On November 29, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address to a Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference (CFAWC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the first to be held under his stewardship as China’s top leader. Attending the meeting were all six of Xi’s Politburo Standing Committee colleagues, the rest of the full Politburo, China’s leading foreign policy practitioners, and hundreds of other officials from China’s provincial-level administrations, the military, state-owned enterprises, and the state bureaucracy. CFAWC’s are exceedingly rare, and equally authoritative. For example, judging from publicly available sources, there was only one such meeting during the entire decade-long tenure of Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao. As with so many of Xi’s initiatives during his brief time as party boss, it is noteworthy that he chose to sketch out at least the preliminary outlines of his foreign policy vision after barely two years in office. By contrast, Hu Jintao presided over his one CFAWC after nearly double that amount of time, in 2006. In his speech, Xi laid out a sweeping foreign policy platform, suggesting that, despite the many domestic challenges he and his colleagues are facing at home, a proactive, balanced, and, where necessary, muscular foreign policy approach is likely to be a hallmark of his rule.

In the first instance, the significance of Xi’s address lies in his review and endorsement of several of the key foreign policy doctrines in the CCP cannon. China’s regional neighbors—and the United States—should take at least some comfort from Xi’s affirmation of these important concepts. He notes, for example, that China will continue to follow the path of “peaceful development,” or the notion that Beijing’s neighbors and other major partners may rest easy that China’s rise can only be accomplished by peaceful means and will only be pursued with an eye toward achieving “win-win” outcomes for all concerned. Peaceful development has been a mainstay of China’s diplomatic vocabulary for more than a decade. With China’s rapid military modernization, sizeable year-on-year defense budget increases, and forthright assertion of its territorial claims, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that peaceful development (continued on page 2)
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acts as an important conceptual brake on a runaway military buildup. Implicit in its characterization of China’s priorities is the notion that economic development—and not the path of arms races and military adventurism followed by the Soviet Union—is paramount in securing the country’s return to regional preeminence.

Perhaps more important still, however, is Xi’s reaffirmation in the speech that China remains in a “period of strategic opportunity” (POSO) running through at least 2020, or roughly the period of Xi’s time in office. This concept encapsulates the CCP’s primary external strategic guideline and reflects the leadership’s judgment that China is enjoying a window in which a benign external security environment allows it to focus on its internal development. The precept is highly authoritative within the Chinese system, having been validated and revalidated now by three party congresses (the 16th in 2002, the 17th in 2007, and the 18th in 2012), and it is frequently referenced in official speeches and formal documents (such as China’s Defense White Paper). Xi’s repeated admonitions to the Chinese military to develop greater fighting capability to prepare itself to “fight and win wars,” along with more direct comments by senior Chinese officials under his leadership describing the U.S. rebalance as detrimental to China’s security interests, had cast a shadow of doubt on the leadership’s assessment of the POSO and had suggested that perhaps a view was emerging that the likelihood of conflict on China’s periphery was higher than the CCP previously had judged. Xi seemed to reject this notion in his speech, encouraging cadres to “not allow our views to be blocked by intricate developments” in the international system, but instead to remain focused on the POSO.

Moreover, implicit in Xi’s endorsement of the POSO is a clear signal that China is not overtly seeking to be a disruptive power either regionally or globally. As long as the concept remains in force, there will be hard limits on Beijing’s willingness and ability to set out on a truly revisionist course aimed at fundamentally reshaping the balance of power in East Asia. As good dialectical thinkers, CCP leaders have historically been quite reliable in abiding by the parameters they set out for themselves in terms of their theoretical assessments and prognostications. As a very traditional CCP leader, Xi Jinping is no exception. Consequently, authoritatively acknowledging that China’s external security environment will remain largely benign for the foreseeable future makes it far more difficult for the leadership to

In the News

“Xi is telling the assembled audience that China now is a great power, and should start acting like one... He is unlikely to be as solicitous or desirous of pursuing relations with Washington to the detriment of other relationships.

—Christopher Johnson in the New York Times, “Leader Asserts China’s Growing Importance on Global Stage”

“The current time frame that they’re in right now really does represent an existential challenge to the party and its leadership. They have a stove-piped, very inefficient system for running a government riding atop a very dynamic society where the economic growth is going through the roof, but we also have these environmental and other problems, and the party’s legitimacy is really being called into question.”

—Christopher Johnson on CBS News, “‘Make or break’ for a rapidly changing China?”

“Pollution itself has become, I think, a threat to the legitimacy of the party and the political stability in China. And the failure to take action on this issue is really going to come back and bite the Communist Party. I think Xi Jinping has realized this... Given the reaction from Republicans today, it’s the president that has the uphill battle much more than Xi Jinping does.”

—Bonnie Glaser in the Los Angeles Times, “U.S.-China climate change deal already facing challenges”

“The Chinese have felt for some time that they don’t have a go-to person in this administration, somebody that they feel really understands China.”

argue—as have revisionist powers in the past—that they must assert Chinese power more overtly and forcefully because the country’s interests in the region are somehow under threat.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to suggest that Xi’s speech is nothing more than old wine in new bottles. Seeking to clearly articulate for the region and the wider world that China seeks to rise peacefully obviously is an important motivation for Xi’s referencing of peaceful development and the POSO, but it is not the only one. An equally, if not more important, piece to the puzzle presumably lies in Xi’s domestic political calculations. Although it is admittedly still fairly early in his tenure, Xi stands out thus far for his penchant for articulating his policy prescriptions in theoretical terms. Ideological form and principles are strong motifs running through both his externally and domestically oriented policy speeches, and his key subordinates have gotten the message and are following suit.

Against this backdrop, by couching his speech in theoretical terms, Xi is able to directly link well-established concepts in the CCP’s foreign policy cannon, like peaceful development and the POSO, with his own formulations, including the “China Dream,” “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” and the “twin centenary goals.” From the limited public coverage of his remarks at the CFAWC, State Councilor Yang Jiechi—as he did with his major article last year in the CCP’s leading theoretical journal—plays the role of validator-in-chief for Xi’s formulations. He credits Xi’s speech for embodying “the central Party leadership’s latest creative achievement in diplomatic theory.” By thus wrapping his major initiatives in theoretical garb, Xi is able to promote their authoritativeness within the Chinese system and, by extension, his personal standing in the leadership. Characterizing Xi’s concepts as the Party’s line, instead of simply policy formulations, also serves to insulate them from attacks by raising the cost of challenging them for any of Xi’s detractors.

As a self-professed acolyte of deceased paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, however, Xi is well aware of the need to “link theory with practice.” It is perhaps somewhat ironic, then, that a major takeaway from his speech is the notion that its content seems to move China more rapidly away from Deng’s longstanding injunction for the country to maintain a low profile internationally. Xi makes several comments in the speech that make this quite clear. He argues, for example, that China’s biggest opportunity lies in the determined leveraging and further development
of China’s strength and influence internationally. He also says that “China should develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role [as] a major country.” So, in effect, Xi is telling his audience that China already is a great power and should start acting like one. This development takes on added significance when we remember that it was just a few years ago, in 2010, that then–foreign policy czar Dai Bingguo wrote a lengthy and spirited defense of Deng’s formulation and warned the CCP elite that it was wrong—and potentially dangerous for China—to move too far too fast. Xi’s speech would seem to clearly reject such thinking.

In fact, Xi’s remarks in this vein also would seem to be subtly altering the definition of the POSO by stressing greater Chinese activism. Whereas the original framework carries the notion of China meekly accepting its advantageous external environment as a gift to be treasured and, where China can within the constraints of its limited capabilities, to be sustained, Xi’s formulation would seem to suggest a much more forward-leaning approach whereby China seeks to shape the contours of the POSO through its growing power. In his speech, Xi acknowledges the deep interdependence between China’s domestic and foreign policies, but, again, he chooses to frame that linkage in a seemingly different way. Instead of being the beneficiary of China’s good fortune on its periphery, Xi appears to view China’s domestic development as an engine for the promotion and expansion of a stable and secure abroad. Implicit in such a description is a sense of immense confidence in the inevitability and sustainability of China’s rise. Such thinking also is highly consistent with the ambitious forecast for China’s place in the world implicit in the “twin centenary goals,” suggesting Xi views his speech as the next logical link in the chain he envisions for building China’s future.

In operational terms, two strong themes come through in Xi’s speech. The first is a clear emphasis on more focused, and more adept, regional diplomacy. Xi makes repeated references in his comments to the need for Beijing to adopt “win-win” strategies in its approach to its neighbors, and he suggests several new elements to be added to the country’s diplomatic tool kit—such as specific references to systematically developing Chinese soft power—to achieve that aim. Xi’s call for better regional diplomacy is very consistent with the themes coming out of the work conference he chaired last October on peripheral diplomacy, but repeating it in the more formal setting of a
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CFAWC boosts the authoritativeness of the message and, accordingly, the signal of prioritization it sends to the wider Chinese bureaucracy.

As noted above, Xi sees robust economic diplomacy as a key element in his overall diplomatic strategy. His performance in hosting last month’s APEC leaders’ meeting and in related summitry in the region clearly highlighted this priority. For example, Xi’s touting of the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), implicitly as an alternative to the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), during the APEC meetings is an indication that China seeks to demonstrate its fundamental grasp of the notion that, in Asia, economics is security. Xi’s commitment of $40 billion to finance China’s “New Silk Road” initiative also caught many observers off guard and demonstrated his willingness to put his money where his mouth is. Signaling China’s neighbors through such initiatives that the economic health of the region is intimately tied to China’s continued growth and prosperity also serves to advance Xi’s seeming predilection for a more multidirectional foreign policy approach than that of his predecessors.

In fact, the other noticeable feature of Xi’s remarks is their seeming ambivalence toward relations with the United States. U.S.-China relations received no direct references in Xi’s remarks, and there were only one or two passing mentions of strengthening ties with “major countries.” Xi’s statement about the world’s inexorable evolution toward greater multipolarity also comes across as an implicit swipe at U.S. global leadership and stature. This is not to suggest, however, that Xi is somehow downgrading relations with Washington. The outcomes of Xi’s second “shirt sleeves” summit with President Obama make clear that he continues to view U.S.-China ties as Beijing’s most important bilateral relationship. Instead, it probably means that Xi is less likely than his predecessors to be solicitous or desirous of pursuing relations with Washington at a substantial cost to building other important relationships. If true, this should serve as an important factor in the thinking of the Obama administration as it shapes and refines its overall policy strategy toward China in its remaining two years in office. ■