



## **China Spreads its Wings** by Tony Walker

*"China cannot develop itself in isolation from the rest of the world."*

These are the words of Premier Li Peng, the most nationalistic of the top Chinese leaders. Hardly revolutionary sentiments, one might think. But in China, which has traditionally shunned multilateralism for fear of being bullied over such issues as security in the South China Sea and human rights, they mark an important shift.

China has embarked on a determined drive to sell a new foreign policy in which it asserts itself regionally while pursuing its goals more vigorously through international forums. Previously, it preferred to deal with sensitive issues bilaterally. In the post-Deng Xiaoping era, Beijing may at last be fashioning a more activist, coherent, and outward-looking foreign policy to match its growing economic importance.

China's rulers have been beating the drum of the new foreign policy for much of the past year. The relatively successful Hong Kong handover and a warming of Sino-U.S. ties have encouraged an increased assertiveness. So have the economic problems afflicting the Asian tigers. State media coverage of meetings between Jiang Zemin, China's president, and heads of the financially troubled Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) last month depicted benign godfather dispensing advice to errant school children.

Such are the contradictions between old and new perspectives that Chinese policy remains skittish and has not yet settled into a predictable pattern. Suspicions about the "ulterior" motives of outsiders are deeply rooted in a country that shunned contact with the world until relatively recently. The propaganda machine continues to warn of U.S. "hegemonistic ambitions" even as Mr. Jiang seeks ways to advance a "constructive strategic partnership" with Bill Clinton, his U.S. counterpart.

But there are enough indications of change to persuade China-watchers that Beijing has embarked, albeit tentatively, on a new trajectory. It is a path, say optimists, that could allow it to improve often fractious relations with its neighbors and with the west.

China has undergone "a very significant reorientation," says Professor Samuel Kim, senior research scholar at the East Asian Institute, Columbia University. Beijing is veering away from its pretensions of being a global (but isolated) power, towards pursuing its goals by forging relations with its immediate neighbors. Mr. Jiang's presence last month as the first summit between leaders of ASEAN and of the region's economic powers – Japan, China and South Korea – is part of what Professor Kim describes as the "substantial regionalization" of China's foreign policy.

Since China opened to the outside world in the late 1970s, Chinese policy has undergone a number of twists and turns. This began with a starry-eyed Sino-U.S. romance during which Mr. Deng declared that the U.S. and China, in their opposition to the Soviet Union, had "identical global interests." But a decade later the Tiananmen Square massacre frayed what had become a threadbare perception of Sino-U.S. togetherness. Then the collapse of the Soviet Union forced an overdue review of China's place in the world.

That review produced a basic conclusion that if China could achieve "great power" stature in the Asia Pacific region – where the U.S., China, Russia and Japan rub up against each other – it would in due course become a great power globally. Chinese officials have begun to articulate with greater clarity foreign policy priorities, including what is described as a "new beginning" in Sino-U.S. relations.

"Since the Cold War is over and the world moves towards multipolarity we stand for a new type of state-to-state relationship," says Chen Jian, an assistant foreign minister and one of the architects of Beijing's Asia strategy. "This is characterized by mutual respect and mutual cooperation."

These words more or less reflect sentiments expressed by Mr. Jiang in a speech to the Communist Party Congress last September in which he observed that big-power relationships were undergoing "major and profound adjustments." China sees itself as integral to those changes.

Kenneth Lieberthal, a China scholar and adviser to the U.S., says it is unclear whether Beijing's desire to forge a coherent foreign policy is merely an attempt to counter American influence, or if China genuinely believes this to be the best way of ordering its international relations. Similarly, China's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum on security, reversing past objection to such multilateral forums, invites the question of whether this is a cynical exercise to stifle discussion about territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Chinese officials insist their interest in dialogue is genuine.

What is clear is that the new leadership in Beijing has, since Mr. Deng's death last February, gone on the offensive diplomatically. Since the Hong Kong handover on July 1, Chinese officials have engaged in what Professor Lieberthal describes as "high diplomacy." This has included summits with the U.S. and Russia, high-level exchanges with Japan, involvement in meetings of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and ASEAN; participation in efforts to bail out sinking Asian economies, and a lead role in promoting Geneva peace talks on Korea.

All this generally constructive activity contrasts sharply with the crisis of early 1996 when China's firing of missiles

into waters off Taiwan prompted widespread censure and the deployment of two U.S. naval carriers.

“They are seeking to establish a high profile as an important country with whom you can get along and one interested primarily in economic development,” says Professor Leiberthal. But he has yet to discern a clear cut global strategy. “Jiang Zemin is trying on major country clothes to see how they fit.”

In the process, China is, somewhat uncertainly, trying to come to grips with its status as an aspiring “great power” or, as Professor Kim describes it, “an incomplete great power” – but through regional engagement rather than splendid isolation.

“The irony is that the west has begun to sing the rise of China chorus at a time when Chinese leaders ..... are shifting from the pretence of being a global power to becoming the dominant regional military power in Asia,” says Professor Kim.

“From Beijing’s post-Cold War perspective, Asia is the center of Chinese power and influence, the nucleus of ever-expanding circles radiating outwards in all directions.” This is an idea we are likely to hear much more of as China continues to spread its wings. It may even become policy.

*Tony Walker writes for the Financial Times. This article originally appeared in the January 8, 1998 issue of the Financial Times and is reprinted with permission.*

**Note: Pacific Forum CSIS Executive Director Ralph A. Cossa will be discussing the results of a recent project on “Triggers of Conflict in the South China Sea” on Thursday, January 29th, at 4:00PM at CSIS, 1800 K St., Washington, D.C. All are invited. Please RSVP to the Pacific Forum or to Andrette Anderson at (202) 775-3153 if you plan to attend.**