

# A year that was China's

2009 will be remembered as the year during which China asserted, often arrogantly, its newly-found economic and military strength. It has not only sailed through the global financial crisis, but has also become the most powerful player in Asia and the second on the planet. However, surprises await in the coming year



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China is rich, China is powerful and China is assertive. In November, 2009's most prominent visitor to the Middle Kingdom, US President Barack Obama discovered it. In an Op-Ed in *The New York Times*, Mr Wei Jingsheng, the Chinese dissident now living in the US, summed up the visit: "No doubt there is some truth in the notion that their revived arrogance is inspired by China's role as America's largest creditor. Surely this is one reason China's leadership feels free to insult President Barack Obama, as it did during his visit to China, when they blocked broad news coverage of his public speech, and when they sent lower-level officials to negotiate with him at the Copenhagen climate talks until the last minute when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao finally granted him an audience."

China is rich and with over two trillion dollars in foreign reserves, the lone superpower of the planet appeared a poor debtor unable to dictate its vision of the world to the Mandarins in Beijing. Wei wrote: "Their humiliation of President Obama... served to mark China's power on the world stage."

The 60th anniversary of the Communist regime will be remembered as the year during which China asserted, often arrogantly, its newly-found economic and military strength. Today China dictates its terms to the world.

The execution of Akmal Shaikh, a British national, despite frantic last-minute pleas for clemency by the Gordon Brown Government is another sign that Beijing has decided to flex its muscles.

Though after a 'full and frank exchange of views', British Foreign Minister Ivan Lewis told Chinese Ambassador Fu Ying that China had not taken Shaikh's mental health into consideration, it was to no avail.

A few days earlier, Mr Francois Fillon, the French Prime Minister had kowtow in Beijing after President Nicolas Sarkozy had 'dared' to meet the Dalai Lama in Poland last year. Mr Fillon, like US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Mr Obama carefully avoided the mention of human rights and other vexing issues. In Beijing, he declared "all misunder-



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standings between Paris and Beijing are a thing of the past." From now on, the relations are to be based on 'mutual respect', which means 'let us only talk about economic exchanges'. France was 'rewarded' with 12 deals in the fields of aviation, energy, culture and water resource utilisation.

Internally, the leaders in Beijing have also shown that they mean business. In December, a Chinese court sentenced Liu Xiaobo, a 55-year-old academic and dissident to 11 years in prison for 'inciting subversion of state power'. The trial was concluded in two hours and the verdict immediately announced. Though not delayed, justice was clearly denied. Lui's crime: He had authored 'The Charter 08', a petition calling for freedom of assembly, expression, and religion in China. It had pleaded for amending the Constitution and called for a multi-party

system in China. It was too much for the apparatchiks who saw it as a direct challenge to their grip over the nation, especially after more than 10,000 intellectuals affixed their signature to the Charter.

The leadership is not only proud of the fact that China has sailed through the world financial crisis, but also that the PLA has become the most powerful player in Asia and the second on the planet. According to a report released last week by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China's military strength ranks second in the world in terms of expenditure, number of troops and weaponry. Evaluation indexes include five direct constituent elements — territory and natural resources, population, economy, military, science and technology — and four influencing factors — social development, sustainability, security and domestic politics and international contributions.

Many experts were surprised to see that China's military power ranks second (with a total score of 53.3, behind the US, which scores 90.08, just ahead of Russia, with 51.08). The size of China's armed forces is, however, the largest in the world (2.25 million troops) supported by 240 nuclear weapons, 7,580 tanks, 1,700 fighter planes, 144 naval ships and eight nuclear submarines.

Despite the fact that China believes in 'asymmetric warfare', its official budget (\$ 60.9 billion last year) is far below the reality as many 'military' expenditures are shown as 'civilian'. To give an example: In 2009, China has built 55,000 km of highway in Tibet Autonomous Region, connecting 67 per cent of its counties with asphalt roads. The Chinese website *eng.tibet.cn* quoted a Chinese official who stated: "2009 is the most significant year of highway constructions

with 19 key projects being completed, and stimulating economic growth by 1.2 per cent." We know where these roads will lead in case of conflict with India.

Examples could be multiplied. Just to mention a recent one: China launched two spy satellites in seven days in December. The remote-sensing satellite Yaogan VIII took off from northern Shanxi Province on December 15. Though officially the satellite will be used for "young people to experience aerospace science and technology", it is known to be a spy satellite, as is Yaogan VII launched a few days earlier from Gansu Province.

Vis-à-vis India also, Beijing has become more assertive by supporting India's neighbours. It was recently announced that China will train the Nepalese Army and had pledged Rs 220 million as military assistance for procuring 'non lethal' hardware and logistics. It is not good news for New Delhi.

Needless to recall the Tawang incident when the Chinese leadership pressured India to block the visit of the Dalai Lama to the North-Eastern State. Fortunately, New Delhi understood that India's interests, particularly for the border talks, could be jeopardised if the usual policy of appeasement was followed; it remained firm. It is true that contrary to Washington, New Delhi is financially not indebted to China.

But everything is not rosy in the Middle Kingdom, corruption and pollution have reached new heights in 2009. This has resulted in more than 1,00,000 small and major demonstrations across the country during the past year only. The provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang have been more restive than ever and nobody in the Politburo seems to know how to handle the situation. It explains why the negotiations with the Dalai Lama have been interrupted since November 2008.

Perhaps more worrisome for the leadership in Beijing is the division amongst top leaders which became apparent when Vice-President Xi Jinping visited Germany and did not mention President Hu's name during a meeting with Ms Angela Merkel.

For China, 2010 may not be as smooth as 2009 and many surprises can be expected.