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COMMENT

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China in the Year of the Snake > The Chinese remember past humiliations and dream of national rejuvenation

All things bright and beautiful are being promised to the Chinese living under the new party leadership. But is what is good for China also good for the world? The Chinese rhetoric has a victim mentality flavour, and carries the risk that compensating for one's past inferiority may lead to extreme actions today.

The Year of the Snake began on 10 February. After the new year holiday season ends, the new leadership have to start working in earnest.

Since the reshuffle at the 18th Party Congress in November, there has been a steady stream of articles in the Chinese press discussing "China's dreams" (*Zhongguo meng*). According to these reports, the Chinese can look forward to ever-increasing success. While the goal of building "a moderately well-off society" has remained topical since the beginning of the era of reform and the opening up in the 1980s, the phraseology now indicates that China has moved into the finalizing phase.

It is said that the realization of such dreams will benefit not only the people of China but also their cooperation partners. An op-ed, published in the overseas edition of the *People's Daily* in January, stated that China's postdating of the latest party congress was worth waiting for, and investing in China's future would be a wise choice for anyone.

"China's dreams" contain something old and something new. It is a new catchphrase by the new party leader, Xi Jinping. At the same time, the dreams are age-old. In China, the models for the future have always been found in the past.

The "moderately well-off society" originally meant a golden age in the mythical past. Since the end of the imperial era, people in China have dreamt of a return to peace and prosperity, as well as removing the yoke of foreign aggressors. The dream has been one of national rejuvenation.

Among the first items on Mr Xi's agenda as party leader was a visit to an exhibition at the National Museum of China, celebrating the successes along the long road of China's reawakening. According to Mr Xi, China's rejuvenation has never been so close, and China possesses more confidence and capability to reach its goals than ever before. He quoted a classical poem which says: "When the strong breeze breaks the waves, it will be time for me to set the sails, high as clouds, and cross the emerald oceans".

A strong breeze would certainly have been welcome last month when the heavy smog, enveloping all of eastern China, dimmed China's future vistas. Zheng Bijian, the originator of the term "China's peaceful rise", has said that the essence of China's dreams is to find solutions for the country's challenges. Globally, the challenge demanding the most immediate attention is the state of China's environment. According to another

influential octogenarian, the former head of China's environmental protection agency, Qu Geping, the environmental problems in China are being exacerbated by the political system: the lack of a functioning rule of law makes it impossible to effectively deal with environmental degradation.

Those eager to see political reforms in China may be in for a lengthy wait. It would be unrealistic to expect Xi Jinping, or any other leader in the highest echelons of the party, to deliver reforms which might endanger the status quo. For example, realizing the division between the judiciary and the party would mean the beginning of the end for those in power. On the other hand, it is well understood by the party leaders that they cannot completely neglect the critique emerging from the civil society. Therefore, the party is taking more determined steps in its fight against corruption than before.

One also has to keep in mind that Mr Xi does not have the sole hold on power. In his first speech to the new politburo, he reminded his colleagues that China's achievements rest as much on Mao's era as the subsequent period of reform and opening up. This was clearly aimed at appeasing the conservative party

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elders who make up a majority in the politburo's standing committee. They will most likely have to resign at the next party congress in 2017, at which point Mr Xi may acquire more freedom to pursue his own dreams. In which direction will he set his sails then?

There is no definition for national rejuvenation: nobody knows what it will look like nor when it can be said to have happened. In the long run, the most important unresolved issue is the status of Taiwan. As long as it remains a de facto independent nation, the Communist Party cannot boast of having returned China's borders to what they were before foreign interventions in the colonial era. In the mid-term, the goal is set for the completion of the moderately well-off society, which should take place by the year 2021 when the party will celebrate its 100th anniversary.

What needs to happen in the short term? Did Xi indicate through his nautically flavoured quotation that China's ambitions in the near future have to do with solidifying its place as the most powerful naval force in the South China Sea? Does someone in China's leadership dream that Japan – appropriately persuaded – might amortize its debt of guilt stemming from

past atrocities by handing over the Senkaku Islands to China?

It is to be expected that in the Year of the Snake, China's foreign policy statements will be ever more assertive. Otherwise the contrast with the dream rhetoric, aimed at internal consumption, would become too obvious.

For the rest of the world, the challenge lies in the ability to realize that although China is adopting an assertive posture, it is actually suffering from an inferiority complex. The need for rejuvenation stems from China's victim mentality. Unfortunately, compensating for insecurity often leads to extremes.

China's recent bellicosity in its adjacent seas may be driven by domestic politics, where nationalism works in favour of the party's leadership. However, games of dare tend to end tragically. The rise to a global power may well be a part of China's dreams, but a conflict with one of its close neighbours would not help to convince the world that what is good for China is also good for the world. Perhaps the party leadership should choose "keep a cool head" as its next slogan. Otherwise, the Year of the Snake just might turn China's dreams into a global nightmare.