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‘How Beijing envisages a fundamental reform of the world order’

The National People's Congress in turbulent times: Sergio Grassi from Beijing on China's Global Security Initiative and relations with the US

At the National People's Congress, the head of state and government Xi Jinping accused the US of wanting to encircle and isolate China. However, the new head of government, Li Qiang, advocated for an expansion of cooperation between Beijing and Washington. How does China see its relationship with the US?

Unfortunately, US-China relations are in a dangerously bad state – the expression of either strategic competition or a structural hegemonic and systemic conflict. Nevertheless, Beijing describes this as the most important bilateral relationship in the world. The Chinese leadership demands – in the spirit of its so-called big countries diplomacy – that Beijing should be treated as an equal by Washington and urges the US to follow up words of understanding with deeds.

After a brief glimmer of hope during the meeting between US President Joe Biden and China's President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Bali last November, relations are currently again in a dangerous downward spiral. Attempts to insert a ‘safety net’ (Chinese expression) or ‘crash barrier’ (American expression) to prevent the slide into a dynamic of confrontation have failed for the time being. Highly worrying in this respect are reports that both countries’ crisis communication channels look like they will remain dysfunctional for a long time to come.

At the People's Congress, the new Prime Minister Li Qiang, following on Xi Jinping's earlier statements at a press conference, stated relatively soberly that ‘encirclement and suppression’ and the ‘hype of decoupling’ promoted by some people would be in the interests of neither the United States nor China. In doing so, China's new prime minister is signalling a fundamental willingness to cooperate in a very pragmatic manner.

The statements made by China's new Foreign Minister, Qin Gang, were much sharper...

That is correct. At his press conference, he said that China would not accept any 'crash barrier proposed unilaterally by Washington' that is intended solely to prevent Beijing from reacting to future provocations. If the US doesn't step on the brakes and instead continues to accelerate along the wrong path, crash barriers will be of no help in the event of any 'derailment' and conflict will certainly ensue. These policies are making humanity's future a gamble, Qin said. He described the US Indo-Pacific strategy as the 'Indo-Pacific version of NATO'.

Referring to Taiwan, he said that Taiwan is the 'first red line' in US-China relations and should never be crossed. Qin reiterated that Beijing reserves the right to deploy any means to secure sovereignty over Taiwan. At the same time, China's foreign minister is signalling Beijing's fundamental readiness to enter into conflict for its core interests.

Beijing has so far reacted cautiously to the latest statements from the White House that President Biden expects talks with Xi Jinping in the near future. But after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's planned visit to Beijing was postponed until further notice, a renewed exchange at the highest decision-making level may be necessary to rebuild at least a minimum of strategic trust.

In addition to Xi's re-election as president for the next five years, the appointment of Li Qiang as prime minister was the most important personnel policy event at this year's People's Congress. What does Li stand for?

Li Qiang is said to be a great promoter of the digital economy, who has also successfully brought international companies such as Tesla to Shanghai. As Shanghai's party secretary, he was moreover already responsible for one of the country's most important economic and financial centres with 70,000 international companies. His draconian Covid19 lockdown management in spring 2022 in Shanghai is viewed as more controversial.

He is also seen as a close confidante of Xi Jinping and is expected to have more legroom than his predecessor Li Keqiang. Since he has so far spent his career almost exclusively in the prosperous Yangtze River Delta – i.e. in Shanghai and the wealthy provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu – he lacks, as yet, any experience in the central government in Beijing or in less developed provinces. Ultimately, however, this key biographical information and the associated inference offer no more than indications of what Li Qiang stands for. It's simply too early for

an assessment.

Li appealed to the private sector and foreign investors for confidence in China's ailing economy. What economic impulses came from the People's Congress?

For 2023, the Chinese leadership has set comparatively moderate planning targets of five per cent more economic growth and the creation of 12 million new jobs. According to estimates by the International Monetary Fund, this would contribute to at least a third of worldwide growth. China's decision-makers reiterated the new concept of development and the sensitive shift from the economic model of quantitative growth to greater socio-economic stability and so-called high-quality development to become an all-round modern socialist country.

The government's work report confirms the objective of a green transformation. Through the establishment and expansion of an environment-related infrastructure in rural and urban areas, ecosystems are to be increasingly protected and restored. The clean and high-efficiency use of coal is also to be promoted and corresponding technologies researched and developed, which could indicate a slower phase-out of coal for the sake of energy security. However, the realisation of China's well-known 2030/2060 climate goals was reaffirmed, i.e. to reach the maximum level of CO2 emissions in seven years and to be climate-neutral in 37 years.

How will the economic recovery be tackled?

The Chinese government is focusing primarily on the domestic market and thus on increasing consumption and on investments and consumption pent up during the pandemic. Not least because of the far-reaching socio-economic damage caused by the zero-Covid policy, the Chinese economy is also suffering a massive crisis of confidence, to which longer-term trends such as the rapidly ageing population and falling productivity growth are also contributing.

The course correction initiated at the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2022, which explicitly emphasises the important role of the private sector alongside the state economy, was reaffirmed. Agriculture, industry, technology and the education sector – and thus implicitly security in supply chains, food, energy, raw materials and technological independence – are to be promoted.

Not only research and development but also the application and dissemination of cutting-edge technologies are to be accelerated by new research facilities. A central technology commission was newly established, tasked in particular with eliminating China's

technological weaknesses such as semiconductors. The creation of a new national financial supervisory authority to monitor systemic risks in the financial sector was also announced. Accordingly, the new authority is likely to have an impact on major initiatives such as the 'Global Development Initiative', the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and China's international lending. Xi Jinping also reiterated that development and security are mutually dependent. The two sessions were attended by over 100 representatives from the defence and aerospace industries, as well as from semiconductor manufacturers and companies in the field of artificial intelligence. Overall, the composition of the new State Council reflects a focus on technology, security and socio-economic stability.

In addition to the 12-point position paper for Ukraine, Beijing promptly presented a position paper on the Global Security Initiative (GSI). The Chinese security initiative is thus gaining in stature. What is China aiming at here?

In the recently-presented position paper on China's Global Security Initiative, central concepts, principles and initial proposals are presented as to how Beijing envisages a fundamental reform of the world order and a new global security order. Linked to this is the claim that China, as a large and strong country, is increasingly helping to shape the world order, is a central representative of the interests of developing countries and is perceived as a peace-making power. In Beijing, for example, the recently announced resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is presented as a success of Chinese mediation and the opening act of the GSI. The paper identifies the 'concept of shared security' as the essence of the Chinese vision of security.

Among the first points of the GSI position paper, Beijing calls for respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and the principles of the UN Charter, while rejecting any form of 'bloc confrontation'. This is followed by reference to the principle of indivisible security, according to which no country should pursue its security interests at the expense of another country. The latter also coincides with statements by Russian officials and is probably an indirect criticism of the US, which Beijing is more and more explicitly accusing of asserting its security interests in a belligerent and selfish manner at the expense of other countries.

Last but not least, the GSI position paper emphasises the understanding of comprehensive national security confirmed at the People's Congress, according to which traditional and non-traditional security areas must be increasingly interwoven and addressed accordingly. The final section, under the heading 'Priorities for

Cooperation', announces that bilateral and multilateral security cooperation will be promoted within the GSI framework. It reiterates the 'consensus that a nuclear war must not be won and must never be fought', while reaffirming support for central arms control and non-proliferation treaties. The trilateral cooperation between China, Africa and Europe on small arms and light weapons is explicitly mentioned.

At the end of the paper, reference is made to regional organisations such as the Shanghai Corporation Organisation, BRICS, ASEAN and the African Union for the implementation of the above-mentioned concepts, principles and mechanisms. The goal is for as many China-friendly countries and organisations as possible to rally behind the initiative to underpin the shifting of the world's centre of gravity toward the developing world.

How can the West react to this?

It would be of great interest to clarify with Beijing how we can avoid a 'club confrontation' in the future in addition to a bloc confrontation. In any case, Beijing's reference to the UN Charter, territorial integrity, the renunciation of the use of nuclear weapons and to international arms control offer interesting starting points for the foreign and security policy dialogue.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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