In the wake of China’s mammoth economic growth that catapulted China as the second largest economy of the world in 2010, and the military expenditure corresponding to its economy, everyone including the Chinese is talking about China’s rise and its emergence as a challenger to the unipolar world.

Chinese think tanks and government alike on their part have been looking for their own answers in the best Confucian tradition where the rectification of names is attached great importance. They came up with the concept of “Peaceful Rise of China” (Zhongguo de heping jueqi ???????) during the 1990s. However, the term became a fad after it was used by Zheng Bijian, the former Vice Principal of the Central Party School in November 2003 during the Boao Forum for Asia, and later by the outgoing Chinese President Hu Jintao in a speech on the occasion of the 110th birth anniversary of Mao Zedong in December 2003. Hu Jintao (2003) had remarked that adherence to the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics is adherence to the “developmental road of peaceful rise.” Following this, the term was used by Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting, and a speech at the Harvard University during his visit to the United States. Wen had tried to justify China’s rise and reassure the world when he said (Guo 2004: 2 in preface), “the developmental road China has taken is different from that taken by some major powers, and China’s developmental road is the road of peaceful rise.”

The jargon emphasizes the emergence of China as a “soft power” implying that China’s rise is not a threat to its neighbors and the world as a whole, and that China seeks to avoid conflict. According to Duan Bingren (2004:2-3 preface), the road of peaceful rise is a major innovation of China’s developmental strategic thought. Duan asserts that “the developmental road, China has sought, is a unique road
seeking peace and mutual benefits; this not only will harmonize the international order, but will also enable China to uphold its independence, social system and choice of life style. The developmental road of peaceful rise, seeks harmony with others, partnership with China’s neighbors, and friendly coexistence with other countries on the basis of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Economically, it seeks integration with the globalization, and naturally seeks China’s new role in global development equations, thus becoming a constructive and responsible player in the international economic activities. Politically, the notion would enable China to actively and constructively participate in the international affairs, be a challenger rather than a moot spectator to the events and aspire for a democratic, peaceful and multi-polar world.” Therefore, the peaceful rise of China is an antidote to “hegemony”, “hot war”, “cold war”, “China threat”, “disintegration of China” etc. theories and notions; it is a promise to the world that the rise of China is peaceful.”

However, the lexicon ran into rough weather as the think tanks in China tried to debate the pros and cons of the term. Many felt that the word “rise” would put its neighbors at unease, while others argued that it is premature to talk about the rise, as China largely remains a developing country. In the backdrop of such a debate, China changed the term ‘rise’ to ‘development’ when it published a white paper entitled “China’s peaceful development” in the beginning of 2006. Nevertheless, the terminology is still being widely used in government as well as academic circles across China.

The debate apart, the crux is whether the “rise” or “development” of China is going to be a smooth sail? If not what could be the dangers or challenges China would face? While contemplating on these questions, Xin Xiangyang (2004:2-3, preface II) posits that China would face four major external challenges: 1) Trade and commerce (challenges from world markets, world energy resources, and trade protectionism); 2) National security (traditional security threat, number of variables in its surrounding security environment, as well as non-traditional security issues); 3) External political challenges (disintegration and westernization of China, the penetration of Non Government Organizations (NGOs) in China, international terrorism and the increasingly large number of international criminal activities); 4) The US containment of China. Besides, Xin also outlines the following four internal challenges: 1) Population; 2) Resources and energy; 3) Environmental degradation; and 4) Social imbalance.

It has been widely speculated by the analysts that the priority of the fifth generation leadership under Xi Jinping would keep a low key profile as far as China’s foreign policy is concerned, and concentrate more on the internal challenges, especially the challenge of social imbalance. The challenge has manifested itself in China in various shapes and forms. Whether it is the question of food security, rural urban divide, peasant’s protests, the issue of rural education or migrant laborers, each and every issue is related to peasants, agriculture and the countryside, and is capable of derailing China rise or peaceful development. Therefore, economic development, deepening of reforms and opening up is going to remain the top priority of the new leadership. It not only would help China to overcome the social imbalances but also equip it to deal with the external challenges in a better way.

Contrarily, it appears that of late China has shown signs of discarding the time tested strategy of Deng Xiaoping as is well explained by his maxim “hide your strength, bide your time.’ Ever since the middle of the first decade of this century, especially the successful convocation of
the Olympic Games in 2008, China started to take maximalist positions vis-à-vis conflicts with the neighboring countries, be it the Diaoyu/Senkaku row with Japan in the East China Sea, or with Vietnam, Philippines and other smaller disputing countries in the South China Sea, or its dispute with South Asian neighbors. As China has started to define South China Sea as an area of core interest in addition to Taiwan and Tibet, it has taken the disputes to new stages by way of sending unmanned surveillance plane over disputed Diaoyu; standoff with the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal; Chinese fishing vessels cutting the cables of Vietnamese Oil & Gas Group seismic ship in Vietnam controlled waters; announcing new rules for the region that authorize its police in the southern province of Hainan to board and seize foreign ships in the South China Sea; raising threats of conflict by establishing Sansha on Yongxing Island in the southernmost province of Hainan; threats to disrupt ONGC Videsh exploration in South China Sea and reiterating China’s ‘indisputable sovereignty’ in the region; initiating a new passport design containing a map claiming the South China Sea and disputed areas along the Sino-Indian border; and even flexing economic muscle against the smaller neighbors in the region by banning their exports on flimsy grounds.

Besides, since China’s economy has grown with a neck breaking speed all these years, its military spending has also increased manifolds. For example a decade back, it only spent around 20 billion USD on defense, the same has increased around five times in recent years. Last year when the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates met Hu Jintao in Beijing, China showcased its new fighter jet, the J-20 in Chengdu, Sichuan. China has also showcased its own drones that resemble the US Predator and Global Hawk. The US suspects Iran for giving China access to the US drone that was shot down by Iran within its territory. If people’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has showcased its new assets, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has also commissioned its first aircraft carrier, Liaoning earlier in September this year. Two months later China landed J-15 on the Liaoning. Analysts believe that the aircraft carrier will allow Beijing to help project its military might in territorial disputes. China has also aggressively furthered its space program. Since 2007, China twice shot down its dysfunctional satellites with anti-satellite missiles thus displaying its capabilities to destroy spy satellites and space-based missile defense system of other countries, especially the US. These gestures from China has not only sent shockwaves to its neighbors, but has also challenged the US power projections.

It is in this context that the US ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’ toward Asia should be seen. It is also in the light of above that smaller neighbors of China are increasingly looking at the US for countervailing China. Even countries like Philippines and Vietnam that have suffered the aggression from Japanese and the US are willing to forge closer ties with these countries. It is for the very reason that ASEAN countries are taking common and united position on the disputes in South China Sea, but they are equally aware of the fact that even if united it is still impossible to confront China.

Therefore, even if China frantically defends it ‘rise’ or ‘development’ as peaceful, the ‘China threat’ has once again raised its head to the discomfort of every party. The situation may be changed to better once Xi Jinping takes charge of the party and military, as in recent pronouncements we have seen him showing difference. For example, in his interaction with foreign experts in China on December 5th, he
seems to have reiterated the essence of China’s peaceful development. He said China will not seek hegemony or expansionism and continue to open to the outside world. He also pronounced that China’s peaceful development does not seek selfish interests, and benefits by harming others, it seeks mutual benefits. Again between December 7 and 11, 2012 while touring southern China, he reiterated that ‘reforms and opening up is unstoppable.’ I believe this doesn’t prove to be a mere rhetoric as has been the case in recent times. China being a developing country still needs Deng’s wisdom as regards the disputes relating to sovereignty. China has resorted to military means to solve its disputes or exert sovereignty several times, if that happens again, the long-term goals of China, especially attaining the level of a moderately developed country by the middle of this century would be seriously subverted, and the fruits of being a beneficiary of globalization lost for a few reefs and rocks here and there.

References:


(Dr. B R Deepak is Professor of Chinese and China Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. The views expressed are his own. He could be reached at bdeepak@mail.jnu.ac.in [1])

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