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China's new leadership signals more assertive foreign policy

By John Chan

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As China's National People's Congress (NPC) ends this week, there are signs that Xi Jinping, who was formally installed as China's president on Thursday, will pursue a more assertive foreign policy, while carefully seeking to avoid any immediate confrontation, particularly with the US.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy has been deeply divided over how to deal with the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" that is aimed at encircling China, and the Western military interventions into Africa that threaten Chinese investments. The NPC was held soon after North Korea unilaterally carried out a third nuclear test, providing a pretext for a new round of US-led pressure on China to rein in its ally.

In his phone call to Xi on Thursday, US President Obama set the tone for their relationship. As well as calling for tougher Chinese action against North Korea, he accused China of being behind global cyber-hacking. "We've made it very clear to China and some other state actors that we expect them to follow international norms and abide by international rules", he declared. The "international rules", of course, are the ones set by Washington and its allies to protect their interests.

Xi, who was installed as CCP general secretary last November, has close relations with the Chinese military and took over as chairman of the Central Military Commission. He reportedly told a group of sailors last December that he had “a dream of a strong nation” and “a dream of a strong military” to be fulfilled in coming decades.

According to the Xinhua news agency, Xi recently reaffirmed to the Politburo that China should stick to the “road of peaceful development” but “we absolutely will not abandon our legitimate rights and interests, and absolutely cannot sacrifice our core national interests.”

Since last September, the Chinese regime has been engaged in an escalating confrontation with Japan over disputed islands in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Xi has personally overseen the various moves by Chinese vessels and aircraft to challenge Japan’s control of the rocky outcrops. Like the new Japanese government, the CCP is exploiting the dispute to whip up nationalist sentiment to direct rising social tensions outwards against an external enemy.

By targeting Tokyo, however, Beijing can portray itself as an uncompromising defender of the “national interest”, while carefully avoiding overt criticism of the US, in the hope that Xi might open a new chapter of more cooperative relations with Washington.

At the NPC, Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying was chosen as its spokesperson. The choice was significant as the Chinese media had previously described her as the country’s “iron lady” for her blunt warning to the Philippines last year that China was ready for “any escalation” of the standoff over the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

The Chinese media again praised Fu last week for her aggressive reply to a question from a Japanese reporter about Xi’s foreign policy. She insisted China had to be “tougher” against Japan’s unilateral “nationalisation” of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets. “If the other party chooses to take tougher measures and abandon consensus, ‘it is impolite not to reciprocate,’ as another Chinese proverb says,” she said.

China’s strategic stance is bound up with the deepening economic rivalry driven by the global crisis of capitalism. The emerging “currency wars”—involving the competitive devaluation by central banks through what amounts to the printing of money—was a major topic for discussion at the NPC.

Again Japan, not the US, was the main target. Gao Xiqing, head of China’s sovereign fund, told the *Wall Street Journal* that Japan was treating its neighbor China as a “garbage bin”. He warned Tokyo that starting a currency war “would not only be dangerous for others but eventually be bad for you.”

The elevation of Foreign Minister Yang Jiechie to the top post of state councilor in charge overall of foreign affairs, also indicates that Beijing is seeking to smooth relations with Washington. Yang represents layers within the CCP bureaucracy with long-established ties with US imperialism. In the 1970s, he served as interpreter for former US president George H. W. Bush, who was a liaison official in Beijing after President Nixon re-established diplomatic relations with Mao's regime.

The US-based *Foreign Policy* magazine wrote that Yang's promotion signaled "a more nuanced posture toward Obama's pivot" to Asia, as compared to outgoing State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who spent his diplomatic career in Russia and Eastern Europe. "Yang enjoys cozy ties with American politicians and in particular, business leaders," it stated. "He wants to devote more resources to lobbying American multinationals, according to sources close to the diplomatic establishment. The sources also say that Beijing hopes this will persuade the White House to put business before ideology in its China policy."

At an NPC press conference, Yang "welcomed" the US playing a "constructive role" in the Asia-Pacific, but on the basis of respecting the "Chinese side's interests and concerns." In relation to Syria, where China has supported Russia in opposing Western military intervention, Yang adopted a similarly conciliatory tone. China did not "protect anyone" in the Syrian civil war, he said, but again urged that the crisis be resolved through "dialogue and negotiation".

While Yang might seek to improve relations with the US, there is no sign that the Obama administration intends to reciprocate. The "pivot to Asia" has encouraged American allies throughout the region to take a more aggressive stance towards China, inflaming potential flash points throughout the region. In the case of Japan, Obama officials have repeatedly declared that Washington is committed to siding with Tokyo in any conflict with Beijing over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Chinese economic interests are also coming into conflict with the US around the globe, including Africa and the Middle East. Having lost billions of dollars in investment due to the US-led overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, Beijing is hoping for a more cooperative relationship with the US over the carve-up of Africa.

Again Chinese hopes appear overly optimistic. Last week US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs chairman Chris Coons called for trade concessions to African countries to aggressively counter Chinese influence in the continent. In response, all that Yang could plead was that US concerns were unwarranted as Chinese involvement in Africa did not exclude other powers.