

Make China Great Again! Xi leads China into muscular new era

By Christopher Bodeen
The Associated Press

BEIJING — In this summer's *Wolf Warrior II*, Chinese action star Wu Jing portrays a tough super-patriot who rescues both fellow countrymen and oppressed Africans with help from the People's Liberation Army.

Audiences loved what became China's biggest-grossing movie ever. Some reportedly sang the national anthem as the movie closed on an image of a Chinese passport and the words, "Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland."

This red-blooded nationalism has been channelled skillfully by president and ruling Communist Party leader Xi Jinping as he seeks to strengthen the party's role in Chinese life and shepherd the country's rise to prominence at a time when the United States and others in the west are seen to be in retreat.

Xi's muscular foreign policy could become even more assertive following the national congress of the ruling Communist Party, where delegates agreed to support his policies and endorsed his second five-year term as party secretary general, observers said.

"Xi's on a roll," said June Teufel Dreyer, professor of political science at the University of Miami. She predicted he would continue expanding China's influence by gradually increasing pressure on other countries, a tactic seen in Beijing's steady island-building efforts in the South China Sea, for instance.

In an address to the opening session of the congress, Xi reiterated that China pursues an "independent foreign policy of peace" and maintains a defensive military posture. However, he also warned other countries not to underestimate China's willingness to stand up for itself.

"No one should expect China to swallow anything that undermines its interests," Xi told delegates at Beijing's hulking Great Hall of the People.

For years, after its emergence from hardline Marxism in the late 1980s, China stuck to reformist leader Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "keep a low profile and bide one's time, while also getting things done."

That began to change after the last decade's global financial crisis, from which China emerged relatively unscathed, and the country's foreign policy has since shifted into high gear under Xi.

China has succeeded in leveraging its booming economy and mountain of foreign currency holdings to influence other nations and further its global ambitions. A key watershed came this year, when the People's Liberation Army began manning China's first overseas base in Djibouti, reversing decades of rhetoric eschewing such facilities as imperialist Cold War holdovers.

The overall goal seems clear: Restore China to its traditional role as East Asia's leading nation and a global economic and cultural force.

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APPLAUDING APP. A woman plays Tencent's smartphone game that allows users to clap for Xi Jinping by pressing on their phone screen as many times as possible in 19 seconds. Ordinary young Chinese may not have paid close attention to Xi's three-and-a-half hour marathon speech last month, but they're happy to "applaud" the president in the newest viral phenomenon to sweep China's internet. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Viral smartphone game lets ordinary Chinese "clap" for Xi

BEIJING (AP) — Ordinary young Chinese may not have paid close attention to Xi Jinping's three-and-a-half hour speech last month, but they're happy to "applaud" the president in the newest viral phenomenon to sweep China's internet.

Tencent, the internet giant behind the Wechat messaging app, rolled out a game that allows users to clap for Xi by pressing on their phone screen as many times as possible in 19 seconds. Within three days, the game racked up 1.2 billion plays, as many shared their scores on social media and challenged friends.

Xi kicked off the ruling Communist Party's 19th national congress and declared a "new era" of China's rise on the world stage. Delegates granted him a second five-year term as party leader.



MONUMENTAL CONTROVERSY. A worker sweeps in front of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, in this June 3, 2013 file photo. India's famed monument of love, the white marble Taj Mahal, is finding itself at the heart of a political storm with some members of India's ruling Hindu right-wing party claiming that the mausoleum built by a Muslim emperor does not reflect Indian culture. (AP Photo/Pawan Sharma, File)

Monument of love, the Taj Mahal, at heart of political storm

LUCKNOW, India (AP) — India's famed Taj Mahal is finding itself at the heart of a political storm, with some members of the country's ruling Hindu right-wing party claiming that the mausoleum built by a Muslim emperor does not reflect Indian culture.

The most recent attack came when Sangeet Som, a lawmaker from the Bharatiya Janata Party, called the 17th-century monument "a blot on Indian culture" that was built by "traitors."

But Som wasn't the first to attack the mausoleum that Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built in the northern city of Agra in memory of his favorite wife.

The federal government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has also been accused of attempting to rewrite history textbooks, especially where India's past Muslim medieval rulers are concerned.



MCGA. A visitor looks at models of Chinese tanks at an exhibition highlighting China's achievements under five years of leadership by Xi Jinping at the Beijing Exhibition Hall in Beijing. Xi's muscular foreign policy could become even more assertive following the recent party congress. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Xi said as much in his opening address when he outlined a vision of raising China's international stature. By 2050, Xi said, China would be "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence."

"Xi presents very bold visions for where China should be headed and what China must become," said Jingdong Yuan, an Asia-Pacific security expert at Australia's University of Sydney.

A more forceful post-congress approach could include expanding China's role in international bodies and new China-sponsored initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank. China could also become more assertive in regional hot spots such as the South and East China Seas and its contested border with India.

Perhaps no strategy reflects Xi's vision more clearly than the "Belt and Road Initiative" launched around the time of Xi's elevation five years ago. The massive undertaking seeks to link China to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond with a sprawling network of roads, railways, ports, and other economic projects valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars. The goal is to make China an indispensable economic partner with expanded political influence, while offering new opportunities for Chinese businesses weighed down by overcapacity and shrinking markets at home.

To do this, China has refined its diplomacy to take advantage of favorable global trends while not going so far that it would damage relationships with its neighbors and the United States, Yuan said.

In some areas, China has proved unyielding. Beijing, for instance, angrily rejected last year's ruling by an international tribunal in The Hague in a Philippine case that invalidated most of China's territorial claims in the contested South China Sea.

It has also taken a hard line against South Korea's deployment of a U.S. anti-missile system that Beijing calls a security threat. South Korea has been vilified in Chinese state media, with Chinese group tours banned and South Korean businesses in China hit hard.

However, the pragmatic approach more often wins out.

Beijing has largely resisted the urge to fire back when U.S. President Donald Trump lambasts China for not doing enough on North Korea or

allegedly cheating at trade, instead offering measured responses. Xi, meanwhile, pulled off a successful visit to Trump's Mar-a-Lago Florida estate that was heavy on the sort of positive optics Beijing prefers. Trump is soon travelling to Beijing.

In China's latest border standoff with India, Beijing agreed to a mutual pullback of forces just days ahead of a China-hosted summit of large developing economies attended by both Xi and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi.

Beijing has also softened its approach to charm Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, offering him infrastructure investment and military assistance against Muslim rebels, while agreeing to allow Philippine fishermen to return to their traditional grounds in Scarborough Shoal, which China seized in 2012.

The approach seems to be working. The results of a recent Pew Research Center survey show two-thirds of Filipinos believe strong economic relations with China are of greater importance, as opposed to 28 percent who say getting tough with China over territorial disputes is more important. When last asked the question in 2015, Filipinos were divided almost evenly on what was more important.

Volvo's electric car brand Polestar unveils first model

Continued from page 2

The market also faces competition from General Motors Co.'s Chevrolet Bolt and BMW AG's electric brand, BMW i, which has released four electric models. Volkswagen AG's Audi unit plans an electric SUV next year.

Sales of fully electric and hybrid vehicles have risen, but last year's total was only 2.6 million, or about three percent of the global market. Navigant, a research firm, forecasts that will rise to about 3.7 million in 2018 and to more than 9 million by 2025, or about nine percent of sales.

Polestar expects China, where the government is promoting electric car development, to account for about one-third of global sales, according to Ingenlath.

China is the world's biggest market for electrics and hybrids. It accounted for 40 percent of last year's global demand with sales of 336,000 units — more than double U.S. sales of 159,620.

Geely also launched another new brand, Lynk & Co., in 2016.



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