

Reflections From China on Xi Jinping's "Asia for Asians"

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Internal debates continue in China and abroad about the meaning and significance of Chinese President Xi Jinping's position on a new Asian regional security order. Some observers insist that a strongly worded May 2014 speech Xi delivered in Shanghai reflects China's intensified determination to exercise an increasingly assertive posture toward the United States. Others suspect that such rhetoric is largely designed for internal consumption to appeal to nationalist sentiments about the need for China to stand up to the United States and take a leadership role in the region. Such differences in interpretation are extended to discussions about China's attitudes toward the United States' continued strategic presence in Asia and about Washington's maintenance of its long-standing alliance network there. The truth is that a combination of Chinese aspirations for shaping a new regional security architecture tempered by the realities and constraints of what China can actually do at this point in time must be acknowledged by both Chinese policymakers and their foreign counterparts.

Key words: "Asia for Asians," Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, major power relationship, *ning zuo wu you*, Xi Jinping

China's President Xi Jinping's speech in May 2014 about "Asia for Asians"—delivered to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)—has been scrutinized by government officials and observers of international politics both in China and abroad (Jiao, 2015; Lei, 2014; Pei, 2014; Tiezzi, 2014). For this observer, Xi's speech and the ongoing discussions about Xi's strategic intentions based on its content are an apt reminder that internal wrangling over the direction of Chinese foreign policy decision making continues behind the facade of "official China."

Xi's statement about the need for a new regional security order raised many questions: was his speech merely the launch of a new slogan intended to please Chinese domestic audiences, or a sign of a genuine policy shift? Was the Chinese president signaling that his country no longer sees the value of the

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United States as a security guarantor in Asia? It certainly seems so if one reads the official translation of the speech.

Xi's precise wording was: "In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation" (Xi, 2014).

Outside of China, many government officials and commentators question China's willingness—despite Beijing's pledges of respect for its neighbors—to lead the Asia-Pacific region in a manner that is acceptable to others in that part of the world (Heydarian, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014). Beijing's recent actions to defend what it perceives as its maritime rights have been interpreted by others as destabilizing, coercive measures in an attempt by China to gain control of the East and South China Seas (BBC News, 2014; Greene, 2015).

Inside China, public criticism of a major speech by the President of China is not permitted. That does not mean that the gist and messaging of Xi's speech were endorsed by all Chinese government officials or international relations specialists, who provide expert analysis to government officials. On the contrary, the speech is still—well over a year since Xi presented it—being discussed and debated in private by Chinese government officials and academic specialists.

Indeed, those who question China's capacity to assume a leadership role in the region were "aghast" at Xi's speech, according to one vice-minister-level Chinese interlocutor.¹ They feel that for several decades and because of China's severe domestic problems, it is not in China's interests to challenge the role of the United States as the region's security guarantor. These formidable hurdles include a slowing economy, the reluctance of several interest groups to accept necessary economic reforms, and the fraying Chinese social fabric due to widespread dissatisfaction with social injustice and widespread corruption. China's modernization still has a long way to go and continuous economic growth is not a given. The United States is still viewed as useful to keeping Japan in check. Additionally, according to those who are skeptical about China's capability to assume a regional leadership role, China's military capabilities are still limited and will remain so in comparison to American military might, despite substantial advances of China's military modernization (ifeng.com, 2015).

Some of the skeptics claim that the wording of Xi's speech was clumsy; this, they say, was at least in part because it was delivered at CICA, a mostly Central Asia and Europe-focused gathering, and, therefore, the Foreign Ministry's Eurasian Bureau had the responsibility for drafting the text. This bureau is reportedly less skilled than the two top bureaus (for East Asia and for South and West Asia) within the Foreign Ministry's Asia Department. One interlocutor who was critical of the Foreign Ministry's speech-drafting process bemoaned that Xi should have said, "it is for the people of Asia to be *mainly responsible* for running the affairs of Asia." Others pointed to an imprecise translation. If literally translated, the sentence about Asia being for Asians, instead of "in the final analysis," would have used "ultimately" three times: "Asian affairs should be *ultimately* run by the people of Asia; Asian issues should be *ultimately* handled by the people of Asia; Asian security should be *ultimately* maintained by the people of Asia."

This author questioned why the draft text of an incompetent bureau could not be changed before Xi gave the speech, if the wording was indeed not the intention of the senior leadership. The interlocutor responded that the text had undoubtedly been read by several higher level officials, but that no one wants to soften a strongly-worded text in today's political atmosphere in which being tough internationally is politically correct. He used a well-known Chinese political expression *ning zuo wu you* (宁左勿右) meaning there is a preference to be on the left rather than on the right.² He conceded that he represented a minority view and that many in China very much approved of Xi's "Asia for Asians" speech, and that standing up to the United States is popular.

The other controversial passage in Xi's speech was one that alluded to the new circumstances in which China's power is growing and which was clearly aimed at the U.S. alliance system:

As a Chinese saying goes, 'A wise man changes as time and circumstances change.' We need to keep pace with the changing circumstances and evolving times. One cannot live in the 21st century with the outdated thinking from the age of Cold War and zero-sum game. We believe that it is necessary to advocate common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia. We need to innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a road for security of Asia that is shared by and win-win to all. (Xi, 2014)

Many Chinese commentators have attempted publicly to downplay the fact that Xi targeted the United States so bluntly, saying that Xi's intention is to reduce (or minimize) the influence of the United States, not drive it out (Jia, 2013; Xue, 2014; Zhang, 2014). For example, Jin Canrong of Renmin University stated in an interview that the fact that in one sentence Xi used "ultimately" three times reflects that this statement alludes to a future trend, not the present (Lei, 2014).³ Several commentators noted that Xi's appeal for Asian affairs to be managed by the people in Asia was made in the context of the need for greater cooperation among Asian countries, which does not per se suggest the need to exclude countries outside Asia. Yan Xuetong of Qinghua University went further and pointed out that as "the balance of power is different in different parts of Asia, we probably have to consider building a sub-regional order that suits the power structure of each sub-region" (Yi, 2015).

Many interlocutors conceded privately that Xi's speech was intended to criticize Washington because of Xi's dissatisfaction with Barack Obama's cold response to his desire to build a "new type of major power relationship," in essence China's pursuit of recognition as an equal of the United States. A relatively common view among Chinese U.S. specialists is that Washington's arrogance stands in the way of its adjusting to new realities. One interlocutor opined: "Because of China's rise, the United States now has a similarly painful adjustment process ahead as China did after the world changed in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union."⁴ Another analyst thinks the speech was also directed at Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, countries that China perceives as having been emboldened by the United States since 2011 and having taken a confrontational attitude to China (Bai, 2015).

In China—as in other nations—a major policy shift, which Xi’s May 2014 speech (at least at face value) appears to signal, is analyzed and mulled over internally and at length. Adjustments may occur, over time, based on these deliberations. Because of the opaque nature of high-level decision making in China, it is impossible to know whether internal opposition is the reason that Xi has not mentioned the need for Asians to run the affairs of Asia since May 2014. In comparison, Xi said that “Asia belongs to the world” at the Boao Forum in May 2015 (Xi, 2015). Heated debates involving many types of foreign policy actors—both official and on the margins—regarding the most advantageous direction for China’s foreign policy have taken place in China throughout the reform process. These discussions have only intensified as China’s power has grown.

Dividing the debaters into hardliners (or hawks) and softliners (or doves) is unnecessarily stark and does not reflect the nuance of China’s diverse foreign policy establishment (for a discussion of hawks and doves, see Mahbubani, 2014). Even within groups, opinions can differ widely. There are those who are eager to see China rule the seas (and the region) and see Xi as the leader to fulfill this dream; those who advocate that China stand up for its maritime rights in the South China Sea but otherwise support the pursuit of constructive relations with the United States and the region, even Japan; those who advocate China being tough on maritime issues but only up to a certain point because of the surge in negative sentiment across Asia on account of China’s assertiveness in the maritime domain; and those who think that constructive relations with the neighborhood should override all other considerations.

Xi’s speech undoubtedly reflects his aspirational vision of a new Asian security framework. His concrete policies, however, will be shaped by the realities, by his fellow senior civilian and military leaders, by the policy responses of other nations, and ultimately by voices within his own foreign policy establishment.

Notes

¹The author discussed Xi’s May 2014 speech with central and local government officials as well as academics and retired officials affiliated with research institutes and universities during three research trips to China in September 2014, November 2014, and July 2015.

²In the Chinese political context, being on the Left is being hardline (and critical of the United States), and being on the Right runs the risk of being seen as a sympathizer of the capitalist world.

³The literal translation of Xi’s words was: “The affairs of Asia should be ultimately run by the people of Asia; the issues of Asia should be ultimately handled by the people of Asia; the security of Asia should be ultimately maintained by the people of Asia. The people of Asia have the ability and the wisdom to achieve peace and stability in Asia through enhanced cooperation.”

⁴Author’s private discussion with Chinese analyst, Shanghai, July 8, 2015.

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