

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

---

## **Will China Be a Responsible Great Power?**

*By Benjamin Ho and Hoo Chiew-Ping*

### **Synopsis**

*The changes made to the CCP constitution to allow President Xi Jinping an indefinite stay of power have led to concerns about Beijing's long-term geopolitical gameplan. At the same time, with great power comes great responsibility. What China does in the region will be closely watched.*

### **Commentary**

FOLLOWING RECENT changes to the Chinese constitution that allow President Xi Jinping to extend his leadership beyond two-term limits, many commentators – both inside and outside China – have raised concerns over how this would affect China's international relations.

In “How China is Challenging American Dominance in Asia,” *The New York Times* noted that “the stakes could hardly be higher [given] the two powers are seeking to reshape the economies and political systems of the world's most populous region in its own image”.

### **China's Relations and Global Norms**

Separately, Professor Wang Gungwu highlighted lessons from China's history whereby party infighting led to the country being weakened and torn apart when faced with external invasion. This reaffirmed that “only a strong party can save China and such a party needs sustained leadership” while providing the impetus for Xi to ensure that he would remain in power to forestall potential challenges that would impede China's growth.

Chinese thinkers increasingly concentrate on “global governance” and how China – as a great power – ought to translate its growing geopolitical clout into issues of

governance beyond its shores. Given Xi's certainty to rule China for the next 10-15 years (barring health issues), it is likely that greater weight will be attached to China's international relations and the type of leadership it is expected to provide.

In the past two years, Xi alluded to China playing a more proactive role in global matters, from climate change, to opening economies and the promotion of the Belt Road Initiative. At the same time, many remain unconvinced of Beijing's long-term intentions, as they perceive China to be acting *solely* in its own interests, unconcerned with the well-being of other nations. This is particularly so in two areas: the South China Sea disputes and denuclearisation in the Korea Peninsula.

### **South China Sea Disputes**

The South China Sea disputes have cast a long shadow over China's relations with Southeast Asia. While Chinese diplomats and the ASEAN counterparts have worked hard the past year to ensure that differences over the issue have not escalated into open argument, the disputes are far from being resolved (notwithstanding ongoing work to conclude a Code of Conduct).

A fundamental problem lies in how the practice of international relations and diplomacy is being conceptualised. Professor William Callahan of the London School of Economics argues it has been taken for granted that the United Nations or ASEAN would convert China to its model of international relations.

But the instability of mainstream concepts, on the one hand, and the increased use by Chinese scholars and officials of traditional concepts, on the other, suggests that conversion can work in different ways: "either mutual socialisation, or Greater China converting the rest of the world to its own model of world politics". In this respect, the stakes involve not just control of economic resources or population, but a more foundational problem of "whose rules matter".

In recent interviews with scholars and policymakers in Vietnam and Indonesia, there is a pervasive sense that China is attempting to rewrite the rules of the international system to benefit itself without due concern or sensitivity for the countries it was dealing with.

China's preference for a bilateral approach in resolving disputes suggests that it remains wary of attempts that purport to canvas international opinion, believing that these moves are attempts to entrench Western interests and priorities. Such beliefs do not help Beijing cultivate better relationships with ASEAN countries.

### **Denucleariation of Korean Peninsula**

The prospect of China asserting strong influence over the Korean Peninsula remains uncertain, notwithstanding Kim Jong-Un's visit to Beijing recently. Although China has often been portrayed as an ally and enabler of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), especially in the West, the relationship is much more complex. As Kim Heungkyu of Asan Institute points out, China is embroiled in the nuclear crisis and yet it has little effective ways to control the DPRK.

The DPRK has become a strategic burden to China. Chinese scholars such as Zhang Weiqi (Suffolk University) add that China's influence over North Korea is not as great as many think. Historical research by Shen Zihua (East China Normal University) finds that North Korea does not see China as a friend or brother.

China's position on the Korean Peninsula is "no war, no chaos, and no nuclear". During the tensions in 2017, China cooperated with the Trump administration in dialling up economic pressure against the DPRK (although only to a certain extent), and proposed the so-called "double suspension" of nuclear or missile testing on the DPRK side and joint exercises on the US-ROK side. The recent inter-Korean rapprochement and the upcoming Kim-Trump summit are touted by many within China as exactly China's solution.

But the Kim-Trump summit has the potential to sideline China and undermine China's interests as well. Some Chinese analysts argue that China has made a strategic mistake in cooperating with the Trump administration. China increased sanctions but received little affirmation and praise and some of its domestic enterprises continued to be targeted and sanctioned.

In their eyes, China risks undermining the status quo and stability of the DPRK, which could cross its own border, but there is no reciprocation from the Trump administration, which is threatening a trade war.

### **From National Power to International Image**

Chinese national power (guojia quanli 国家权力) is no longer in doubt. Nevertheless, its international image (guoji xingxiang 国际形象), which is perceived by many to still suffer from its revolutionary Maoist past, remains problematic. China's relations with the Asia-Pacific region are critical to its international image.

If China is to be seen as more than just "looking out for itself," it must demonstrate that its approach to global governance reflects standards that are internationally valid. Consequently, for China's image promotion to work, a less Sino-centric way of relating to the world is needed, particularly in its diplomatic relations with its closest neighbours. If Beijing is to be a global leader it must convince others that it can marry its greatness with responsibility.

---

*Benjamin Ho is an associate research fellow with the China Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore and a PhD Candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Hoo Chiew-Ping is a senior lecturer at the National University of Malaysia and an associate fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS-Asia). This was originally published as Pacific Forum PacNet #24.*

---