

The Recent Round of Foreign Visits By PRC Leaders

At the end of March, after the People's Republic of China (PRC) concluded its military maneuvers directed at Taiwan, the United States, and Japan, the top Beijing leaders commenced a series of visits to foreign countries, chiefly in Southeast Asia and Africa.

On March 31, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen arrived in Japan for a four-day visit. Then, from April 16 to May 3, Zhang Wannian, vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, visited Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, and Myanmar (Burma). On May 7, Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, paid a ten-day visit to Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and New Zealand. Also in May, Jiang Zemin made a two-week tour of six African countries and Zhu Rongji visited Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

One factor that contributed to this round of visits was Beijing's need to cope with changes in the international situation. Since the end of the Cold War, the major powers have begun to strive for domination in nonmilitary areas instead of getting embroiled in military confrontation. Up to now, the United States has managed to keep the upper hand where these issues are concerned while the PRC has been relegated to a much lesser role. In order to win greater international influence, Beijing has made efforts to establish multilateral, rather than just bilateral, relationships with other countries. The visits to Southeast Asia by Zhang Wannian and Xiong Guangkai were both planned with this consideration in mind. According to news reports, Xiong told military leaders in the Philippines that Beijing had ordered its naval vessels to keep clear of waters in the Spratly Islands claimed by Manila. There are also reports that Beijing has accepted the principle of military transparency put forward at the ASEAN Regional Forum, agreeing to make public details of its weapons' imports, to notify other states of its military activities, and to invite observers from neighboring countries to witness military maneuvers. All these adjustments have been made to cope with changes in the international strategic situation.

Another consideration for Beijing is the need to enhance its international status at a time when it is being ranked among the major economic powers. After nearly two decades of reform, mainland China has accumulated considerable economic strength, although it still has a lot of domestic problems. Beijing wants a bigger role in international affairs, but not simply as a superpower pawn. Moreover, the frequent friction it has experienced with Washington since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre has made Beijing anxious to break out of U.S. containment. Jiang Zemin's African visit can be seen as an effort to expand Beijing's international role. During his trip, Jiang made promises of economic aid to some of the countries he visited, which is a method commonly used by countries wishing to expand their political influence. Financial problems at home caused Beijing to suspend its foreign aid program for some time after the initiation of economic reform.

The latest round of foreign visits by PRC leaders may also be seen as a preemptive measure directed at other powers, mainly Japan and the United States. There are signs that Beijing's military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait since July 1995 have heightened awareness in Tokyo and Washington of the need for stepped-up defense cooperation to cope with the threat from the PRC. Qian Qichen's visit to Japan, which came just before that of U.S. President Bill Clinton, was obviously intended to calm Japan's fears and prevent the formation of a Tokyo-Washington alliance directed against Beijing.

(Arthur S. Ding)

