

China announces an historic shift in its international strategy

For the first time since its rise as an economic giant, China has decided to lay its cards on the table and spell out its plans and ambitions as a world great power. The old guideline condensed in the famous Deng Xiaoping's aphorism "hide your brightness, bide your time", has been replaced by a new strategy that will see China play an open and active role in world affairs. The revised foreign policy was outlined by President Xi Jinping at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs held in Beijing at the end of last November.

In a comprehensive speech that was televised nationwide, President Xi informed several hundred high-ranking party officials, military officers and Chinese diplomats brought home from abroad, that China was now able "to conduct great power diplomacy, cultivate a great power mentality, foster great power sentiments and demonstrate great power bearing" especially when "dealing with small and medium sized nations."

He did not mention the United States but his speech clearly hinted that China was not anymore willing to acquiesce to their role as the sole superpower nor to give them precedence in its foreign policy. China's priority is now in the Asian region through policies such as free trade agreements, infrastructure investment and development of consultative security mechanisms. Beijing aims at making a growing number of rising and prosperous Asian nations dependent on China's role as a great power and marginalizing the United States in Asia's future.

This historic shift in China's foreign policy is a direct consequence of the downturn of the Western powers caused by the global financial crisis of 2008. Europe's economy has stagnated and the very survival of the European Union appears increasingly open to question. The United States has seen a healthier recovery, but growth has been uneven and the country remains riven by political division. China, meanwhile, has been able to sustain high growth rates (real GDP 7,7% 2012, 7,7% 2013, 7,3% 2014,). By 2010, its economy had surpassed that of Japan to become the second largest in the world and even if it faces slower growth in coming years, the gap with the economy of the United States will continue to narrow.

Moreover, much of the growth in the future is expected to occur in Asia and a successful integration of the economies of China and its neighbours appears increasingly capable of realizing the long-term potential of Asia and strengthening China's ability to change the international order. The vision outlined by President Xi at the conference gives emerging powers a clear indication that China shares their grievances regarding the alleged injustice and failings of the current Western-led order. Xi stated China should “persist in promoting greater democracy in international relations,” and “insist that all countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community.” Lest there be any doubt as to the purpose of the message, Xi made clear that China should seek to “speak for other developing countries.”

To gain the leverage necessary to ensure change in the international order, China, on top of consolidating its leadership of Asia, must build a global coalition of sympathetic partner nations, bolster its credibility as a global leader and articulate a compelling political and moral vision that can be seen as superior to that of the United States. The world has benefited from the decision by the governments of the United States and China to build a stable, cooperative relationship, but for Beijing the benefits gained from stable cooperation with the United States appear to be diminishing rapidly.

As a consequence the United States will soon be under pressure to increase both competitive and cooperative policies that protect its interests while avoiding a full-blown rivalry with China. More effective competition for regional and global leadership offers the prospect of allowing the U.S. to shape the terms of cooperation with China. Similarly, enhanced cooperation is crucial to restrain antagonistic impulses. The approach may seem contradictory but it looks like the only way to avoid a most dangerous outright confrontation between the two greatest world powers.