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Far Eastern Economic Review

Beijing Learns to be a Superpower

by Willy Lam

May 1, 2009

The year 2009 will go down in history as a watershed for the expansion of China's global clout. The world financial crisis may have dealt the Chinese economy a blow, but it has hardly deterred the Chinese Communist Party leadership from aggressively projecting both hard and soft power. This has been made possible by not only China's fast-growing economic and military might but also the decline of America's international influence in the wake of the Iraq war and the meltdown of its financial institutions.

President Hu Jintao, who heads the CCP's Leading Group on Foreign Affairs, is pushing "quasisuperpower diplomacy" to consolidate China's pre-eminence in the new world order. Despite the charm offensive launched in Europe and Latin America by President Barack Obama, there is no denying that Mr. Hu has stolen some of the limelight traditionally accorded the leader of the Free World.

For example, at photo ops at the G20 conclave in London, the Chinese supremo was seated right next to Queen Elizabeth II and host Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The official Chinese media has made much of comments by Western observers that the G20 has morphed into the G-2, namely the world's lone superpower and the rising quasisuperpower. There is also talk of a Pax Americhina, or Chinamerica, dominating 21st-century geopolitics.

The image of China as the fire-spitting dragon was etched onto television screens around the world as the Chinese Navy celebrated its 60th birthday in the port city of Qingdao late last month. Military representatives from 29 countries were on hand to witness the Chinese navy showing off its first indigenously manufactured nuclear submarines and other state-of-the-art hardware. One month earlier, Defense Minister Liang Guanglie had told visiting Japanese counterpart Yasukazu Hamada that the People's Liberation Army was going ahead with its program of building aircraft carriers. Western experts think the PLA has plans to construct up to

four flat-tops in the coming decade. Beijing is also pulling out the stops to land a Chinese astronaut on the moon by 2015. All these add up to a no-holds-barred power projection that is rare in China's 5,000-year history.

Mr. Hu, who is also chairman of the Central Military Commission, the equivalent of commander-in-chief, has made major revisions to the foreign and security policies of his predecessors. Deng Xiaoping, the late patriarch, laid down this series of dictums in the late 1980s and early 1990s: In foreign policy, "take a low profile and never take the lead"; and regarding the United States, "avoid confrontation and seek opportunities for cooperation." This changed slightly in the mid-1990s; former President Jiang Zemin pioneered from the mid-1990s onward a so-called "great power diplomacy under the global climate of one superpower, several great powers," meaning that China should work together with other great powers such as Russia, Japan and the European Union to transform a "unipolar world order"—one that is dominated by the U.S.—into a "multipolar world order."

However, under Mr. Jiang, China continued to avoid direct conflicts with the lone superpower. And the relationship between the Jiang leadership and the Clinton administration was by and large stable. At the same time, Mr. Jiang tried to persuade

China's neighbors that Beijing was sticking to a "peaceful rise" strategy, that is, the Middle Kingdom's emergence would not pose a threat to them.

China's economic, military and diplomatic clout had expanded dramatically by the time Mr. Hu took over in late 2002. Seeing itself as a quasisuperpower, Beijing is no longer shying away from frontal contests with the U.S., China's strategic competitor. For the Hu-led Politburo, quasisuperpower diplomacy means China will expand its influence in regions ranging from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations bloc to Africa and Latin America—and in global bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Blaming Washington for failing to regulate its multinational financial firms, Beijing is lobbying hard for a "new global financial architecture" shorn of U.S. domination. Most significantly, Beijing is trying to prevent American naval and air power from dominating the Asia-Pacific Region. And the PLA is developing enough firepower to thwart an "anti-China containment policy" supposedly spearheaded by Washington and abetted by such U.S. allies as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia.

In an apparent revision of the "peaceful rise theory," China's military officers and analysts are saying that to attain a global status commensurate with China's comprehensive strength, the PLA should not only seek sophisticated weapons but also be constantly primed for warfare to defend China's core interests. According to General Zhang Zhaoyin, the PLA must abandon the outdated doctrine of "building a peace-oriented army at a time of peace." Writing in the official Liberation Army Daily, General Zhang argued that "preparing for battle, fighting wars, and winning wars have always been the fundamental tasks of the army." "The PLA must never deviate from the doctrine of 'being assiduous in preparing for warfare, and seeking to win wars,'" added Mr. Zhang, who is the deputy commander of a Group Army in the Chengdu Military Region.

Strategist Jin Yinan has posited the theory that "China can not emerge in the midst of nightingale songs and swallow dances," a reference to the placid pleasures of peacetime. Mr. Jin, who teaches at the National Defense University, indicated that China had to "hack out a path through thorns and thistles" in its search for greatness. "When a country and a people have reached a critical moment, the armed forces often play the role of pivot and mainstay" in ensuring that national goals are met, Mr. Jin noted.

What is alarming particularly to China's neighbors is that a number of hawkish PLA officers want to fine-tune yet another Deng doctrine on how to handle sovereignty disputes with nearby states, namely, "shelve sovereignty disputes and focus on joint development." According to Rear Admiral Yang Yi, an NDU professor, Deng's dictum "must be based on the premise that sovereignty belongs to China." He warned unnamed countries that it is "dangerous" to assume that Beijing would not resort to force simply due to its anxiety to foster peaceful development and to polish its international image. "Strong military force is a bulwark for upholding national interests," Mr. Yang pointed out. "The Chinese navy is a strong deterrent force that will prevent other countries from wantonly infringing upon China's maritime interests."

More significantly, Liberation Army Daily commentator Huang Kunlun has raised the notion of "the boundaries of national interests." Mr. Huang argued that China's national interests had gone beyond its land, sea and air territories to include areas such as the vast oceans traversed by Chinese oil freighters—as well as outer space. "Wherever our national interests have extended, so will the mission of our armed forces," Mr. Huang wrote. "Given our new historical mission, the forces have to not only safeguard the country's 'territorial boundaries' but also its 'boundaries of national interests.'" "We need to safeguard not only national-security interests but also interests relating to [future] national development," he added. This novel concept would vastly increase the "legitimate" areas where the PLA can operate.

There seems little doubt that the hawkishness demonstrated by these PLA officers is in large measure aimed at the U.S., which is seen as the most serious constraint on China's rise. And Mr. Hu's strategy is precisely to step into the vacuum in global influence that is due to the depletion of American might. That U.S. troops are bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan has deprived to some extent Washington's ability to play the role of global cop.

Worse, the U.S. has lost much of the moral high ground—as well as soft power—that it used to have. The wholesale collapse of American banks, insurance companies and manufacturing giants has shown weaknesses in the "American model of laissez-faire capitalism." By contrast, the "China model"—a socialist market economy coupled with tight government control over many aspects of society—has gained respect in disparate parts of the world.

More significantly, the mutating power equation between China and the U.S. has emboldened the Hu leadership in its geopolitical calculus. In the early 1990s, then-President Jiang began asking his foreign-affairs aides this question: whether China needs the U.S. more than it needs China—and by how much. If, in quantitative terms, an equal degree of interdependence is characterized as 50 to 50, the "ratio of interdependence" between China and the U.S. in the early to mid-1990s was reckoned by Chinese experts as around 70 to 30. This figure changed to 65 to 35 by the turn

of the century. In the wake of the Iraqi crisis and, in particular, the financial tsunami, a number of Beijing strategists think the ratio has changed to between 60 to 40 and 55 to 45.

Recent developments have testified to the fact that at least in the economic realm, a kind of rough parity has been obtained between the two countries. While the U.S. is China's largest export market, China is also the biggest buyer of American government bonds and other securities. Premier Wen Jiabao has openly queried the "safety" of these Chinese-held U.S. assets. It is partly due to these new realities that the Obama administration has toned down its criticism of China's exchange-rate policy and other controversial trading practices. Washington has also curtailed negative comments of Beijing's human-rights record as well as its policy toward Tibet and Xinjiang.

According to Chen Xiangyang, a senior strategist at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing wants to "occupy the vantage point" and "seize the initiative" in global geopolitical contention. "We want to articulate China's voice, safeguard China's image and expand China's national interests," he pointed out. One example is the proactive, "strike-first" posture struck by China at the G20 meeting.

A couple of weeks before the London summit in early April, Beijing captured the world's attention by suggesting that "special drawing rights" of the IMF should replace the U.S. dollar as the "new global currency" in which countries hold their reserves. The Hu leadership also wants to boost the say of developing countries in the World Bank and the imf. While China's proposal about the new world currency was not seriously discussed in London, the country's profile as the originator of global initiatives was raised tremendously.

Another example of Beijing's newfound assertiveness is the so-called red-line diplomacy. In internal papers, the CCP leadership has made reference to "drawing red lines" around areas and issues deemed vital to China's core interests—and which foreign powers will not be allowed to touch. Red-line diplomacy has been deployed, for instance, to isolate the Dalai Lama, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who leads the Tibetan exiled movement. In March, the government of South Africa decided to bar the Dalai Lama from participating in an international peace conference in Johannesburg. After Pretoria's surprise decision, a number of Nobel Prize winners who were originally invited to the conference boycotted the session, which was then cancelled.

Earlier, Beijing suspended normal ties with France after President Nicolas Sarkozy met with the Dalai Lama last November. Relations were restored—and Messrs. Hu and Sarkozy held a bilateral "mini-summit" in London—only after Paris had issued a statement saying it does not support Tibetan independence.

At the same time, the cash-rich Chinese government has earmarked some $6.62 billion to boost "overseas propaganda," that is, to spread Chinese soft power globally. Prominent state media, including cctv and Xinhua News Agency, will vastly enhance programs and news feeds in different languages for Western and Asian audiences. Also on the drawing board is an English news channel modeled upon Al Jazeera that will allow the world to get the Chinese take on issues ranging from politics and finance to culture and religion.

A key thrust of Beijing's self-laudatory hard-sell is to convince the world of the superiority of the "China model" of governance. As Peking University political scientist Yu Keping indicated, the China model has "enriched our knowledge about the laws and paths toward social development and promoted the multipronged development of human civilization in the age of globalization." And according to Central Party School Professor Zhao Yao, the China model is worth maximum exposure because "it has saved the world socialist movement." "Through the reform and open door policy of China, new vistas have been opened up for socialism," Mr. Zhao asserted.

Will the Hu leadership succeed in its global power putsch? Much hinges on whether Beijing is willing and able to function as a law-abiding member—what Washington once called a "responsible stakeholder"—of the international community. However, China's image suffered a blow on the occasion of the recent launch of an intercontinental missile by its client state and ally, North Korea. Not only did the CCP leadership fail to condemn Pyongyang; it tried to prevent the United Nations Security Council from imposing new sanctions on the Kim Jong-il regime. Beijing's irresponsible behavior has reminded the world of similar relationships that China has maintained with a host of pariah states such as Burma, Sudan, Angola and Zimbabwe.

One reason why Beijing seems to have condoned Pyongyang's brinksmanship is that it wants to use the "North Korean card" when dealing with the U.S., Japan and South Korea. However, the CCP leadership's cynical stance has alienated these and other countries. After all, the downside of Beijing's quasisuperpower diplomacy is that it will give further ammunition to critics of China—and lend credence to the "China threat theory." The latter has become popular in several Asian countries following Beijing's more assertive stance in its recent territorial spats with Japan (over the Senkaku Islands, known as the Diaoyu in China) and with the Philippines (over the Scarborough Shoal, known as Huang Yan Islet in China). If these conflicts were to escalate, it is possible that countries including Japan, South Korea and the Philippines might be more predisposed toward joining the U.S. in reactivating a "containment policy" against the would-be quasisuperpower.

Another major factor hampering China's "great leap outward" is stagnation in political reform within the country. President Hu has since last year reinstated with gusto Maoist institutions such as "democratic centralism," a euphemism for boosting the powers of the Politburo Standing Committee. Political liberalization has been frozen. The PLA's clout, meanwhile, has been augmented because of its role in not only bolstering China's global reach but also suppressing an estimated 100,000 cases of protests, riots and disturbances that break out annually. Unlike military forces in most countries, the PLA is a "party army," not a state army. This means that it answers to only a handful of top CCP cadres such as Mr. Hu, who also requires the support of the top brass to maintain the pre-eminence of his own CCP faction.

That the Chinese armed forces are not subject to meaningful checks and balances has raised fears among China's neighbors that the generals might, for their own benefits, be pushing the country toward an expansionist and adventurous foreign policy. The CCP leadership's refusal to give up Maoist norms such as the "party's absolute leadership over the armed forces" and "the synthesis of [the requirements of] peace and war" has dented the global appeal of the China model—and detracted from the viability of Beijing's quasisuperpower diplomacy.