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No. 180

13 August 2013

## **XI JINPING'S "CHINESE DREAM" AND THE UNITY OF THE CHINESE NATION**

***Yusuke Anami***

The new president of China, Xi Jinping, referred to the "Chinese Dream" several times in his speech to the National People's Congress last March. Ever since, there has been worldwide discussion about what this new phrase indicates.

Actually, President Xi has been quite specific about what this "Chinese Dream" means. In his speech in March, he told the nation that it had to "strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". So it is quite clear what the "Chinese Dream" is all about.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

The Chinese media are treating the term “Chinese Dream” as if it were a new and unique official guiding ideology of the top leadership. The substance of the dream, which is “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” however, is a concept that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been stressing since the early 1990s.

The Tian’anmen incident of 1989 revealed a grave divide between the CCP and the Chinese populace. Ever since the CCP decided to shake hands with the Western bloc in the midst of the Cold War and introduce a market economy into socialist China, the question of why the CCP should maintain its monopoly of political power has been repeatedly raised by the Chinese people.

The call for democratization expanded when it became evident that CCP members along with their families were dominating not only political power but also most of the wealth created by trade with developed countries. After the Tian’anmen incident in which the call for democratization was crushed by brute force, the CCP invented a new propaganda strategy in order to mitigate the serious frustration over the nondemocratic and extremely unequal reality of China.

“The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” became the key concept of the CCP’s new propaganda strategy in the post-Tian’anmen era. In this strategy, the images of western developed states and Japan were relinked with “imperialism,” and it was emphasized that these countries still maintained a conspiracy to dominate China. The Tian’anmen incident was labeled as an example of such foreign intervention. In order to make the Chinese public believe this fiction, the CCP launched the Patriotism Education Campaign and reproduced images of the invasion and humiliation by the “imperialist states” that started from the Opium War in 1840.

At the same time, the Chinese public was told through the state-controlled media that economic development and the buildup of national power was essential to cope with this international conspiracy to manipulate and dominate China. Domestic stability and unity within the Chinese nation under the CCP was stressed as the vital element for achieving that goal.

In this context, economic development, which used to be interpreted in the early 1980s as a result of close and harmonious relations with the US, Japan, and western Europe, was reinterpreted as a result of the determination and endeavor of the Chinese nation to confront the plot shared by those “imperialist states.” In other words, economic development was said to be part of a process to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation”, which had suffered enormously from past aggressions.

In short, the CCP tried to mitigate domestic frustration by stressing the existence of potential foes outside China, and by interpreting economic development as part of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” in which the goal was to gain enough power to confront such potential foes as “American hegemonism” or “Japanese militarism.” Thus, it could be said that “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” is a propaganda phrase linked with anti-foreign nationalism, and this phrase basically represents the determination of the CCP to hold on to its power at all costs.

Enhancing such nationalism by stressing “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” however, soon created a serious dilemma for the CCP. On the one hand, narrow-minded nationalism spread rapidly within the population, and social frustrations seemed to be exploding against foreign countries as the CCP had planned. On the other hand, since anti-foreign sentiment became dominant within the Chinese media and within China’s cyberspace, any compromise made with “imperialist states” was heavily criticized as an act of betrayal of the Chinese nation. In other words, this strong paranoia, which was a result of the CCP’s propaganda strategy, started to strangle China’s diplomacy by limiting its options.

This dilemma became quite clear when the Chinese government failed to ratify the diplomatic agreement with Japan in 2008 regarding the joint development of the East China Sea, due to strong domestic opposition. As is seen in this case, it has become almost impossible for the Chinese government to make any compromise with Japan. This situation has seriously undermined stable relations with Japan, which is a vital economic partner for China. In addition, as Jeffrey Bader, a former member of the National Security Council

under the Obama administration, has discussed in detail in his recently published book, China's diplomacy with the US has also been leaning toward a hardline stance for the past several years.

Meanwhile, the number of demonstrations and riots against the authorities in China has been rising sharply. By 2003, the number of these so-called "collective incidents" had increased to 60,000 per year. In 2006, it reached 90,000. Since then, the Ministry of Internal Security stopped announcing these statistics. However, according to information coming out of Hong Kong, the number of "collective incidents" reached 200,000 last year. These figures show that nationalism cannot solve the social tension within China caused mainly by the CCP's monopoly of power and wealth.

According to official statistics announced by the State Statistics Bureau of China, China's Gini index has almost reached the 0.5 line, a level indicating serious social instability, and that is exactly what is happening in China today. Without dramatically improving systems relevant to the redistribution of wealth, it is unrealistic to imagine that domestic turmoil in China will ease in the near future. Without certain basic political reforms, it is hard to expect that such improvements will be realized. Therefore, it could be said that China needs political transformation, not anti-foreign nationalism, in order to solve the social tensions that are tearing the Chinese nation apart.


Consequently, the main concern for many China specialists in Japan has been whether the new Xi Jinping leadership would address the nation with a slogan that emphasizes "reform" or one that emphasizes "the great rejuvenation." If it is the former, China's future might have some hope. If it is the latter, the CCP will very likely keep enhancing nationalism with an anti-foreign bent until it is too late.

So far, President Xi has been talking about the "Chinese Dream" mainly in the context of "the great rejuvenation." Therefore, it is quite natural to expect even more domestic turmoil in China and increased tension in the international environment surrounding China.

Although "reform" has not been omitted from the CCP's agenda, the fact that former president Hu Jintao's ten-year attempt at "reform" from 2003 could

not prevent an increase in demonstrations and riots, along with the fact that there are fewer “reformists” in the new Standing Committee of the Central Politburo, is preventing many China specialists in Japan from having an optimistic view of China’s future stability.

Japanese policy-makers seem to be hoping that, if they could somehow ease the present tensions with China and shift the relationship to an economically-oriented one, they would be able to stabilize Japan-China relations. There seems to be a general lack of understanding that Japan’s economic relationship with China, in which CCP-related organizations are the main contacts for Japanese companies there, has to some extent contributed to the problem of instability. As mentioned previously, this problem comes from the facts that CCP members have monopolized most of the wealth and that the gap between rich and poor has expanded to an unacceptable level. Unless this fundamental problem of serious domestic inequality and social tensions is solved, it is unlikely that the CCP will stop relying on anachronistic anti-foreign sentiments that have become a cancer in Japan-China relations.

What the policy makers of Japan and other developed countries have to understand is that economic partnership with the CCP regime, which lacks an effective system for redistributing wealth, is ripping Chinese society apart, and that riots and demonstrations within China are indicating that the sustainability of this economic partnership is reaching its limits. How to cope with this crisis will inevitably become a key issue for countries that have close economic ties with China. 

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