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60 years People's Republic of China

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Bonn, 5 October 2009. What does the “normal” German citizen do on the German national holiday? He enjoys a day off, gets together with family or friends, and if the weather goes along, he may even take a long walk or a bicycle trip. He is apt to have a good meal, too, either at home or “out”. As such, the national holiday is unlikely to be of much, if any, interest to him. What does the “normal” Chinese citizen do on the Chinese national holiday? She may either work, since many businesses, including, of course, numerous restaurants, are open for the day, or she may enjoy the day off, get together with family or friends, and take a long walk, the weather permitting. And she is more than likely to enjoy a good meal! As such, the national holiday is unlikely to be of much, if any, interest to her.

The year, though, the People's Republic of China is celebrating its sixtieth birthday, a very important anniversary according Chinese tradition, even more important than the fiftieth. The Chinese government saw fit to celebrate the occasion by staging a huge military and civilian parade in the centre of Beijing, capping the festivities with a gigantic show-party on Tiananmen Square. While the logistical effort that went into the making of parade and “party” is certainly admirable, the patriotic vocabulary used in the speeches, propaganda, and songs presented there is disturbing. The demonstration of power embodied in the mobilisation and coordination of thousands of persons marching in step or in huge pictures created by groups of dancing actors was enough to make the observer's flesh creep. Any doubts as to whether China is capable of organising events of this magnitude were certainly dispelled, at the latest, on the occasion of the opening ceremonies for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Why it is that China needs all this is a question not so easily answered.

Is what we see here merely a strong, self confident state celebrating its own existence? A rising world power that feels a need to demonstrate its military and logistical prowess to the rest of the world, perhaps even to use it as a threat? Or is this more an insecure regime using gargantuan festivities to paper over existing problems?

Perhaps a little of the one, a little of the other. When, in 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic, China was a very poor country shaken by war and civil conflict. The first successes posted by the new regime were shattered when Mao opted for the Great Leap Forward to expedite national development. This huge social experiment ended in miserable failure, the consequence was a famine that has left indelible marks on the country's birth and death statistics. In the aftermath, Mao's opponents first sought to curb his influence, but in response Mao launched, in 1966, the Cultural Revolution, which thrust the country into a state of turmoil close to civil war. While the tide of the Cultural Revolution had already begun to subside in 1969, it was not until 1978 that the Chinese government, under Deng Xiaoping, was able to launch a set of deep-reaching economic reforms. These in turn constituted the foundation for China's headlong course of economic development. And it was building on them that that China, in 1992, committed itself to developing a socialist market economy, a move on which it followed up, in 2001, by joining the World Trade Organization. While today China is still a developing nation, it is no longer, everywhere, a poor country. Beijing, Shanghai, and some other Chinese cities and regions have become thriving economic centres, attracting trade, investment, and – increasingly – labour from all over the world. These are successes that the Chinese government sees as worthy of celebration – and that, we might perhaps add, rightly deserve be celebrated.



China's economic rise has made the country more powerful, it is now a member of the World Trade Organization, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a member of the new G-20 club. A number of important global challenges are virtually bound to elude solution without cooperation by China. But – thanks to its political system as well as its new economic power – China is not necessarily on friendly terms with everyone. And for that reason the Chinese government may think: It couldn't hurt to exhibit the country's weapons arsenal and to point to its national capacities to develop and build weapons systems and fighter aircraft of its own - despite all of its solemn assurances that it seeks only friendly with relations with all other countries.

The demonstration of strength was certainly also addressed to a domestic audience. Tensions in the country have, in recent years, tended more to grow than to abate. Major income disparities, widespread corruption, suppression of freedom of the press, disgruntlement over cases of expropriation and environmental scandals, and – not least – violent expressions of dissatisfaction on the part of the indigenous populations in Tibet and Xinjiang – all this has repeatedly demonstrated to the Chinese government that social peace in China continues to be elusive, a very fragile good. The events of 1989 have not been forgotten, either – one more reason why there was, on China's national holiday, just as much talk of harmony, peace, and stability as there was of China's pride and self-confidence. The idea seems to be that these elements will serve as a cement that continues to hold the country together, in the future as well. Whether or not the constant, mantra-style repetition of slogans of this kind will really turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy is an entirely different matter.

It is, perhaps, more soothing to know that "normal" Chinese citizens – those, in other words, who were not obliged to march in step or dance on Tiananmen Square – this year once again made use of their day off to take a long walk with their family and to enjoy a good meal. It was this that gave the day its relaxed character, and placed it in stark relief to the awe-inspiring scenes to be observed in the centre of Beijing. It may well be that it is above all the Chinese government that needs gargantuan celebrations, while the populace itself has wholly other interests of its own. Perhaps the Chinese authorities will some day come to realise that that the yields of any such demonstration of power are bound to be lower than the costs, which are certain to be enormous.



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