The Chinese White Paper on 'Peaceful Development': Worth a Second Glance?

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While there has been much analytical speculation over the Chinese concept of 'peaceful development,' (originally projected as peaceful growth), the first official sanction to it has come recently in the form of a white paper on 'China's Peaceful Development,' published by the Information Office of the State Council, and put up on the Chinese Government’s official web portal in September 2011. The document claims that the option of peaceful development is a historically ordained strategic choice made by China to realize modernization, make itself strong and prosperous, and make more contribution to the progress of human civilization and China will steadfastly follow the path of peaceful development.

The White paper mentions that China's policy has been and would continue to seek mutual benefit and common development with other countries in keeping with the trend of economic globalization, and working together with other countries to build a harmonious world of durable peace and common prosperity.

In context of China's Asian neighbourhood, the document mentions that China actively enhances friendly cooperation with its neighbors and works with them to promote a harmonious Asia. China also calls on countries in the region to respect each other, increase mutual trust, seek common ground while putting aside differences, safeguard regional peace and stability, and settle disputes including those over territorial claims and maritime rights and interests through dialogue and friendly negotiation. China does not seek regional hegemony or sphere of influence, nor does it want to exclude any country from participating in regional cooperation.

While definitely not very striking in its content, the question is should one ignore this White paper and reject it as a collection of platitudes or does it merit, at least, a careful second reading? For, it has been quite some time that the Chinese state, has been seriously toying with the concept, and definitions of peaceful development. The phrase ‘Peaceful Rise’ was first used by former Vice-President of the Central Party School Zheng Bijian during a lecture delivered in 2003. Since then, the phrase ‘Peaceful Rise’ or currently more acceptable ‘Peaceful Development,’ has been used quite frequently by the top rung Chinese leaders in their public speeches. At the annual meeting of Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) in April 2011, for instance, the Chinese President Hu Jintao reiterated the need for the countries in the Asian region to shelve differences, seek a common ground for security and inclusive development.
This is primarily a result of the rediscovery of the Chinese intellectual tradition since the opening up of the 1980s and the end of Maoism. According to scholars like Thomas Bondiguel and Thierry Kellner, the new think tanks are playing an innovative role by permeating the Chinese policy making structures and providing scope for some serious out of the box thinking.

This has been perhaps necessitated by the fact that for all the sabre rattling done from time to time by Beijing on unresolved territorial questions in South China sea or in other parts of its neighbourhood (including the long standing border dispute with India) and its projected impressive military growth, China realizes that any conflict in Asia is unlikely to remain a localized affair, working to the advantage of China. Any conflict over territorial dispute in Asia, however, minor in scale and localized would rob China of its relative financial advantage and stability and bring to a halt its relatively steady growth for nearly three decades now. Moreover, financial instability might generate internal instability which could destroy the fragile social consensus already quite strained.

This is true of the perceived rapid extension of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region. Popular as it might be, the string of pearls theory, it has been argued, is a more a matter of speculation than hard reality. In pursuing this policy, China seems to be proceeding according to the 'places not bases' theory. Fear for the string of pearls also masks the reality that China is yet to achieve the capability to turn these ports into naval bases. According to an US Congressional Research Service report on Chinese Naval modernization programme submitted in June 2011, the PLAN(Peoples' Liberation Army Navy) continues to exhibit limitations or weaknesses in several areas, including capabilities for sustained operations by larger formations in distant waters, joint operations with other parts of China’s military, C4ISR systems, anti-air warfare (AAW), antisubmarine warfare (ASW), MCM, a dependence on foreign suppliers for certain key ship components, and a lack of operational experience in combat situations.

Overall, while one must not underestimate the periodic spurts in the Chinese aggressive policymaking trying to protect its perceived ‘core interests,’ or its massive military buildup, the chances of any overt conflict taking place in China’s Asian neighbourhood seems to be remote. The official sanction of the concept of ‘peaceful development’ seems to be an indicator to this trend. The new concept, it has been argued, represents a new social contract between the Chinese state and the transnational actors. With this new contract, the Chinese state is defining its responsibility in a new context in order to legitimize itself. Appearing as a peaceful, restrained and responsible global power is a vital factor within this new ‘structurization’ process.

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