

# China asserting

By Pallavi Aiyar

*The year 2006 saw a significant departure from China's traditional foreign policy, signalling that it was no longer willing to watch from the sidelines*

**T**HE last 25 years have seen China wow the world with its stellar economic performance. Yet it has shied away from playing the kind of active role in international affairs that would seem commensurate with its economic weight.

This is because China's politics have primarily been defined by the need for economic development above all else. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's economic reforms, had warned against the country playing too active a role in international affairs lest this distract from the paramount task of ensuring domestic economic growth. His advice has long governed China's actions in world affairs.

The year 2006, however, marked a significant departure from China's traditional foreign policy, signalling that Beijing was no longer willing to watch events unfold from the sidelines and was ready to accept its new status as a world power of import.

Several end-of-the-year commentaries in China's official media have highlighted this departure. A commentary in the China Daily newspaper dramatically proclaimed, "Make no mistake, this sleeping dragon has awakened from its centuries long slumber. China is everywhere." The

article went on to observe that in no other year in recent memory had the leadership of China spent "so much time abroad and achieved so much." It added that nearly half the leaders of the United Nations' 192 member countries visited China in 2006.

Such openly triumphal commentaries in the official media are unusual. China's authorities have in the past tended to downplay the country's international clout, choosing to stress instead its "developing country" status and limited military capabilities. Such modest rhetoric was intended to allay the fears that China's "rise" was causing across its immediate neighbourhood and beyond.

But that Beijing is finally acknowledging its status as a major player in the international system is evidenced by the fact that Chinese President Hu Jintao has formally developed a theory of international relations: the concept of a "harmonious world".

A recent commentary in the People's Daily newspaper begins by saying that "2006 has been the first year for the Chinese government to implement its 'harmonious-world-oriented' diplomacy." The article recognises that when Mr Hu first formulated the theory in late 2005, it left "world public opinion perplexed, not knowing how to put it into practice."

Indeed the concept of a harmonious world does seem short on specifics, encompassing as it does broad notions of multilateralism,

prosperity for all through common development, and tolerance for diversity. These are a laudable set of objectives but Mr Hu's theory lacks details regarding the means through which to achieve these vaunted ends.

In fact, the importance of the 'harmonious world' theory lies less in its being a practical solution to the world's problems and more in the fact that it reflects a growing self-awareness on China's part that its actions have repercussions far beyond its own borders. Given its new power,

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China has realised that it must develop a theoretical basis for its changed role in world affairs.

China's recent willingness to be a more active player internationally results from a complex of factors. To begin with, there is no longer any denying the country's economic muscle. This past year saw China acquire the largest foreign exchange reserves in the world, worth a mind-boggling \$1 trillion. The year 2006 also firmly established China as the world's fourth-largest economy having clocked more than two decades of solid economic growth. According to a recent report by Citigroup, China could

# its place on world stage

be the world's largest economy within the next 25 years.

The commentary in China Daily states that the current administration "no longer tries to hide China's growing economic weight in global affairs and the role it will have to play in order to sustain growth."

This explanation is key. In order to sustain its double-digit economic growth, China has no choice but to become more active internationally. A major proportion of the oil and other natural resources that China needs to

For Beijing, ensuring regional peace and stability is thus critical and it is aware that it must play an active role internationally to secure this. Demonstrating its new leadership in a variety of international and regional forums, China hosted three major international summits in 2006: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in June, the China-Africa summit in November, and the China-Asian summit also in November.

All three summit meetings underscored how Beijing is beginning

more significant than the SCO summit, was the China-Africa meeting, which brought together the heads of state of more than 40 African nations in Beijing. During the summit, President Hu promised to double Beijing's assistance to the world's least developed continent by 2009, in addition to offering African nations \$5 billion in loans and credits. The summit was held in a year that saw a slew of big names from Beijing touring Africa, lobbying for lucrative contracts and promising investments. In January the Chinese Foreign Minister swept through west Africa; President Hu visited Nigeria, Morocco, and Kenya in April; and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao took in seven African countries in June.

China's Africa push is already resulting in a sharp shift in the received geopolitical status quo. Beijing's influence is beginning to replace that of the United States and traditional European powers on the African continent.

But the diplomatic manoeuvre that won China the most plaudits in 2006 was its effort in getting North Korea back to the negotiating table with the restarting of the six-party talks on the DPRK's nuclear programme. China's crucial role in facilitating negotiations on one of the world's major potential flashpoints has given it considerable clout not least with the US.

China's new found willingness to participate actively on the international stage found manifestation in several other gestures in 2006. For example Beijing substantially increased the

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feed its growing economy is imported. Thus, Beijing has begun to aggressively woo energy and other raw material rich countries across Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia. These countries also represent emerging markets for Chinese products, making them doubly valuable.

Moreover, sustained economic growth within China depends on a stable security environment in its immediate neighbourhood. Destabilisation of the Korean peninsula, for example, would unleash a flood of refugees across the border, interrupting careful plans for the economic rejuvenation of China's northeast.

to use multilateral forums as vehicles through which to serve its own national interests. The SCO, for example, binds the energy rich nations of Central Asia to China and represents a formidable alliance between Moscow and Beijing. Covering an area of 30 million square kilometres or about three-fifths of Eurasia, the SCO controls a large part of global oil and gas reserves and includes two of the world's five declared nuclear powers. For China, leadership of such an organisation is not only prestigious but also helps set it up as an alternative to US influence in the strategic central Asian region.

**Wooing Africa:** But perhaps even

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Chinese troop contingent in UN peacekeeping operations, in addition to pledging \$3 million to the UN Peace-Building Fund. According to Xinhua, China also provided aid to 86 developing countries in the first 11 months of 2006.

However, China's new diplomacy has not been without its share of criticism. Countries from Japan to the US have expressed unease at China's military modernisation programme, calling attention to what they allege is the opaque nature of this process. Human Rights groups have also attacked China's willingness to deal with regimes widely condemned as corrupt and oppressive, such as Sudan and Angola.

But despite these criticisms, China's growing international status is irrefutable. Increasingly when the UN needs peacekeepers it turns to China, when African countries need aid and infrastructure investment they turn to China, and when the US needs help in its dealings with North Korea it turns to China.

By taking the lead in a variety of regional and international forums, initiating bilateral security dialogues and military exchanges, and dispensing aid and technical assistance in parts of the world where traditional powers like the US are cautious to tread, China sent out a clear signal in 2006: the days when Beijing sat on the sidelines, content to let other powers shape world affairs, are emphatically over.

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