

Cover story: Comment

Maritime Silk Road shows way forward

GEOPOLITICAL INITIATIVE A GOOD EXAMPLE OF NATION'S CONSTRUCTIVE AND PEACEFUL RISE

By ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN

An “inflection point” in mathematics occurs when there is a change of curvature, say from concave to convex, at a particular point on a curve. There is now, at this particular point of time, an inflection point occurring in China's diplomacy, as the country changes from reactive to proactive in its international relations. Future historians may characterize this transformation as one of the defining geopolitical trends of the first half of the 21st century.

I am pleased to see China's emergence but too many foreigners are not — they worry, openly or privately, about what a strong China may do. The so-called “China Threat” is real in that many foreigners believe it to be real. But do these people know the real China?

Deng Xiaoping, China's “Paramount Leader” who initiated reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, said famously that China should “hide our capabilities and bide our time”. His directive is often misinterpreted as advising that China, like a growing lion, should lie low while strengthening itself so that eventually it can pounce. In fact, Deng simply wanted China to build its own economy and never again be bullied by foreign powers.

Has China's “time” now come? President Xi Jinping has given his clearest directive for China's foreign policy and it is certainly more engaged with the world. Speaking to senior Party officials last year at a top-level conference on foreign affairs, the first in eight years, Xi described China's new diplomacy.

Articulating the “strategic objectives and principal tasks of foreign affairs work”, Xi stresses safeguarding China's core interests, crafting a conducive international environment, and hastening the nation's emergence as a great power. China, he says, should conduct “diplomacy as a great power” in an increasingly “multipolar” world — “making friends and forming partnership networks throughout the world” and “striving to gain more understanding and support from countries all over the world” for the Chinese Dream.

China cannot compete for global leadership by power alone. Economic and military strength, while necessary, are not sufficient. There must also be moral and ethical aspects to China's rise: China must ride the high road, offering an alternative geopolitical vision that is in some sense superior to that of the West. China, Xi asserts, should “see to it that equal importance is attached to justice and benefits, stress faithfulness, value friendship, carry forward righteousness, and foster ethics”.

At a top-level session on regional free trade, Xi called for China to “participate and lead, make China's voice heard, and inject more Chinese elements into international rules”. To effect such historic change



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to the world order, Xi is reshaping the diplomatic landscape with “active engagement”. For example, Xi describes a new category of countries, which he labels “major developing powers” (such as India, Brazil and South Africa) and with which China should “expand cooperation” and “closely integrate our country's development”. Furthermore, China should take leadership in the developing world and “speak for other developing countries”.

From climate change to international peacekeeping, Xi is changing China from a sometime reluctant follower to an often creative leader. China has re-emerged as a great power and there is no turning back.

What is Xi's grand vision for China? The world is watching; many are hopeful, but too many are fearful. Some wonder about Xi's intent. But there is now no need to wonder; he has made his intent clear in his new book *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*.

Seven of the book's 18 chapters deal with foreign affairs; two stress the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century — President Xi's novel initiative for multinational development that exemplifies his strategic thinking. Appealing broadly to the roughly 50 countries participating, Xi created a \$40 billion Silk Road Fund to complement the more general \$50 billion Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Philosophically, to promote the Silk Road spirit, Xi offers four principles: boost mutual learning between

civilizations; respect each other's choice of development path; focus on mutually beneficial cooperation; and advocate dialogue and peace.

Practically, to implement the Silk Road spirit, Xi calls for global thinking that is “both farsighted and down-to-earth” and suggests a “1+2+3” cooperation pattern: “1” means cooperation in energy, the whole industrial chain of oil and natural gas; “2” refers to “two wings” — one being infrastructure and the other being trade and investment, including Chinese investment in energy, petrochemicals, agriculture, manufacturing, and services; “3” describes three breakthrough, advanced technologies — nuclear energy, space satellites and new energy.

For China to fulfill its potential as a global leader, it must gain the world's respect for its principles and philosophies, not only for its economy and military. This involves appreciation for China's self-determined “road of development” and for its political system, particularly the perpetual leadership of the ruling party.

This is a larger topic but such appreciation can develop only with a kind of convergence, where China's political system continues to reform, with increasing transparency and freedoms, and where foreigners come to understand that pragmatic competence managing China's complex society trumps idealistic ideologies of multi-party democracies.

For China not to view the United States as its adversary, not as a threat to its system and government, Wash-

ington will have to accept that the Western democratic model may not be ideal for all nations at all times. (The Middle East teaches this lesson.) China must continue to determine and develop its own system.

In my dream of a post-adversarial world, China assumes increasing responsibility for world peace and prosperity, which includes opposing regimes that trouble their own people. In seeking the moral optimum, China may have to tear up old scripts.

For its part, the US should reject the Cold War mentality of “containing China”, resisting its rise, as being both archaic and self-defeating. Of course, there would remain areas of contention — balance of trade, human rights, territorial disputes — but different political systems should not be one of them. Politico-economic theories constructed in the 18th and 19th centuries have little utility in the 21st century, where most nations optimize free markets and government regulation that by nature can be neither generalized nor static.

It is in the national interests of China and the US to work together such that their foreign policies begin to converge. Surely there are nationalistic issues, and conflicts can compound when parochial media focus on real or perceived differences. The real achievements of nations — increasing citizens' well-being — are the synergistic accretions of advanced education, knowledge creation and technology utilization.

The US and China should change tired ways of thinking. The US should come to see China without the distorting lens of old history and the Cold War. Decades have passed since China felt compelled to export the non-existent “glories” of extreme leftist “Utopia”. Today's China has no interest in converting the world to its road of development or political system.

China must pursue its own self-interests, which stress improving standards of living and the country's increasing prominence and prestige. To secure the former, China requires international stability. To enable the latter, China must take the moral high ground in international affairs.

I applaud when China assumes more responsibility in promoting global stability, from reining in rogue regimes to providing humanitarian relief. In today's world, the real conflict is not between opposing political systems but rather between the forces of modernity, competence and development on the one hand and those of ignorance, exploitation and oppression on the other.

As such, China's increasing engagement with global diplomacy should be celebrated.

The author is an international corporate strategist and political/economics commentator. He spoke at the book launch ceremony of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China and he is the author of How China's Leaders Think. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.