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Xiangshan Forum

China's Quest for Stability: Images and Realities

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SYNOPSIS

In pursuing proactive defence diplomacy, China has resorted to political messaging and pragmatic signalling. However, China can enhance this exercise by addressing some external security concerns about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

COMMENTARY

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY is a fine art that requires close coordination between the military and diplomatic wings of a nation-state. In this light, the 9th Beijing Xiangshan Forum (BXF), organised by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence from 20 to 22 October 2019, was aimed at presenting a positive outlook on China's military and diplomatic objectives.

Crafted as the Chinese platform for defence-outreach towards other countries, the 9th BXF featured also a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). There was political messaging about giant China as a global player and as an exceptional power that would always care for the interests of medium and small countries. Pragmatism about China's deeply layered strategic environment was also evident.

Image-Multipliers

Four image-multipliers of China's preferred identity — originally conceptualised by President Xi Jinping, also Chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) — were highlighted at the 9th BXF. A clear objective was to deploy image-

multipliers to complement the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) force-multipliers.

Foremost among the image-multipliers was the profiling of China as an emerging architect of a global community with a shared future. Beijing was also portrayed as a non-hegemonic power with no expansionist designs and no spheres of influence.

These images were supplemented by the projection of China as a force for peace in the Asia-Pacific region and as a stabiliser of the current international order. Offering a flavour of the season, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng narrated the PRC's numerous achievements, in the face of challenges, in the past seven decades.

BRI Factor in China's Defence Diplomacy

China is currently at the geopolitical crossroads; its image multipliers are intended to legitimise its aspiration for the status of a benign global superpower. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is Xi's geostrategic 'vision' and geopolitical 'plan' to expand China's economic connectivity with the rest of the world. In his overarching mantra of a "new era", the BRI occupies the pride of place as a catalyst for China's "national rejuvenation".

To be an economic superpower and a world-class military force by 2049, the PRC's centenary year, is the essence of Chinese "national rejuvenation". In this light, Xi launched the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in May 2017 as a platform for China to liaise with external partners.

At the 9th BXF, there was an opportunity, not fully utilised, to address the updated international suspicions and concerns about the geostrategic and military advantages that might accrue to China through its BRI projects.

Focus on Regional Realities

At the 9th BXF opening ceremony, Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister, General Wei Fenghe, said China set no political conditions for its exchanges with other countries. This was only an indirect reference to the BRI's centrality in today's Chinese defence diplomacy. Even this messaging was laced with Wei's reassertion of China's ancestral claims in the South China Sea.

President Xi was more forthright in his congratulatory message to this conference. To "build a security architecture fitting the regional reality" was now the "shared responsibility" of countries, Xi said, in a clear reference to the Asia-Pacific region that covers South China Sea.

Sharing the limelight with Wei at the conference, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu expressed concern over the ongoing creation of "dividing lines" by the United States and its partners through "the artificial expansion" of their "sphere of cooperation to the so-called Indo-Pacific region". Offering a different perspective, ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General Anh Tuan Hoang emphasised that the organisation's Indo-Pacific Outlook, while being consistent with other regional initiatives, was aimed at creating synergies in the wider domain.

On a pragmatic note overall, the 9th BXF held a 'parallel session' of the Forum on China's preferred Asia-Pacific and organised a non-official 'roundtable', too, on the duality of Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions.

Other Talking Points

In a global perspective, Xi, Shoigu and China's CMC Vice Chairman, General Xu Qiliang, emphasised the centrality of the United Nations in global affairs. This was unsurprising, because both China and Russia wield veto rights at the UN Security Council.

However, with Xi having identified India as one of China's key interlocutors to address globalisation challenges, the Russia-India-China forum (RIC) and the US-Japan-India links were also talking points, behind the scenes at the BXF.

The RIC, conceptualised in the 1990s, is said to have established a "geopolitical basis" in today's "multipolar" world, despite "some differences" between China and India. Therefore, the relatively new US-Japan-India network, if aimed at "containment" of China, "is not going to work", it was emphasised. China's "all-weather partner" Pakistan, was seen as a regional player whose relevance to the Indo-Pacific stability could not be under-estimated.

Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen and Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister Ishwar Pokhrel were prominent speakers at a plenary session of the 9th BXF. China seems to recognise Singapore's advocacy of stable Sino-US relations in trade and beyond. Separately, Xi recently achieved a breakthrough in China's connective ties with Nepal.

Future of Peace and War

In a realistic non-official discussion preceding the conference, Chinese and other experts were asked to ponder, among other questions, the emerging "nightmare" scenarios for China and the world. A war, by design or default, between the US and China, or even the US and Russia, was the consensus. The "militarisation of outer space" and the new "struggle" in the cyberspace were also some critical concerns.

'Parallel sessions' of the Forum addressed future revolutions in warfare, such as artificial intelligence, technological innovation and new security concepts. Counter-terrorism, maritime security, and the Middle East were other themes. Reflecting China's protective perspective, "security cooperation" (not tensions) in the South China Sea was a sub-theme.

Outside the conference, a former major-general of the PLA told me that "the US was surprised at China's rise and wants to stop China" from rising further. It was, therefore, a "difficult" situation already, he said. Such perceptions may shape China's future military and diplomatic postures.

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