

Panel: China and the Two Koreas (Orchid Room)

Date/Time: Tuesday, December 11, 2012 / 15:45-17:00

Talking Points for: Zhu Feng, Professor, Peking University

How Xi could build a new China for its foreign policy?

On Nov. 15, Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping (習近平) became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and chairman of the party's Central Military Commission (CMC), giving him supreme authority over China's armed forces. In March, he will become president of China as well. How does China's new leader see the world, and how will he handle the country's foreign policy? Do his style and preferences differ significantly from those of his predecessor, Chinese President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤)? The answers will determine China's relations with the world, and vice versa, for the next decade.

China's leaders approach power in a very different way than do political leaders in, say, the US. US politicians must sell their ideas and values to voters; China's leaders do not need to inform the press and the public directly about anything, including their foreign policy positions. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of former Chinese leaders Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), China's leaders have seldom imposed their own personalities upon Chinese diplomacy.

In this sense, Xi's leadership style will most likely continue in the tradition of his predecessors. Nevertheless, Xi's outlook and world view are surely different from Hu's. For starters, Xi is part of a generation raised and educated mostly in China's reform era, which has been a decisive influence in their lives. China opened itself to the world in 1978, when Xi and his contemporaries were young men eager to understand the world outside China. They are a generation inspired by Deng's realistic approach to shattering the walls that radical leftists had built around China, and one that believes that knowledge can change the destiny of the country and its people. When this generation assumes the mantle of leadership, its members will turn their passion and curiosity about knowledge and innovation into real work. They are surely willing to learn from the wider world as they seek to promote China's

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national interests abroad and encourage gradual change at home.

Xi may address Chinese diplomacy's thorniest issues — particularly Sino-US relations — with more realism and flexibility than in recent years. His visit to the US in February was widely regarded as a sequel to Deng's visit in January 1979. Xi talked to US President Barack Obama and visited the Pentagon. He gave a luncheon speech and saw old friends from his brief stay in Iowa as a young man. He showed interest in US culture, just as Deng did in 1979. He ate chocolate and watched NBA games. Most important, instead of spending countless hours drearily discussing political and strategic topics, he spoke directly and vigorously about the current state of Sino-US relations. "The Pacific Ocean is wide enough to accommodate the two major countries," he said.

Unhappy with the US' "pivot" to Asia, Xi remained calm, but emphasized that "one cannot rely too much on military power regarding Asia-Pacific diplomacy." Similarly, Xi tried to avoid major arguments on human rights, saying simply: "There's no best, only better." In essence, he sought to demonstrate that however many questions, arguments and potential conflicts exist between China and the US, both countries' leaders should address them with an attitude of cooperation and sincerity. Leaders should not become entangled in details that fuel suspicion of their counterparts' motives, lest they lose sight of the bigger picture. Xi's confidence extends to China's domestic politics. His generation is more certain of reform than previous leadership cohorts were owing less to official ideology than to the country's enormous achievements in the past three decades.

In practice, Xi may well prove to be a nationalist. Certainly, his generation, like the founding fathers of the People's Republic of China, dreams of turning China into a stronger, more prosperous country. The country's new leaders want the world's applause, but they are more eager for domestic ovations.

Like previous Chinese leaders, Xi firmly believes that the world should respect China's authority to manage its own affairs. Thus, he is willing to show diplomatic muscle if China is challenged on a core area of concern. His speech in Mexico in 2009 demonstrated this, "Some foreigners with full bellies and nothing better to do engage in finger-pointing at us," he said. "First, China does not export revolution; second, it does not export famine and

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poverty; and, third, it does not mess around with you. So what else is there to say?” Xi understands that the world expects not only a better China, but also a China that is committed to constructing a better world. He will be a tough and strong-minded leader, but one who understands the world in a pragmatic way and knows how to work well with his foreign counterparts.

His visit to the US left two impressions: First, he is a leader at ease both in front of and away from the television cameras. Second, he is not afraid to have a little fun. With those simple touches of humanity, Xi could bring a revolution to China’s diplomacy.

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