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China's 60th Anniversary: Celebrating Beijing's Peaceful Rise

Wang Di and Ron Matthews

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China's projected eight per cent growth for 2009 and its impressive military during the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic will inevitably fuel Western concerns about its rise. Beijing's challenge is to project its soft, rather than hard power.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC power has been fuelled by unparalleled growth, averaging 9.5 per cent, over the past three decades. As a result, China has increased its defence expenditure by 17 per cent in each of the last four years. Reflecting this substantial expansion in defence expenditure, its military power has undergone impressive transformation, carrying with it the inevitable potential of destabilising the world order -- even as it celebrates the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China today, 1st October.

China as a Threat?

For instance, China continues to have the world's biggest standing army at more than 2.25 million personnel, possessing a broad array of advanced military platforms, including indigenously-designed and -produced nuclear-powered submarines. The country is also in the process of acquiring aircraft carriers, and extending its military capability into space, having become the world's third country to send a manned spacecraft, the Shenzhou VII, into orbit last year.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, then, China's rising hard power is seen as a threat. The United States, in particular, is nervous of China's burgeoning military capability and strategic reach. Yet, is this stereotype of the Chinese threat justified? There is room for doubt. For instance, China's 'official' 2009 defence budget, at US\$70.3 billion is only around 10 per cent of the present US defence spend, at US\$651.2 billion. Moreover, China's offensive capability is far inferior to that of the US. Reportedly, the Chinese navy cannot sustain naval operations beyond 100 nautical miles from its shores; its combat aircraft are less than half in number of the US, and much of China's artillery is veritably antique by Western standards.

Rethinking the Trajectory of China's Rise

China is aware of the international anxieties engendered by its growing military strength, and needs greater transparency in communicating the purpose and nature of its military 'modernisation' programme. Recently, progress has been made in this regard. In June, defence consultative talks were resumed between Beijing and Washington and in August maritime safety talks were held to reduce incidents such as naval confrontation in the South China Sea.

Additionally, China's defence ministry has just launched a new Mandarin and English language website providing an unprecedented amount of public information on China's military capability. The website's stated intent is to "improve cooperation with foreigners" and "display before the world the fine image of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a mighty, civilised and peaceful force". China is also seeking to counter-balance its rise in hard power with a focus on soft power projection; the ultimate goal in the eyes of China's policymakers is to create the image of a benign China.

China has pursued numerous initiatives towards this end. Its diplomacy has won over less than half of all the disputed territories in these resolutions. On the existing maritime territorial disputes, China, for instance, introduced the "shelving disputes and joint development" proposal in 1978. This provided the basis for the 2008 path-breaking preliminary agreement with Japan on joint exploration of gas fields in the East China Sea. China has also engaged with neighbouring countries in pushing for cooperation in various non-traditional security areas, including drug trafficking, piracy, terrorism, money-laundering, and international economic and cyber crimes.

China's Projection of Soft Power

Emerging from Cold-War isolation, China has continuously sought to become a good international citizen. The country has, for instance, received kudos over its participation in various international peace-keeping operations in international hot-spots, including the Middle East (1989), Cambodia (1992), East Timor (2000), Sudan (2005) and Haiti (2005). It has provided the second highest number of peacekeepers, next to France, amongst the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. In December 2008, China sent a three-ship task force to the Gulf of Aden to combat the scourge of international piracy in the waters off Somalia. China acted in response to a UN Security Council request for assistance, and it was, significantly, the PLA Navy's first mission outside the Pacific.

Additionally, China actively participates in various multilateral development mechanisms, and provides a large amount of overseas assistance. By the end of 2005, for example, Beijing had given 'unfettered' economic and technical assistance to 53 African countries alone, completing 769 projects, the majority of which are closely associated with sustainable development in Africa. China has also begun two major programmes to globally expand its soft power. One is Beijing's ambition to spread China's cultural influence throughout the world, with a notable aspect of this effort being the establishment of an international network of Confucius Institutes. According to official sources, by April 2009, some 326 Confucius Institutes had been established in 81 countries and regions.

China's other big cultural outreach programme is the launch of what has been described as a 'media aircraft carrier' aimed at winning the hearts and minds of a global audience. The Chinese government has pumped 45 billion yuan (US\$6.2 billion) into supporting four key state-run news organisations, China National Radio, China Central Television (CCTV), People's Daily and the Xinhua News Agency, to expand through them China's international influence.

There are also plans to launch an international news channel, with round-the-clock global news coverage: a sort of Chinese version of the Arab network, *Al-Jazeera*. Taken together, including the staging of the successful Beijing Olympics, these diverse initiatives have already begun to positively impact China's global image. If gauged by the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, then, since 2008, China's

image rating has increased in 10 of the world's 24 major countries.

Soft Power Restraints on Hard Power?

The growth of China's soft power, the cultivation of a benign and responsible state image, and the promotion of peaceful traditions and culture, are likely to entail restraints on any possible use of hard power. The pursuit of aggressive foreign adventures will act only to destroy the benign image that China is so assiduously striving to achieve. China's rising power, therefore, should not invoke anxiety; rather it should be viewed positively, facilitating China to participate more fully and constructively in a new post-financial crisis world order.

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