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China's Peaceful Rise: Till When?

By Amanda Huan

Synopsis

China begins the New Year as the world's largest economic power. Has China risen? Amidst never-ending talks and discussion about a rising China, what are the indicators of a risen China?

Commentary

SINCE THE 1990s, China has been engaged in what it once referred to as a "peaceful rise". Fast forward to a quarter of a century later and people still speak of the 'rise of China', despite its vast developments and advancements in the areas of economics, military power, and soft power. What would it take for China to be recognised as having risen? How would one determine if and when China has risen?

Perhaps to help answer this, one needs to look back at the last great-power transition. The last transition, between Britain and the United States, needed a cataclysmic event - World War II - to herald the change in perception and power. After the events of World War II, it was clear as day to everyone that the United States was the top power in the world. Needless to say, no one is looking for a repeat of a great war in order to recognise China's ascent. So, short of a shock to world order, what needs to happen, or what indicators must China fulfil in order for the country to be perceived as a 'risen' power?

China's standing in the East Asia region

It is perhaps more pertinent to examine China's standing within its own backyard, as it is unlikely for China to be recognised globally as having 'risen' if its own neighbours do not see it as such. Economically, in October this year, the International Monetary Fund found that China had overtaken the United States to become the world's largest economy. Measured in terms of purchasing-power adjusted GDP, China is expected to make up 16.5% (or US\$17.6 trillion) of the world's GDP at the end of 2014, while the US trails behind at 16.3% (or US\$17.4 trillion).

Latest figures from the World Bank affirm this. Within East Asia, China is a major trading partner, and in some cases the largest trading partner, with most countries in the region. For example, it was reported this year that Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia were among the top ten trading partners of

China in 2013. China's robust trade and economic activities with the countries in the Indo-China region are well known as well. As such, China's economic strength is indisputable. But is this enough for it to be perceived as having 'risen'?

Militarily, China has ramped up its defence spending. In the last four years, military expenditure alone has consistently accounted for 2% of its GDP. While this percentage seems small, one must bear in mind that China's GDP has been increasing throughout the years. The sheer size of the budget is best seen in absolute terms. In the first quarter of 2014, China announced its 2014 defence budget of US\$132 billion, which is a 12% increase on the year before. In response to this, China's neighbours have also raised their respective military expenditure, but their combined spending is still far less than that of the Chinese. As such, on the military front, few would dispute the military capabilities of the Chinese.

Looking at the economic and military factors, it seems, on the face of it, that China has, in fact, already risen. Yet many in the region still talk about a 'rising' China, and not a 'risen' one. This points to a possible third factor in play – the notion of acceptance.

Acceptance: The issue of 'winning hearts and minds'

Despite its growing economic and military strength, China is still not widely accepted as the top power even in its own backyard. The US retains that position in most people's perceptions. That is not to say that China has done little to try to win the hearts and minds of people. From its setting up of Confucian Institutes around the world to educate people about Chinese culture and values, to its mainstream pop-culture offerings such as Jet Li and Jackie Chan, China has attempted in a multitude of ways to assert its 'soft power'. Yet, it pales in comparison to the pervasiveness of America's Hollywood culture and the 'American Dream'.

Some may contend that this notion of 'acceptance' is unnecessary. Should China emerge as the unequivocal number one in economic and military terms, the world is likely to perceive it as having 'risen' regardless of whether its 'soft power' is dominant. But this is unlikely to happen anytime soon as we are more likely to end up in a situation where there is economic and military parity between both China and the US. As such, whether or not China has 'risen' may thus hinge on this notion of acceptance.

With that in mind, what else does China need to do in order to be 'accepted' as the top power? Does it need to be more or less assertive? Should it make its intentions clearer? Is China's less dominating 'soft power' the only reason why it has failed to be perceived as 'risen'?

The relativistic nature of 'rise'

Another possible explanation could be due to the problematic nature of the concept of 'rise' in itself. In this case, for one to say that China has risen might require one to invoke a relativistic comparison with that of the US. That is to say that China can only rise if the US declines or cedes its position.

In line with the relativistic argument, it is also possible that China has not 'risen' because it continues a relatively poor/under-developed country. Based on the IMF's World Economic Outlook 2014 data, China is ranked 89th in the world for GDP (PPP) per capita. In comparison, the US stands at 10th place and Singapore in 3rd. Until China is able to improve its GDP per capita ratio, it remains to be perceived as a 'rising' power.

In all, it is quite remarkable that despite China's advancements in the economic and military sectors, it is still widely perceived as a rising power, rather than as one that has risen. China itself, however, insists on calling itself still a developing country. Still, after 20 years of a 'rising' China, is it not time that the indicators of a 'risen' China be recognised?

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg