



RESPONDING TO THE WORLD'S CONCERNS

Officials address domestic and international issues for a global audience

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The Second Session of the 12th National People's Congress (NPC)—held in Beijing from March 5 to 13—is seen as a test of the sincerity of the Chinese Government in honoring its commitment to reform. More than 3,000 reporters, including about 1,000 from abroad, gathered in Beijing with an eye on China's policy trends.

Most of their attention was focused on two questions: First, can China advance its reform faithfully and continue to be the engine of economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond? Second, what kind of global strategy will China pursue after becoming stronger, and will it adopt a hard-line foreign policy?

Active foreign relations

In his first government work report as Chinese premier, Li Keqiang expounded on the progress his cabinet has made during the past year and revealed the government's future plans, pledging to advance comprehensive reform in all fields with steadfast determination as well as courage. In the 17,000-character report, Premier Li devoted only about 350 characters to China's foreign policy, reiterating that China is firmly committed to pursuing the path of peaceful development and a win-win strategy of opening up.

Three days later, when China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi was invited to an NPC press conference to take questions from domestic and foreign media about China's foreign policy

and external relations, Wang said that in 2014 China will continue to pursue an active foreign policy that serves domestic reform. The foreign minister defined the key tasks of his ministry for this year as: strengthening friendly relations with all other countries in the world, especially neighbors; creating a more enabling external environment for domestic reform and development; pursuing vigorously economic diplomacy; deepening win-win cooperation with other countries; and creating more favorable conditions for the transformation and upgrading of China's economy.

Since China introduced the reform and opening-up policy in 1979, its national strategy has focused on domestic economic development combined with low-profile diplomacy. After 35 years, though China has become the second largest economy as well as the No.1 trade power, the country is faced with more complicated domestic obstacles. The present administration admits frankly that China's reform has entered a critical stage and a deep-water zone. China faces arduous tasks in maintaining economic growth, adjusting the economic structure, improving people's livelihood as well as fighting corruption. It will continue to be a domestic-oriented country. Thus, its diplomacy must maintain a high degree of consistency and stability.

The outside world has long judged China's external strategy by the rapid growth of its national defense budget. China's defense budget this year totals 808.23 billion yuan (\$132 billion), a rise of 12.2 percent year on year. The newly added defense spending will be mainly used to step up the modernization of weapon systems, improve soldiers' living standards and promote military system reform. The moderate growth of China's defense budget is fair and reasonable and meets the demand to safeguard China's se-

curity. In response to foreign concerns, Fu Ying, spokeswoman for the Second Session of the 12th NPC, told a press conference that peace can only be maintained by strength.

Firm stance on core interests

Premier Li stressed safeguarding China's sovereignty, security and development interests in his government work report. Specifically, he stated, "We will safeguard the victory of World War II and the postwar international order, and will not allow anyone to reverse the course of history." This statement is a clear message to Japan showing China's resolution to fight against the Shinzo Abe administration's right-wing policies.

In the past year, maritime disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea have put a severe strain on China's relations with Japan and the Philippines. In response to a question over territorial and maritime disputes, Wang replied that China's position is firm and clear on issues of territory and sovereignty.

"We will not take anything that isn't ours, but we will defend every inch of territory that belongs to us; we will never bully smaller countries, yet we will never accept unreasonable demands from smaller countries," Wang said. Wang declared China would like to carry out equal-footed consultation and negotiation to properly handle the issues by peaceful means on the basis of respecting historical facts and international law. "There will not be any change to this position," the foreign minister concluded.

The Chinese Government also refuted accusations from other countries that China is more assertive in handling its disputes with neighboring countries and denied that China's firm stance on sovereignty issues signals the shifting of its diplomatic strategy. Wang said, "China is committed to the path of peaceful



GLOBAL VISION: Foreign Minister Wang Yi attends a press conference in Beijing on March 8

development, and we hope other countries will also take the path of peaceful development.”

A responsible global power

China deeply understands that its contribution to the world should grow with the increase of its national strength as it strives to become a responsible global power. However, its efforts sometimes have been neglected.

Wang gave a detailed explanation of China's policies on hotspot issues at the NPC press conference. Regarding the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, Wang articulated China's "red line": China will never allow war or instability on the Korean Peninsula. He further pointed out that the six-party talks, which involve China, North Korea, South Korea, the United States, Russia and Japan, are the only dialogue mechanism acceptable to all the parties concerned. Only with denuclearization can the Korean Peninsula enjoy genuine and lasting peace.

Wang claimed that it is not accidental that the situation in Ukraine has reached its current point of crisis. He said that China urges those involved to heed the interests of all ethnic communities in Ukraine and uphold regional peace and stability. The priority now, he said, is to exercise calm and restraint. The parties should carry out dialogue and consultation to put the issue on the track of a political settlement.

On the Afghanistan issue, Wang announced that China will for the first time host a ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan in August. China hopes that through this conference, the parties will build more consensus and work together to support Afghanistan's efforts to complete its political, security and economic transitions.

Wang also gave an outlook of China's all-round diplomacy in 2014. He confirmed that Chinese President Xi Jinping will visit Europe in March. Xi will also visit some Latin American

countries within the year and attend the BRICS Summit in Brazil. Premier Li will take a trip to Africa.

Wang said that the "China-Russia relationship is at its best point in history." He pointed out that the most important task for Sino-Russian relations is to ensure that the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination will continue to grow. Talking about China's ties with the European Union (EU), Wang said China hopes to speed up the negotiation toward a China-EU investment agreement, with a view to future free trade arrangements.

Since the beginning of 2014, due to Sino-Japanese tensions as well as U.S. President Barack Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama, signs of more differences between China and the United States are increasing. Washington fears that the Chinese military may attempt to capitalize on the Obama administration's perceived weakness and push to drive U.S. forces out of the western Pacific rim. However, during this session of the NPC, China showed its resolution to build a new model of major-country relations with the United States.

Wang said that at the heart of this new model of major-country relationship is mutual respect, win-win cooperation and an absence of conflict or confrontation. This is the common direction the two sides have set. It is a positive strategic outlook the two countries show to the world and a solemn commitment to the international community. He said the China-U.S. relationship is both very important and very complex. "The Asia-Pacific should be the testing ground of our commitment to building a new model of major-country relations, rather than a competitive arena," he said.

In 2014, China will play host to two major international conferences: the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia Summit in Shanghai and the Asia-Pacific

Economic Cooperation Leaders' Meeting in Beijing. Wang said that China will make the most of its role as the host country to show its sincerity in promoting Asian security as well as Asia-Pacific economic integration, striving for a new breakthrough in launching a free trade area of the Asia-Pacific.

People-oriented diplomacy

Premier Li's work report has upgraded "protecting the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens and legal persons overseas" to being on par with safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, echoing the governing task of "making coordinated efforts to ensure and improve people's well-being" mentioned in the work report.

Early on the morning of Wang's press conference, a Malaysian civil aviation flight bound for China with 239 passengers and crew members—including more than 150 Chinese—lost contact with ground control. Wang mentioned the incident before the opening of the press conference and expressed his concerns, adding that the Chinese Foreign Ministry and relevant diplomatic and consular missions of China had activated the emergency mechanism.

Before the end of his press conference, Wang introduced the latest progress in China's consular protection and services. The foreign minister said that nearly 100 million Chinese travel abroad each year and his ministry needs to handle tens of thousands of consular cases annually. He noted it is the abiding purpose of China's diplomacy to serve the people. The Foreign Ministry will establish a global emergency call center for consular protection and services. The ministry will continue to implement the initiative to better protect and serve overseas Chinese and further improve consular services.

After the press conference, Wang immediately returned to the Foreign Ministry to deal with the missing Malaysian flight. That morning, President Xi and Premier Li instructed China's diplomatic authorities to employ their full efforts to handle the aftermath of the incident. Premier Li also talked with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on the phone in an urgent call that afternoon. A massive international search-and-rescue operation was soon underway in Southeast Asia. ■