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China Seeks Role as Second Superpower

By Erich Follath and Wieland Wagner

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Next week, Beijing will open its 18th party congress at which the Communist Party will select the country's new leader. One of the core issues at the meeting will be the role in China of a military that has gained considerable influence. Some in the party are unhappy with its powerful position.

Everyone who attended the event later said that this sort of thing had never occurred before, not once since the communists assumed power in China 63 years ago and the party assumed control of the military. It also happened when everyone was in a mood to relax, at a "holiday banquet" in honor of top generals.

The Communist Party in Beijing had organized the banquet in February to emphasize harmony between politicians and the military. When a senior officer in the air force was about to make a toast to his comrades in the political camp, General Zhang Qinsheng pushed him aside and shouted: "Enough of this cajolery! There are pigs in the party who are plotting against me!" Then he berated President Hu Jintao, who was also sitting at the table, and accused him of being part of the conspiracy against him. The outraged Hu stormed out, and the military officers still in the room had trouble controlling Zhang, who allegedly kept yelling obscenities.

Half a dozen of the attendees confirmed the incident, and their report was leaked to the *New York Times* and SPIEGEL. What is unclear is how inebriated the general was, and what has happened to him since then.

Zhang, 64, was suspended in May without any official explanation. It was the preliminary end of a stellar career. A member of the People's Liberation Army since 1968, he had worked his way up from commander of the Guangzhou military region to the rank of first deputy general chief of staff. Until a few months ago, he was even mentioned as a possible defense minister. But there was also talk that Zhang was politically unpredictable and not always willing to accept the primacy of the party.

Currying the Generals' Favor

He isn't the only one. In the run-up to the 18th party congress, which begins in Beijing next Thursday, the Communist Party leadership is experiencing substantial turnover. Of the top nine members of the leading body in the People's Republic, the Standing Committee of the Politburo, seven are to be replaced. A struggle is underway over the country's direction -- and for power.

Hu Jintao, 69, will step down as party leader and, at the end of his term in March, will hand over the presidency to current Vice President Xi Jinping, 59. But in all likelihood, he will not give up his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, thus retaining control over the military until at least 2014. His two predecessors took the same approach. In addition, Hu has promoted at least 45 officers to the rank of general in the last eight years, in an attempt to secure their loyalty.

This must be an annoyance for China's new strongman, Xi. Without control over the military, his political latitude is diminished. Ironically Xi, unlike Hu, has had military experience and maintains close contacts within the armed forces. As a young man, he worked in the office of then-Defense Minister Geng Biao, a friend of his father from their days as guerilla fighters. And he is married to Peng Liyuan, an influential performer of soldier's songs who is adored nationwide, and who holds a civilian rank equal to that of a major general.

Xi has self-confidently allowed himself to become involved in a game of shadowboxing with his current boss. He has met with senior military officials several times in recent months. His closest allies include members of various schools of thought: General Liu Yuan, considered a hardliner and advocate of an aggressive policy, and General Liu Yazhou, who seems to support a political liberalization of his country based on the Singaporean model.

The struggle for the generals' favor increases their self-confidence. Alongside substantial increases in China's military budget (more than 11 percent for 2012, for example), some hardliners envision greater independence for and a depoliticizing of the army. This is a red rag to the Communist Party, which fears such shows of independence and, through the government press, warns nervously against "false ideas" with "hidden motives." These ideas, the Beijing propaganda tool *Global Times* writes, are being disseminated by the West and are a "strategic tool" to undermine the systems of socialist nations.

A Menacing Ring of Fire?

For the agitators in the army, it is more than a question of increasing their role within the domestic interplay of forces. They feel that China is surrounded, and argue for a new, sharper

tone towards its Asian neighbors and, most of all, the United States. In the words of influential Communist Party official Li Qun, Washington has "strategically encircled" the People's Republic. As evidence, he cites the fact that the US Navy plans to station about 60 percent of its warships in the Pacific by 2020, putting more ships there than in both the Atlantic and the Persian Gulf.

Li is also convinced that the White House is making a concerted effort to form military alliances with China's neighbors. "Their real goal is not protecting so-called human rights," says Li. "They are using it as an excuse to constrain China's healthy growth and prevent China's prosperity and power from threatening their global hegemony." This, says Li, is why American military bases are being built from Afghanistan to perhaps even Vietnam soon, forming what the Chinese see as a menacing ring of fire. American military spending is still five times as high as the amount Beijing spends on its armed forces.

In this scenario, it isn't China that is torpedoing any progress toward peace, both in the Syrian civil war, through its United Nations Security Council veto, and with its hesitant position on Iran. The Chinese believe that with their military superiority, the hawks in Washington could shine a light on China's vulnerability in the event of a crisis, blocking seaways and thus cutting off access to the raw materials that are vital to the country's survival. Taiwan, which Beijing sees as nothing but a province of the People's Republic, is being armed and "used as a pawn to stop China's rise," writes retired General Luo Yuan in the US magazine *Foreign Affairs*.

Territorial Disputes

Chinese military leaders are especially upset about the United States meddling in the South China Sea, a region they view as their maritime backyard, in much the same way as the Americans view the Caribbean. The Far Eastern waters are believed to hold enormous oil and gas reserves, and China is claiming sovereignty over almost every group of islands in them. This has already led to territorial disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines.

Beijing's biggest territorial conflict at the moment is with its old archenemy Japan, over the uninhabited [Senkaku Islands](#) in the East China Sea, in Japanese hands since 1895. But China contends that historic maps from the Ming era prove that it owns the islands, known as the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese. The dispute threatened to escalate in mid-September, when Beijing sent patrol boats to the region. American diplomatic pressure in early October helped defuse the situation somewhat, with US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta urging Beijing to exercise moderation. Almost concurrently, American and Japanese forces held a joint maneuver on the Pacific island of Guam.

It's highly unlikely that a full-blown armed conflict will erupt in the East China Sea, even though the Communist Party leaders recently had their ships advance into the vicinity of the disputed islands for "exercises." Most China experts in the West see Beijing's boastful generals as rational strategists, more interested in increasing their own power than actual battles.

But tensions with foreign powers can lead to economic wars. When the Japanese seized a Chinese fishing vessel near the disputed islands two years ago, Beijing limited the sale of the

rare earth metals that are so critical to Japanese industry. And in September 2012, as a result of the current tensions, trade between the two countries declined by more than 14 percent compared with the same month in 2011.

In recent years, verbal disputes with Japan have led to several violent protests in cities like Beijing, Qingdao and Chengdu. But this nationalist fervor that the party likes to arouse could also become difficult to contain. When angry Chinese protesters attack Japanese facilities and set Toyotas and Hondas on fire, the situation threatens to spin out of control. Moreover, protests against foreign companies can quickly turn against China's Communist leaders in troubled regions with separatist movements, like Tibet and Xinjiang.

Xi Wants to Make China World's Second Superpower

Designated party chairman Xi Jinping is considered a tactically skillful and moderate politician. He is unlikely to risk curbing the powers of the military or even limiting the increases in their budgets. But he is also unlikely to support any military adventures.

Last week's shakeup in the military leadership seems to suit Xi's agenda. General Ma Xiaotian, 63, one of Xi's confidants, who comes from a well-known family of senior party officials, was made the new head of the air force. Ma, considered to be extremely self-confident, once told a Hong Kong television station that "the Americans have no business in the South China Sea." Allies of Bo Xilai, the former party chief in the southwestern city of Chongqing who is being accused of corruption and other crimes, have now been forced out of the military leadership. The Maoist mindset with which Bo sought to prevail against the pragmatists is also likely to fall out of favor now.

In the 1980s, Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping had advocated international restraint for China. His principle was known as "*taoguang yanghui*," which can be loosely translated to mean "hide our capabilities and bide our time".

But the times are long gone when the People's Republic was focused solely on its domestic economy. Xi will seek to solidify China's position as the world's second superpower, next to the United States, using both military muscle and the tools of economic policy. China touts its [efficiently capitalist single-party dictatorship](#) as both an alternative to Western democracy and a development model, especially for Asia, Africa and Latin America.

China Forges New Alliances

Unlike Washington or Berlin, Beijing expressly does not make loans and infrastructure aid conditional on human rights and good governance. It also seeks international groups in which Washington and Western Europe are not even represented, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a sort of anti-NATO. Within the SCO Beijing, together with Russia and most of the Central Asian countries, has developed strategies against the risks of terrorism. Another group far up on Beijing's agenda is BRICS, an association of economically significant emerging economies that includes China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa. The group

meets once a year. At its most recent meeting, this spring in New Delhi, it announced the formation of its own development bank to combat Western financial dominance.

China is also pursuing another strategy. In these months of global uncertainty, Beijing has increasingly focused on its cultural conflict with the West.

"We must clearly see that hostile foreign powers are plotting to westernize and divide China. Ideology and culture are the key areas of their infiltration," President Hu wrote in the party organ *Qiu Shi* (Seeking Truth). "We should take decisive measures to protect ourselves and react."

Chinese Values

Internationally, the party is betting on its own soft-power strategy. It argues that democratic institutions and the universal values preached by Western Europe are not what the world needs to recover from its problems, but rather Chinese values.

So what, exactly, does China stand for? Aside from its spectacular economic successes of the last three decades, what does it have to offer in the way of attractive and universally applicable values that are worth emulating? Where are the ideas, and where are the personalities with which China hopes to make an impact worldwide?

Huimin, a region along the Yellow River in Shandong Province in eastern China, isn't exactly an international place of interest, nor is the kind of place where the country's Communist leaders normally meet. But that wasn't the case last December, when the country celebrated the birthday of a Chinese sage. Philosopher and military strategist Sun Tzu was allegedly born in Huimin some 2,550 years ago.

Young men and women, all wearing old-fashioned military uniforms consisting of brown coats, yellow sequins and helmets, goose-stepped in formation. A statue was unveiled and there was a fireworks display. The next day, top Communist Party politicians, senior military leaders and scientists met at the local Sun Tzu academy, near the Sun Tzu memorial park, to analyze the works of the master. The celebration and the symposiums were intended to honor a national hero, whose teachings the party leadership believes are in keeping with their policies. Sun Tzu, a warrior who was also prepared to make peace, is the perfect centerpiece of a propaganda campaign.

It is likely that Sun Tzu lived in the 6th century B.C., in the realm of King Helü of Wu, whom he served as a successful general. Historians disagree over whether he was truly the sole author of the work "The Art of War," or whether later supporters added to it. Chinese traditionalists view these doubts as frivolous. For them, Sun Tzu is sacred, and his teachings indeed seem practically tailored to the world harmonization program favored by the Communist Party. The thin volume includes such sayings as "A leader leads by example, not by force," and "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." For several years now, almost every state visitor to China has been presented with a silk-bound copy of the book. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has two.

In 2009, Politburo member Jia Qinglin stressed that Sun Tzu's legacy should be used to promote "lasting peace and shared prosperity." Today, in the run-up to the 18th party congress, the famed strategist is often mentioned in reverential terms in political speeches. Sun Tzu is portrayed as what the *Economist* called a "peacenik," or even as a champion of human rights. One of the quotes used often is: "Treat the prisoners of war well, and care for them." And for China apologists like former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who also defend the brutal crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests, Sun Tzu represents everything that is far-sighted about China.

A Brutal Side

But soft power strategists come up empty-handed when theory collides with practice. Neighboring countries have experienced China's brutal side in recent months. Given this behavior, the Communist Party shouldn't be surprised to see the role of Chinese advisors being carefully scrutinized, from Angola to Azerbaijan, or about the growing suspicions of Western politicians, who must now fear Beijing's "punitive measures," be it at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, during trade conflicts or as a result of visits by the Dalai Lama.

Politicians and military leaders in the West know that the philosopher had more than only a soft side. "All warfare is based on deception," he wrote, and: "Bring war material with you from home, but forage on the enemy!"

In his alleged birthplace, Huimin, the Communist Party has dedicated an amusement park to the famed philosopher, the Sun Tzu Art of War City. But even in Huimin, the signs of westernization are unmistakable, from McDonald's restaurants to the Lady Gaga songs being played in discos and the film "Avatar" being shown in movie theaters. Hollywood is winning out over Chinese culture.

There is only one other superstar of Chinese history to combat the trend.

Qufu is less than 300 kilometers (186 miles) south of Huimin. But unlike Sun Tzu's alleged birthplace, Qufu is a tourist magnet, a UNESCO World Heritage Center with temples and monuments. In Qufu, everything revolves around one person: Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius.

Throughout the history of his country Confucius, a contemporary of Sun Tzu who allegedly lived from 551 to 479 B.C., was either deified or demonized. For revolutionary Mao Zedong, he was the ultimate reactionary. But since his rehabilitation in the 1980s, Confucius has once again been treated as a classic and as one of China's great figures.

The son of a minor nobleman, he lived in a grim era marked by the turmoil of war. The struggle against chaos became a matter close to his heart. He recognized that only the stabilization of social conditions provided a chance to unite the people by peaceful means.

According to a text in the "Collected Sayings," he was once asked how the teeming population could be "further benefited." "Make them prosperous," the master replied, "and instruct them."

On another occasion, when he was asked to define kingcraft he said: "Food enough, troops enough and the trust of the people."

And if one of the three had to be spared? "First the troops," he answered. And then? "Food. But without trust a people cannot stand."

His teachings did not make him popular at first. The philosopher went from place to place, offering his services as a government advisor, usually without success. He once managed to become the justice minister of the princely state of Lu, but then he lost the position and wandered through the countryside. He did, however, manage to gather disciples. They carried on his legacy and wrote down his ideas from memory. The disciples were said to have kept watch over his grave for three years.

Using Confucius to Polish China's Image

Stone guardians are scattered throughout the tall grass: lions baring their teeth, fierce birds of prey and elegant panthers about to pounce on potential troublemakers. A seven-kilometer wall encloses the site, Master Kong's modest burial mound in a cypress forest near Qufu. It was carefully restored, after members of the Red Guard knocked over steles and desecrated Confucius' final resting place during the Cultural Revolution.

Some 4 million pilgrims visit the site every year. Most of them are Chinese, some traveling in groups subsidized by the Communist Party. They go to see the Confucian Mansion, with its 463 rooms, and the temple with the Apricot Altar. They also visit the Confucius Institute, where the party promotes conferences about the great thinker.

Master Kong is useful to the party. His admonitions to obey rulers and honor one's elders are perfectly suited to the party's efforts to revive patriotic sentiments. His sayings about the "good" traditions that should be preserved, without completely closing one's mind to new things, could also hold appeal in the West. But it is also worth noting how selectively Confucian sayings are used in China. For instance, his saying that one should no longer serve an unjust ruler is never mentioned, not surprisingly, given the prevalence of corruption within the Communist Party.

China is using Confucius to polish its image in many areas. At the opening ceremony for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, extras appeared dressed as students of Confucius. China's leaders also use Master Kong to recruit students for scholarships worldwide, a form of campus diplomacy in which they have even outpaced the United States in countries like Indonesia.

A Massive Media Initiative in the Developing World

The Communist Party is spending \$7 billion on a Third World media initiative. State television broadcaster CCTV recently launched a program based in Nairobi, as an alternative to CNN and the BBC, with mostly positive reports. The entire CCTV network reaches several hundred million viewers in more than 140 countries.

The Confucius Institutes, in particular, are attracting attention as ambassadors of the People's Republic, offering language courses and seminars to spread Chinese culture, calligraphy and cuisine. In most cases, they are affiliated with universities in the host countries. There are currently 358 institutes operating in 105 countries, with 13 in Germany alone.

Opinions differ on their work. China's critics see them as propaganda tools, Trojan horses working for the Communist Party. Proponents of China, on the other hand, point out that in most cases the host countries are involved in funding the institutes, which also gives them some control. Besides, they argue, Germany also engages in public relations with its Goethe Institutes.

Michael Lackner, a sinologist in the Bavarian university town of Erlangen and a member of the board of the local Confucius Institute, is not under the impression that the Communist Party directly influences the institutes, and most of his counterparts at German universities agree. "But, of course, Confucius Institutes are not there to level criticism against the People's Republic."

Jörg Rudolph, one of the directors of the East Asia Institute at the Ludwigshafen University of Applied Sciences, takes a completely different view. He points out that the institutes fall within the jurisdiction of Li Changchun, the member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo responsible for "ideology" and the chief censor of Chinese media. Rudolph also quotes a "Manual for the Director of the Confucius Institute" published in Beijing, which advises all professors to develop "hot love" for the institute and, with a "great sense of mission," to establish files on both personnel and students.

When Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, it was largely ignored by the Confucius Institutes, as were the arrest of the internationally celebrated artist and dissident Ai Weiwei and the fiery speech against the Communist Party given by Liao Yiwu, who received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in mid-October. "Shouldn't our Master Kong have commented on that? Wouldn't he have been proud of it?" asked a blogger on the Chinese Internet, a forum for the counterculture in China, where there are more people online than in the United States.

China's Identity Problem

But while Master Kong is praised publicly and is being used to win the hearts of foreigners, he isn't exactly being admitted to China's Mt. Olympus, either, at least not on an equal footing with Mao. The giant statue of the philosopher, which stood for a short time last year diagonally across from the gate to the Forbidden City, with its enormous portrait of the Great Chairman, was moved to the inner courtyard of the Beijing National Museum. There was no official explanation.

An exhibition at the museum is just as puzzling as the relocation of the statue. Beyond a motley collection of exhibits and propaganda speech describing China's 5,000 years of glorious civilization, which supposedly was bound to lead to the communist revolution, it is unclear how China really sees itself and what it is meant to stand for, except perhaps crude materialism. In return for a substantial fee, the exhibit rooms at the National Museum were rented out to Louis Vuitton and Bulgari for brand presentations.

On the eve of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party, China is portraying itself as a superpower caught between an excessive feeling of self-worth and whitewashed sense of inferiority. It comes across as an up-and-coming nation that could very well offer a lesson to the countries of the Third World with its economic efficiency, and yet is unable to offer an attractive alternative to the democratic West. "If China can't address the question of its identity, its rise will remain blind," says political scientist Zhang Shengjun of the Beijing Normal University.

Still, the flexibility of its Communist Party leadership remains astonishing. It's in full evidence, for example, during a visit to the aircraft carrier *Kiev* in Tianjin, a booming city of 13 million. In 1996, a Chinese company bought the giant warship, commissioned by the Soviet navy in 1975. Today it serves as an outing and party destination for the wealthy, who can afford to spend several thousand dollars for a night in the officers' quarters, which have been turned into suites.

With the exception of these rooms, the aircraft carrier has remained largely unchanged, including the fighter jets and weapons it carries. Twice a day, paying guests can attend a demonstration of what a Chinese aircraft carrier could really face -- just as sailors could do on board the Chinese Navy's first functioning aircraft carrier, which was commissioned in the port city of Dalian on Sept. 25.

It's show time in Tianjin, where guests are watching a live show called "Strike Force." A group of actors demonstrates the ship's defenses against a hostile power. Attackers hoist their way onto the warship from small speedboats, but they are repelled with gunfire and flamethrowers. The war on the high seas can only end with a Chinese victory -- or at least one would think so, until the actors appear after the half-hour spectacle, and it turns out that they are all Caucasian.

The operators of the show have turned over the action to foreign hands. Mirage Entertainment, a company based near Los Angeles, provides the team of acrobats. There is no fear of contact with the class enemy, who, in a real military conflict, would probably also be coming from the United States.

The American actors received their visas directly at the airport, which is not at all typical practice in China. The motto of these entertainers, some of whom worked on the "Terminator 2" film, is: "We make everything come true. Even your nightmares."