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The Beijing Xiangshan Forum: Competition or Co-existence?

By Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

Synopsis

The Beijing Xiangshan Forum is developing as an important track 1.5 platform for dialogue and cooperation on regional and global defence and security issues with growing global influence. Through this forum, China also aims to amplify its arms market.

Commentary

THE 8TH BEIJING Xiangshan Forum (BXF) was held jointly by the China Association for Military Science (CAMS) and China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS) on 24-26 October 2018 in Beijing. Started in 2006, this forum was previously known as Xiangshan Forum. Over 500 delegates from more than 70 countries and international organisations participated and deliberated upon this year's theme – "Building a New Type of Security Partnership of Equality, Mutual Trust and Win-Win Cooperation".

The Forum started with the Young Officers and Scholars Seminar on China-US relations and was moderated by the Director General of Xiangshan Forum Secretariat Office, Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo. The Young Officers seminar was more focused and better structured than the inaugural Rising Experts Roundtable at the last Xiangshan Forum.

A New Security Concept?

The main Forum started with a welcome dinner in which Li Zhanshu, a high-ranking party official, delivered the opening speech. He underlined the achievements and changes China had made over the 40 years of the country's reform and opening-up. Mr Li added that with an aim to build consensus and expand cooperation, the Beijing

Xiangshan Forum has developed into a high-level security and defence forum with significant international influence.

A letter was received from the Chinese President Xi Jinping, and read by the Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe at the opening ceremony. This message from the top leadership underlines BXF's rising significance in China's defence diplomacy. President Xi's letter outlined a new security concept. The letter said that peace, development and win-win cooperation remain the trend of today's world.

The global governance system and international order are changing at a faster pace, and the future of the world is closely connected. China is following a new concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. It appears that China will adopt an even more open approach when working with all nations to enhance development and security through cooperation and to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

Restructuring the Global Order

Describing the forum as a major platform for international security and defence dialogue, Xi said the forum has played a positive role in promoting security discourse, mutual trust and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region since its inception. He called on participants to build consensus, contribute to a new form of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation, and work together to build a brighter future for mankind.

Defence Minister Wei said that Xi's letter expressed China's sincere willingness to increase strategic mutual trust and security cooperation with countries around the world. Wei proposed upholding mutually beneficial cooperation while abandoning the mentality of zero-sum game.

He underlined that China's military firmly upholds the path of peaceful development, safeguards China's sovereignty, security, development and overseas interests, and protects global and regional peace and stability.

Wei also issued a strong warning to countries that challenge China's core interest in the island of Taiwan. He said that "if anyone ever tries to separate the island of Taiwan from China, the Chinese military will take resolute actions and we will pay whatever price that has to be paid". He also criticised the US for damaging China-US relations.

Tough Competitor to Shangri La Dialogue?

Since its inception, BXF has been compared with the Shangri La Dialogue (SLD), the annual regional security forum that is convened in Singapore annually by the London-based Institute of International and Security Studies (IISS). While BXF has learned from SLD and other security forums, it is in the process of building itself up as a similar platform and identifying global issues from a China perspective.

BXF has emerged as a platform to better understand the Chinese perspective on emerging security matters. The Forum provided opportunity for delegation-level talks, and facilitated deliberations on the rapid transformations occurring all over the world.

A delegation from North Korea led by Vice Minister of the People's Armed Forces, Col. Gen. Kim Hyong Ryong, participated in the Forum for the first time. He spoke in the opening plenary after the speech by Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen. The latter raised important issues such as ASEAN centrality, the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (CoC), multilateralism, artificial intelligence, Indo-Pacific, and non-traditional maritime threats.

Compete or Co-exist?

Selected delegates, including some ministers and senior defence officials, visited NORINCO Exhibition Centre and were briefed on its integrated defence system and logistic solutions. NORINCO is a group of companies which provides more than 80 per cent of the requirement of the Chinese Army for weapon systems and also represents the Chinese defence industry abroad. This is an important addition to the Forum's agenda which could be a valuable tool for expanding the Chinese arms market.

Further, BXF could offer a security framework with Chinese characteristics to support the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has become a defining strategy for economic outreach to China's partners and is an attempt to create a favourable international environment conducive to China's continuing development.

Finally, BXF coincided with the first ASEAN-China Maritime exercise. Organising such an exercise could become a regular feature during the Forum. Perhaps, such an exercise may also widen its nature and scope to advance China's regional security interests.

The BXF's significance is growing steadily as it becomes a conduit for Chinese defence diplomacy. The organisers are improving the quality of this Forum, looking at the big picture through their incremental innovation. China seeks to develop a new security architecture with BXF enabling Beijing to articulate its own narrative.

Attention and support from the top leadership makes BXF pivotal to Chinese defence diplomacy. Although BXF seems set to outsize SLD in future, with many seeing it as a potential challenger to SLD, it is more likely that both these forums will co-exist in the emerging security landscape.

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