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China's 'New Era' Vision: Implications for South Asia

Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement of a 'new era' during the 19th National Congress of the ruling Communist Party of China in October 2017 seems to reflect China's emerging confidence in its capability to reshape the regional geopolitics on its own terms. However, this paper argues that, in view of the evolving power structure in the Indo-Pacific region, it is probably premature to make that assumption.

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During the 19th National Congress of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), held in Beijing from 18 to 24 October 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping was re-elected as the General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee. The event also saw Xi's thoughts written into the CPC Constitution as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era". This, in essence, cemented his leadership over the CPC and highlighted his unrivalled power in China. The catch-phrase of his long speech during the party congress was 'new era'. The CPC propaganda machine is now on overdrive to propagate Xi's thoughts on the Chinese 'new era' far and wide. The announcement of the 'new era' can be interpreted as a declaration of China's confidence in its own capabilities to reshape the region and even the

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world. It can also be seen as a call for unity among the party cadres and the people of China in the context of the growing global and regional challenges. The expression of the Chinese ‘new era’ encompasses both the elements of success and the call for unity in the face of challenges. However, the element of exuberance over China’s success is more pronounced than the latter.

A New Era of Confidence

This confidence in the Chinese ‘new era’ is based on the success of the Chinese model of development. Xi explained its meaning by stating that, “It [New Era] means that the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.”²

The official endorsement of the Chinese model of economic development was the most distinctive feature of Xi’s speech. In the past, Chinese officials and scholars would shy away from recommending the Chinese model for adoption by other developing countries as it was considered unique to China. However, the current official endorsement is indicative of the Chinese government’s realisation that, to earn the goodwill of the global community, China should aspire to assume leadership position, have confidence and trust in its own values, and lead by example.

During his address, Xi also emphasised the success of the CPC in improving the well-being of the Chinese population. He focussed particularly on the achievements of the government in the last five years of his leadership. The advancement in the general well-being of the Chinese citizens and the growth of wealth and prosperity of China have naturally led to an increase in China’s military strength and economic influence. In fact, a confident China can assert itself around its borders, as in the case of the island-building project in the South China

² “Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress”, *Xinhua*, 3 November 2017. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm. Accessed on 5 November 2017.

Sea and the frequent military stand-offs with India. At the same time, China's ascendance has led to changing perceptions among the major countries around its borders which consider the rise of the Chinese influence as inimical to their national interests and as a security threat to their national objectives. In this respect, regardless of what China says about its intentions, these countries tend to judge China's intentions by its actions.

In his speech, Xi expressed the urgency for the speedy modernisation of Chinese military by saying that, "We (*Chinese*) have reached a new historical starting point in strengthening national defense and the armed forces. Confronted with profound changes in our national security environment and responding to the demands of the day for a strong country with a strong military, we must fully implement the Party's thinking on strengthening the military for the new era and the military strategy for new conditions, build a powerful and modernized army, navy, air force, rocket force, and strategic support force, develop strong and efficient joint operations commanding institutions for theater commands, and create a modern combat system with distinctive Chinese characteristics."³ The Chinese military modernisation will also trigger a competitive military modernisation by the other Asian countries. The Chinese 'new era' could result in a potential arms race in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Great Power Logic

History has shown that when an emerging power develops its capabilities, its ambitions also witness a commensurate rise. In such an instance, in an effort to secure, maintain and sustain its new-found prosperity, the great power will demand more space – physical boundary or influence – and it will rationalise, be it a projection of destiny or national purpose, to support its demands. This has been the case with countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Japan and the United States (US).

China's new-found power seems to have created the myth in China of an imagined Chinese empire in Asia, and this is reflected in its demand for status in Asia as a great power. Consequently, China is also becoming less flexible in its dealings in Asia – this is especially

³ Ibid.

so in the case of its neighbours which share land boundaries and maritime interests.⁴ The increase in China's economic and political influence, and the consequent demand for more space in Asia will eventually come into conflict with the interests of other major powers in Asia as well as the American alliance system in Asia which includes Japan, South Korea and Australia.

The context of the announcement of the Chinese 'new era' is the perceived disarray in the US alliance system in the Asian region, and uncertainty about the foreign policy of US President Donald Trump's administration.⁵ China's 'new era' seeks to fill this gap in Asia and remould it based on Chinese perceptions and values.

In South Asia, the Chinese 'new era' philosophy will only reinforce India's concerns about Chinese encirclement. The South Asian region has figured prominently in Xi's first term in office. Except for Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan, he visited the other South Asian countries. His visits to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives were positively received, with these countries subsequently pledging their support to China's Belt and Road Initiative (formerly called the One Belt One Road [OBOR]). India and Bhutan remain the only South Asian countries which have yet to express their support for the BRI.

⁴ On maritime disputes, one example of China's inflexible position is its refusal to follow internationally-accepted laws, norms and procedures in the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines, especially its rejection to participate in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea arbitration process, and, later, its rejection of its ruling. See "China attacks international court after South China Sea ruling", *The Guardian*, Tom Philips, 13 July 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/13/china-damns-international-court-after-south-china-sea-slapdown>. Accessed on 2 November 2017. On land boundary issues, the frequent military standoffs with India, military intrusions, and the accompanied anti-Indian nationalist rhetoric are other example of China's hardening stance on the boundary issues. See Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on 30 June 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s_2510_665401/2511_665403/t1474637.shtml Accessed on 2 November 2017.

⁵ "How State Dept. uncertainty could erode US foreign policy", *PRI*, Jennifer Strong, 5 April 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-05/price-us-could-pay-uncertainty-state-dept>. Accessed on 24 October 2017; "Uncertainty over Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Risks Global Instability," *New York Times*, Max Fisher, 5 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/world/americas/donald-trump-foreign-policy.html>. Accessed on 24 October 2017; "Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Stances Sow Uncertainty", *Wall Street Journal*, Carol E. Lee and Damian Paletta, 10 November 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trumps-foreign-policy-stances-sow-uncertainty-1478790542>. Accessed on 24 October 2017.

A Premature New Era

By the time the CPC National Congress took place, China was already seen to be successfully filling the void left in Asia by the uncertain US foreign policy stand.⁶ However, the National Congress coincided with Trump's plans for a major re-balancing of America's foreign policy towards Asia. The visit by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to South Asia in October 2017 and Trump's visit to Asia in November 2017 (which include stops in Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines) seem to indicate the US' desire to assert its influence and maintain its dominance in the region. The major element of America's re-balancing act is the recognition of India's increasing role in the Asia Pacific region and the expressed opposition to the BRI, which resonates with India's own position on the BRI. The US is also trying to build an informal alliance with India, Japan and Australia.⁷ The US, in its frequent references to the concept of Indo-Pacific, appears to be creating an image of the Asia-Pacific as a region between the US and India, with both ends helmed and policed by an informal alliance of like-minded democracies.

Conclusion

China's announcement of a Chinese 'new era' is likely to rally several of the Asian countries, which have a conflict of interest with China, around American leadership in Asia. This would certainly strengthen the US alliance system in Asia. With the advancement of Chinese 'new era' concept in South Asia, India's concerns will increase. The consequence could be India aligning itself more closely with the US to counterbalance China's influence in its neighbourhood. This may lead to possible tensions in India's relations with the other South Asian countries which may seek to use China to balance India's dominance in the region.⁸

⁶ America's withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement negotiations and China's launching of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is largely endorsed by most Asian countries, are the biggest examples of China filling the strategic void left by the US in Asia-Pacific.

⁷ "A free and open Indo-Pacific: US flags pact with Australia-Japan-India", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Peter Mitchell, 25 October 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/a-free-and-open-indopacific-us-flags-pact-with-australiajapanindia-20171019-gz3x6y.html>; Interview with Japanese Foreign Minister Kono, "Japan to propose dialogue with US, India and Australia", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 26 October 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/a-free-and-open-indopacific-us-flags-pact-with-australiajapanindia-20171019-gz3x6y.html>.

⁸ For the other South Asian countries, one of the most important elements of their relationship with China is to balance India, this is especially true in the case of Pakistan. See Rizwan Naseer and Musarat Amin, "Sino-Pakistan Maneuvering to Balance the Power in South Asia", *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 31

Given the dynamics of power politics being played by the major powers, China may be overestimating its capabilities and power to bring about a ‘new era’ in Asia. At the end of the day, China’s vision is likely to lead to greater competition and tension, and possibly conflicts in Asia.

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