

China at 70: Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones

On 1 October, China stepped into the 70th year of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949. Commemorating this achievement, on 27 September 2019, China's State Council Information Office issued a White Paper titled "China and the World in the New Era".^[i] Tracing the trajectory of China's growth since 1949 from being a backward nation and a 'pariah' at the international stage to that of becoming world's second largest economy in 2010 and thereafter, the White Paper categorically states that:

"China has entered a new era of development. China now has an impact on the world that is ever more comprehensive, profound and long-lasting, and the world is paying ever greater attention to China".^[ii]

The above proclamation by the Chinese government holds a strong message for the world to take note of. That is, the Chinese understanding no more dwells in Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "*Tao Guang Yuang Hui*" of "hiding capabilities and biding time". Rather, there is a clear acknowledgement that with the advent of the 21st century, China has emerged as a definite leader in the world stage with an aspiration to take the "centre stage,"^[iii] as claimed by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2017. This confidence exemplifies China's acceptance of itself as a 'great power' in the world with an ability to make a difference. What is noteworthy is that China's such an understanding of the 'new era' under Xi resonates with Mao Zedong's prophetic words in 1949, wherein, in laying the foundation of PRC, Mao strongly posited that "China has stood up".

What appears prominent in the document is the 'image' that China wants to showcase to the world. This is well-noted in the ways China's significant role in making a difference has been projected. That is: First, China has found a development path suited to its actual conditions, wherein despite its rapid economic progress, China still stands at the primary stage of socialism and that China still remains to be world's largest developing country.

Second, China's development is an opportunity for the world, given China is the biggest contributor to world economy as it is "the world's factory", "a global market" for consumers' and "the most attractive investment destination".

Third, a prosperous and beautiful world is the common aspiration of all peoples, wherein the rise of China has been a contributing factor. As argued that China has made a notable change in altering the international structures of power, which has long been dominated by factors such as unilateralism, protectionism, hegemonism and power politics. In contrast, China seeks to build a "global community of shared future" that looks beyond the zero-sum gains and aims at a win-win cooperation.^[iv]

And, finally, China contributes to a better world by integrating the common interests of the people of other countries. It acts as a "builder of world peace, a contributor to world development and a guardian of global order".^[v] In doing so, China's socialist path is mainly guided by 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'. Adding to it is the Chinese military that acts as a "resolute defender" of world peace and contributes to common security- clarifying PLA's intentions and actions as not 'offensive' but 'defensive'.

What calls for this image building by China? To argue, it remains indisputable that China's meteoric rise has caught the globe in weary, rekindling the thoughts of 'Middle Kingdom' and a spiraling suspicion over the return of a Sino-centric order. In order, to dismiss the long debated "China Threat" Theory, the White

Paper provides a clarification by dispelling such an assumption as that of being a product of “cognitive misunderstanding, deep-rooted prejudice, psychological imbalance brought about by the prospect of falling power and deliberate distortions by vested interests”.^[vi] China’s justification mainly indirectly hints at the US-led speculations over China’s rise. Hence, in calling off the odds and further adding to China’s significant role, the White paper appears to justify and most importantly, ‘redraw’ China’s international image. Such a conscious attempt by Beijing coincides with the growing challenges given the current Hong Kong crisis, China’s detention policy against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the stalled longstanding dream of reunification with Taiwan, the Doklam stand-off, backing up of Pakistan and providing a blanket cover to Masood Azhar and most importantly, the ongoing trade war with United States that have significantly tarnished China’s image of a ‘responsible actor’.

In view of this, the White Paper seeks to create a more humble image of China. That is: first, strikingly, despite its gigantic rise in all dimensions, China still identifies itself as world’s largest developing country and a first among middle income economy in the world that promotes “common development”.^[vii] Second, the tarnished image of China as that of being ‘assertive, irresponsible, and not being a normative actor’ has been dispelled by the argument that China has made significant contributions in terms of concepts and initiatives by proposing for: a global community of shared future; a new model of international relations; the Belt and Road Initiative, a vision of “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security and others”.^[viii] By making such claims, China seems to clarify its responsible contribution towards the international system. Third, there is a conscious attempt to uphold the sacrosanct nature of the CPC which has sustained its legitimacy for seven decades. Calling CPC as the “core leadership”, the White Paper mentions that:

“Without centralized, unified and firm leadership, China would have tended towards division and disintegration and caused widespread chaos beyond its own borders”.^[ix]

When the on-going debates constantly suggest China under CPC to ‘crumble’ and making inroads to democracy, such an assertion by the Chinese government dovetails a different conclusion- only CPC that sustains PRC and not otherwise.

However, some asymmetry can be found in China’s words of acting as as ‘goodwill ambassador’ to the international system as stated in the White Paper to that of its actions as witnessed in the grand military parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary. There was a significant difference in the symbolism. For the parade, boasted China’s new military capabilities with 160 aircraft and 580 pieces of military equipment, including drones and missiles.^[x] Of which, the most notable was the Df-17 conventional missiles unveiled for the first time. As noted, the missile has the capability of precision strikes against short-and medium-range targets, with strong penetration capacity in all-weather conditions.^[xi]

Beijing’s such a display of its military hard power ran in contrast to its highlighted soft image in the White Paper. Beijing’s such an action further gives a boost to the ‘China Threat Theory’ rather than fading it away. Although it remains indisputable that in 70 years China did rise against all odds and has been the catalyst in causing a new world order. However, the questions that remain are: How long can China sustain its rise? Will China walk any different in taking the centre stage, if at all? Therefore, it can be well-stated that for China, there are still some stones to be felt as it crosses the river in the new era.

References

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[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Xi Jinping (2017), "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", *Xinhuanet*, 18 October 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf, accessed online 10 October 2019.

[iv] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2019), "China and the World in the New Era", no. 1.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Stella Soon (2019), "Amid economic challenges, China displays 'a military show of strength' at its 70th birthday bash", *CNBC*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/01/china-displays-a-military-show-of-strength-at-70th-anniversary-parade.html>, accessed online 10 October 2019.

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