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Beijing set to adjust its diplomacy

By Jian Junbo

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SHANGHAI - Whether and to what extent China will adjust its diplomatic policy under its new leadership has become a focus of attention for China watchers.

"China will continuously push for construction of a harmonious world with permanent peace and common prosperity," Hong Lei, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, told a journalist on November 15 in response to a question as to where the country's foreign policy will move following this month's 18th Party Congress. "China will unswervingly follow the road of peaceful development and firmly pursue the independent and peaceful foreign policy. China will unswervingly follow a win-win and open-up strategy. China will comprehensively develop the friendly cooperation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence."

His statement was reiterated by a foreign ministry spokeswoman four days later.

Although such official statements give no hint of an adjustment in China's foreign policy, this doesn't convince foreign relations experts in China. Some Chinese scholars argue that China should abandon the low-profile strategy set by Deng Xiaoping 33 years ago and become more active in pursuit of its "proper" international status as an economic power.

Some foreign observers believe such a change has already happened. David Denoon, a professor at New York University, says that since 2005 China has adopted an over-confident, less-cooperative foreign policy. China takes more aggressive positions in territory issues, he said.

Chinese academics also see signs of change. Professor Yan Xuetong, Dean of International

Studies Institute of Tsinghua University, has argued that the aim, direction and approach of Chinese diplomacy have changed. He said the aim has changed from being economic-interest-oriented to strategy-oriented, the direction from passivity or inaction to proactive, and the approach from one of passive response to active reaction. In short, China has become more actively involved in helping to shape the international order.

Regardless of the continuity or adjustment, an understanding of the possible tendency of China's foreign policy should be based on three factors - China's domestic conditions, its external conditions and its traditional conception. If there is any change in these factors, China should adjust its diplomacy policy accordingly.

In regard to domestic conditions, the biggest domestic issue for both Chinese leaders and the public is economic stability and sustainable development. If the economy is in bad shape, China will run into a huge crisis which may be unbearable, particularly in consideration of its huge population and serious social problems. This means ensuring economic stability and high-speed development as a core objective of foreign policy, since a country's diplomacy basically is to serve its domestic interests.

China is in economic transition from a labor-intensive or capital-intensive economy to high-tech-intensive or smart economy. At such a crucial time of economic restructuring, China's policies, domestic and foreign, must focus on avoiding any risk that could jeopardize its economic stability and development.

The US's "pivot" to Asia is the biggest challenge to China's diplomacy. Since the Barack Obama administration introduced this policy, Beijing has been increasingly challenged by neighboring countries with territorial disputes by countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan. How to respond to these challenges and at the same time to keep regional stability in East and Southeast Asia is a challenging task facing China's new leaders.

Both ancient and modern ideas, regardless of whether they are ancient ideas such as Confucianism or Daoism and modern socialist internationalism or nationalism, converge on a strategic ideal - the pursuit of a "harmonious world", which calls for respect for sovereign equality and cultural pluralism. Beijing will continuously oppose international hegemonic behavior and illegitimate interference by force in international affairs.

Continuity or adjustment in China's diplomacy can be analyzed and examined based on the domestic and external conditions as well as the traditional conceptions and thoughts.

Generally speaking, China's foreign policy will continue to ensure a stable and safe international environment for its economic restructuring and development, which remains a core strategy of China's diplomacy. As Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said, "Economic development is the central task of China right now. The focus of our diplomatic work should just be to create a favorable international environment for the country's economic growth, but also to directly serve the economy".

He made these remarks at a press conference on the sidelines of the annual session of China's

National People's Congress (NPC) in 2009. This argument seems still valid for today's Chinese diplomatic task. But this does not mean there won't be some subtle changes in foreign policy, as expanded interests and changes in external conditions are taken into consideration.

With the development of China's economy in recent decades, China's economic interests have become increasingly globalized, so nowadays to ensure the safety of shipping of Chinese goods becomes a very important diplomatic task of Beijing.

At the recent 18th Party Congress, President Hu Jintao declared that China will turn itself into a maritime power, which means it will enhance its strength and capability in ocean development, safeguarding its maritime rights and interests, and safeguarding the freedom of its sea lanes. This becomes one of the central tasks of Chinese leaders and diplomats in future, and they will inevitably have to deal with challenges by the US with its "Return-to-Asia" strategy.

Meanwhile, China has to be more proactive to pursue its national interests at a global level rather than remaining in a passive position. The old issue-driven diplomacy should be replaced by agenda-driven diplomacy. Beijing will proactively address issues rather than awkwardly make responses when being challenged, to peacefully and effectively deal with potential conflicts with other countries, including big powers and its neighbors.

Although ensuring economic restructuring and development as well as maintaining a stable international and regional environment for this purpose is the core objective for China's diplomacy, the approach toward this goal should and could be more diversified than before.

For a long time, Beijing has preferred to use economic resources to foster stable bilateral relations and international order, but this has had many negative consequences. A close economic relationship cannot always ensure a friendly political relationship. The fragmentation of foreign relations has finally harmed economic relations and China's national interest. So besides using economic rewards and bribes, diverse approaches such as lending political supports, pursuing military cooperation or societal exchanges should be taken more regularly.

Moreover, with the rise of emerging countries, China will build closer relationships with them at a bilateral level as well as at a multilateral level, especially in the Group of 20 and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) forums. In these non-US-dominated multilateral venues, China can involve itself in the construction of a new world order with greater equality and democracy.

Finally, as the second-largest economy and a fast-rising power, China has to bear more international responsibility so as to safeguard its national interest and also help maintain world peace and prosperity. China cannot become a great power until it can provide positive and efficient ideas and action plans to the world.

In conclusion, changes in China's diplomacy can be expected under its new leadership. However, Beijing cannot alter its diplomatic strategy in a radical way but can gradually adjust some approaches, tactics and features. Beijing will strive to keep a balance between "keeping a low profile" and "actively pursuing something", both of which are the legacy of the late Deng

Xiaoping.

But whatever changes there may be, China's foreign policy won't ever aim to make the country a hegemon, or an aggressive or colonial power. Although China is developing to be a superpower, it will not act like the United States. "China has never colonized any overseas territories" - the words of Martin Jacques, the author of *When China Rules the World*, are perhaps a good key for us to understand the future of China's foreign policy.