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By François Lachapelle

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2009 is no piece of cake for Chinese officialdom. Having survived the invisible torment of the twentieth anniversary of Tiananmen they turn now to the preparation for the 60th birthday of the People’s Republic. Despite daily high temperatures in the 30s in North China, one wonders if Peking bureaucrats might be suffering from cold sweats.

Certain early indicators indicate that the event is being taken seriously. Visas are being restricted, as they were in the period leading up to the Olympic Games. Several travel agencies have already announced that they will be unable to secure business visas for travellers after mid-September.

China’s 60th birthday will not be a one-day event. In fact, festivities began on October 1, 2008. So as to encourage patriotism and health among the younger generation, the Ministry of Education decided to add jogging to the curriculum. The goal for the month of April, 2009, was for elementary school children to log 120 kilometers, high school students 180, and university students 240. (The astute mathematician will notice that all these numbers are multiples of 60).

If the Beijing Olympics were meant to showcase China’s modernization and the quality of Chinese athletes, and Expo Shanghai 2010 the glowing future of the young dynasty, the first parade of the Chinese military in the 21st century will serve to put China’s military power on display. For Fang Fenghui, Commander of the military region of Peking and Deputy of the 11th People’s Congress, “the appearance of new military hardware will be one of the highlights of the military parade.” This 14th parade will be particularly important in that the Chinese contribution to the first parade in 1949 was limited to horses, while in 2009, again according to Fang Fenghui, “there will be a great deal of equipment of Chinese manufacture, of impressive quality, to be seen during the parade.”

What is the interest of this 60th birthday for those who will not be in China in the coming months to witness the ballet performances of the Red Guards, or for those who are not fascinated by military matters, straight lines, and squeaky clean uniforms? For one thing, an ostentatious display of Chinese military power is an excellent occasion to take the pulse of the American political elite and to see how many of them remain enamored of the theory of the "yellow peril."

The theory of the China threat is a « hard » version of realist geopolitics built in part on the history of dealings with the rise of Fascism, and which tends to see each new emerging power as a threat to the balance of power. Those who hold such tenants do not believe that engaging China and linking it to the international system (as liberal theorists would prefer) will change China. On the contrary, they believe that such an approach will only allow China to get richer and to continue to modernize its military. For the China threat crowd, October 1st will be a painful day in that they will see that China is at least twenty years behind the US in terms of military technology.

At present, however, it would seem that the yellow peril is haunting Washington less than in the past. What we find are rather sentiments which argue against the China threat hypothesis, such as those expressed by Thomas Barnett, author of Great Powers: America and the World after Bush (Putnam Adult, 2009) : « If there is anything to worry about, it’s not China’s massive military; it’s the economy, stupid.»

With the economic crisis and the new administration in Washington, we see more “panda huggers” than “panda sluggers” around Obama. In 2001, Bill Gertz’s China Threat (Regnery, 2000) was all the rage, while the liberal theory of cooperation seems to be making a comeback. The idea of a Chinese-American partnership is upheld by those in Washington who oppose the notion of the China threat and
see cooperation with Beijing as being in the national interests of the United States. Is Beijing happy to see the yellow peril go into hibernation? Surely, but at the same time, a rapprochement with the US might mean that China would have to play a more active role in international affairs and in the leadership of the new world order: « With great power comes with great responsibilities »! In the willfully provocative language of the geostrategist Barnett:

China has great power and demands much in the way of resources and finances and trade from the world, but China does not give much back in return. It hides behind diplomacy, denying that its troops should ever spill their blood in defense of Chinese economic interests that are now protected by American blood spilt in the Middle East... It simply does not fulfill its rising—and already enormous—responsibilities as a great power. So, yes, if you were waiting for the time to declare America to be no longer omnipotent, that time has arrived. But the bad news is, now is the time for China to stop simply talking and start actually doing something. Slogans are not enough... China needs... now to start acting much older and much wiser and much more willing to play a seriously active role, because the days of hiding behind the skirt of the U.S. Leviathan and pretending Beijing can always play the “good cop” to America’s “bad cop” are over.

China’s leaders prefer the current situation, where they can have their cake and eat it too. American leaders can (or could) justify themselves by claiming to spread democracy, individualism, and liberty. Should Beijing claim world leadership, it would be accused of hegemonism, given its confusing model mixing authoritarian politics and state capitalism. And calls for greater liberalization would accompany the accusations.

Tags: National Day