

The legacy of Hu Jintao

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As the curtains are drawn on the fourth generation of leadership under the stewardship of Hu Jintao and the stage being set for the fifth generation of leadership in China with the eighteenth party congress meeting scheduled on November 8, the time is ripe to look back and see what kind of legacy President Hu Jintao is leaving behind. Perhaps his biggest achievement is to bring into prominence the concept of 'social governance', something that was missing from the Chinese political lexicon ever since China embarked on the path of reforms and opening up.

The reforms have led to China increasing its economic might and galloping its way to double digit GDP growth rates. However, in this quest for GDP-oriented development, the leadership lost touch with its traditional constituency — peasants and the working class, along with other marginalised sections (ruoshi tuanti). Hu's most significant achievement has been to re-engineer the GDP model (cujing) of development and adopt a policy discourse that puts emphasis on 'quality' rather than 'quantity' of economic growth by adoption of 'people first' approach (yiren weiben).

There are two contrasting pictures of China — one at the international level and the other at the domestic level. It will be interesting to see how the whole world has a major stake in how China manages its own problems because a destabilised China can spell trouble for the whole world. It is very relevant for the world to understand the domestic politics and governance in China for this provides us the vital clues as regards China's foreign policy and strategic objectives. Given this, Hu Jintao's policy of social governance, namely, scientific concept of development and harmonious society and the challenges associated with attainment of these objectives assumes importance.

Today there are two widely contrasting views on the growing rise of China. On one hand there is a portrayal of China that has recorded GDP growth rates over a period of time which is unprecedented in human history. According to a report by Goldman Sachs China has contributed more than 20 per cent of world's GDP growth between 2000-'09. In recent times the post-2008 financial crisis has witnessed strengthening of China's international standing and its economic governance has come for appreciation from various quarters. In contrast there is a picture of China which is grappling with outcomes of unabated economic growth for the last three decades. In the last decade or so these outcomes have manifested themselves in the shape of a widening rich-poor divide, and growing regional inequalities. In certain cases of rural unrest caused by a concoction of agriculture and environmental issues leading to qunti xing shijian (mass incidents).

This brings us to the question as to why we should be concerned about the domestic issues facing China. There are multiple reasons for the same. Today the whole world has major stakes in how China manages its own problems because a destabilised China can spell trouble for the whole world. In today's context it holds special relevance because as always the case with post-1949 China, domestic political discourse has influenced foreign policy outcomes. For instance, China's foreign policy discourse speaks about a 'harmonious world' emanating from its domestic political discourse of 'harmonious society'. In short, the key to understanding China's international policies and practices, including its economic policies, lie in seeing where the domestic trends are heading.

Under president Hu Jintao, China witnessed a great leap forward from economic governance to social governance. The twin political slogans under the policy discourse of social governance have been a scientific concept of development and a harmonious society. The scientific concept of development calls for a comprehensive, co-ordinate, sustainable development. To achieve these goals the Chinese leadership undertook a series of policy measures that reflected the political will of the leadership to address the shortcomings of the GDP obsessed growth model. For instance, the six number one policy documents in the years 2004-2009 laid out a series of goals to promote rural-urban integration. The party leadership also adopted a host of policy measures to tackle the three rural problems — rural peasants, rural agriculture and rural regions, and inspired the building of a 'new socialist construction of the countryside'. Under these policies the leadership sought to redirect economic development from one based on quantity to one based on quality. This kind of development stresses on innovation, energy conservation and checking of emissions caused by environmental pollution, domestic consumption and social welfare of urban and rural people.

The call for harmonious society has led to policy measures balancing the five co-ordinates. The five co-ordinates refer to rural and urban, backward and the forward regions, man and nature, domestic development and opening up, and economic and social development. The most significant part of this discourse has witnessed Hu introducing the concept of liang ge quxiang (two directions) in 2004, which in 2005 was elaborated by him by contending that China has moved from a primary stage of economic development in which agriculture supports industry to a stage of economic development in which industry supports nourishment back to agriculture and cities supports villages. This has led to host of policy measures in the form of rural tax and fee reform, new rural co-operatives, medical system, comprehensive rural minimum living allowance.

Despite the best of intentions there are numerous challenges in front of the Chinese leadership if China is to address the various domestic issues related to socio-economic and regional inequalities. To begin, China's unabated economic growth at rates achieved in the last three decades are unimaginable partly because export markets cannot absorb Chinese products at same rates. This is exacerbated by focus on quality rather than quantity of economic growth. Quality of growth would mean cleaner environmental technology; better social governance practices; addressing income inequalities and interregional inequalities.

Zheng Bijian, the famous party historian, once remarked, 'China has always influenced the world by changing itself'. China's rise in the coming years depends on how it sets its house in order and its success in domestic arena will significantly influence its power status in the international system.

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