

Challenging Times, Creative Efforts

The key themes of Chinese diplomacy in 2018 By Wang Huiyao

The world in the 21st century continues to be shaped by increasing multipolarity and cross-border flows of people, goods, capital and information. It is a world of greater openness, where the cast of characters is more numerous, complex and interconnected than ever before. It is also a world where technological progress and globalization are blurring boundaries and upending traditional assumptions. The rise of emerging markets and developing countries is reconfiguring balances of power, while the international order of the last half-century increasingly struggles to accommodate itself to the new reality.

Against this evolving backdrop, the world at large is learning to adapt to the growing presence of China and other emerging powers. China is also defining its role on the global stage and refining how it interacts with fellow nations.

Under these changing conditions, China is forging its own approach to international relations. In 2018, China continued to expand its diplomatic repertoire, leveraging traditional channels but also developing new mechanisms to promote mutual understanding.

Summit diplomacy

Summit diplomacy has been the pillar of China's international engagement in recent years. President Xi Jinping has been more active in global affairs than any previous Chinese leader, and this past year top-level summits became more important than ever.

The key role of summit diplomacy was evident at the recent G20 Buenos Aires Summit. Along with exploring joint

solutions to global challenges, the gathering presented an opportunity to keep the Sino-U.S. trade dispute from spiraling out of control. To the world's relief, Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump were able to reach a preliminary "ceasefire" agreement to start working on resolving differences over economic relations.

While still active in traditional forums like the G20, China has also led in the creation and strengthening of new platforms to promote free trade and international cooperation. In 2018, China hosted four such international events: the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit and the China International Import Expo (CIIE).

At the Boao forum in April, Xi sent a clear signal: China will continue to open its economy and promote globalization. He pledged to expand market access and improve the business environment for foreign investors. Xi also pledged to promote import growth. In this way, the Chinese President offered firm support for globalization amid the protectionist wave that has swept the world.

This theme was reinforced at the inaugural CIIE in November. Much more than a trade fair, the CIIE served as a landmark in the evolution of China's development and its economic interaction with the rest of the world. As Xi said in his opening speech, over the next 15 years, China is set to import \$30 trillion worth of goods and \$10 trillion in services.

In June, the coastal city of Qingdao played host to the 2018 SCO Summit. Formed in 2001 with regional security objectives in mind, the agenda of the SCO has broadened to include other areas of cooperation, such as the economy and the environment. The summit was significant in that India and Pakistan attended as new full members. The eight member nations of the SCO now account for nearly half of the world's population and over a fifth of its global GDP.

The FOCAC Summit held in Beijing in September brought together leaders from

China and African countries to explore new forms of collaboration. Xi announced \$60 billion in financing for Africa in the form of government assistance and from financial institutions and businesses. The summit built on Xi's trip to Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa and Mauritius earlier in the year, the fourth African trip during his presidency.

These events reflect China's efforts to build platforms and engage with a broad range of partners around the world.

Sino-U.S. relations

China and the U.S. are the world's chief economic and political actors. In 2018, the twists and turns in their relation have formed the central storyline for the two nations themselves and for the world at large.

The meeting between the two Presidents following the G20 Summit averted further escalation of tariffs and brought both sides back to the negotiating table. But despite this reprieve, it is clear that a fundamental shift has occurred in the relationship. In Washington, a bipartisan view of China as an antagonist and as the biggest strategic competitor to the U.S. has taken hold. The U.S. approach of engagement in previous years is gradually giving way to a mindset of containment.

Despite frictions, the two countries still have enormous potential synergies to exploit through closer cooperation, particularly with respect to transnational challenges like climate change. China's participation in California's Global Climate Action Summit in September demonstrated that there are many channels open for the two to work together. Deepening cooperation at the local level may offer an effective way to do this.

Breakthroughs with neighbors

This past year saw a notable warming of ties between China and Japan, as the premiers of both countries made reciprocal visits. Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Japan in May was



The construction site of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, a project under the Belt and Road Initiative, on June 24, 2018

followed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing in October, the first stand-alone journey to China by a Japanese leader in nearly seven years. During this visit, the premiers of Asia's two biggest economies reached a series of agreements to deepen economic and trade ties.

Sino-Indian relations also underwent improvement following a period of heightened tensions in 2017 caused by border friction. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China in April, holding talks with Xi to build mutual trust and deepen cooperation. China and India, the world's most populous nations, share strong cultural ties and have economies that complement each other. Both countries see it as in their interest to get relations back on track.

With China's support, there has also been progress on the Korean Peninsula in defusing the nuclear weapons threat. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea held breakthrough summits with China, the U.S. and the Republic of Korea. These are initial but important steps toward reducing tension on the peninsula and opening up a path toward lasting peace in the region.

Belt and Road cooperation

In the five years since its launch, the Belt and Road Initiative, drawing on China's capital resources and infrastructure development capabilities, offers a new model of diplomacy, one of helping partner countries improve connectivity and paving the way toward growth and prosperity.

The initiative has been supported by a growing number of Chinese enterprises that are going global. In concert with this, China has used diplomacy to promote the initiative.

More than 100 countries and regions, along with international organizations, have signed cooperation agreements with China, extending the initiative's scope from Eurasia to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the South Pacific region.

Countries like Japan and the U.S. that previously had misgivings about the initiative are gradually warming to it. During Abe's visit to Beijing, China and Japan launched a mechanism to discuss economic cooperation projects in countries related to the initiative.

Protecting overseas interests

Driven by China's opening up and the Belt and Road Initiative, the number of Chinese citizens and companies overseas is growing. Along with this, China has been the country with the most outbound tourists in annual terms since 2013, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. The number of outbound tourists is expected to grow to 157 million in 2020, compared with 135 million in 2016. China's accumulated outbound direct investment (ODI) reached over \$1.8 trillion at year-end 2017, moving up to second place in the world ranking.

These trends make protecting the interests of Chinese citizens working, traveling and studying overseas an increasingly important task for Chinese diplomatic and consular services. Potential risks facing citizens overseas are various and can include natural disasters and terrorist threats, both of which situations occurred this past year, requiring assistance from Chinese consular services.

Global governance reform

Multilateralism has come under increasing strain in recent years. There has been a rise in anti-globalization sentiment around the

world, and some countries that helped build the international order are now undermining the very institutions that support it.

In part, current global governance problems are a result of multilateral institutions failing to reform and adapt to new circumstances. In response to this, China—while continuing to support existing mechanisms for international cooperation—has stepped forward to promote reform of the global governance system according to concepts of fairness and justice.

It is not only official agencies that are engaged in this task. A growing cast of social actors is also contributing ideas and impetus to reform global governance. This includes non-governmental think tanks that can help generate and disseminate ideas at home and abroad.

Through the ages, many have seen relations between players on the stage of world history as inevitably antagonistic, driven by fear and self-interest. Proponents of this view often see modern states as playing out predetermined roles, destined to clash as balances of power shift.

To formulate a new template for international relations, though, China has determined to craft its own role as the supporter of a more open, fairer world. It is likely that 2019 will bring more twists and turns in world affairs. However, it is to be hoped that the coming year will also provide chances to build relationships, work together, and script a shared future for humanity. ■

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