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**Banyan**

**Will China fill the vacuum left by America?**

**Not as long as Chinese officials remain shy of the world stage**

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EVEN analysts who make a living predicting a great shift of wealth, power and global leadership from the United States to China never anticipated the speed with which Donald Trump appears to be marginalising his homeland. Last week Mr Trump announced he would pull America out of the Paris accord on climate change. At an annual China-EU summit under way at the time, the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, declared that China and Europe together would demonstrate “solidarity with future generations and responsibility for the whole planet”. Others have gone further: it will be to China that the world will now turn for leadership on the issues that matter.

China appears to have advanced on other fronts. The Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, an annual talkfest on security, exists in part to showcase America’s commitment to keeping the peace in Asia. Mr Trump’s defence secretary, James Mattis, did his best at this year’s event over the weekend to reassure Asian friends. Their chief concern is over the South China Sea, which China appears bent on turning into its own lake.

But though Mr Mattis’s promises to expand American engagement in Asia were welcome, they did not dispel the perception that America is taken up with North Korea’s nuclear threat (see [Lexington](http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21723118-america-strives-respond-clear-and-present-danger-how-china-north-korea-equation%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), at the expense of the rest of the region. And America is run not by Mr Mattis but by an erratic man for whom “America First” may imply wrecking the world order that America itself built out of the ruins of the second world war. Amid doubts about America’s commitment to the region, South-East Asian officials proposed that their countries’ navies join China’s to patrol the South China Sea, in which China has greatly expanded its presence through the construction and military reinforcement of artificial islands. It smacked, to some, of rolling over in the face of Chinese power.

Elsewhere, Chinese leadership seems to move from strength to strength. As *The Economist* went to press, China’s own security grouping, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), which includes Russia and four Central Asian states, was preparing to welcome India and Pakistan as new members. Pakistan, an old ally of China’s, is a natural inclusion. But India is a rival, so its nod to Chinese might is notable. The SCO’s expansion reinforces China’s ambitions for its “belt and road” initiative of infrastructure spending that is intended to tie Asia to Europe, the Middle East and even Africa. Those who worry about Chinese power see the initiative as a gilded instrument of a new Chinese order.

This seeming tilt towards China owes little to its powers of attraction. It is more of a knee-jerk response to events in Washington: if that’s what you do, Mr Trump, say those who have prospered under an American-led order, it leaves us with no choice but to turn elsewhere. But admire China’s sense of timing. In January, even before Mr Trump’s inauguration, China’s president, Xi Jinping, speaking before the world’s elites in Davos, presented his country as a champion of globalism and open markets.

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And yet: where China appears to be filling a leadership vacuum, there is often less than meets the eye. Climate change is one example. The world’s largest emitter has done much to cut back on its discharge of greenhouse gases, installing more renewable capacity than any other country. Yet its own transparency and accountability over pollution and emissions still falls far short of the openness a world leader on climate change would need to adopt. Meanwhile, common cause between Europe and China has severe limits. As James Kynge of the *Financial Times* says, China’s push to cut emissions is motivated by an environmental crisis at home, combined with hopes of conquering world markets for renewable energy. Europe wants to save the planet.

As for economic leadership, the EU-China relationship again reveals the limits. Mr Xi prises open markets, but many of China’s own remain closed—and where foreigners may operate, the fear is of technology being stolen. That has led to European frustrations. Anger is growing over China’s divide-and-rule tactics in separately wooing 16 poorer central and eastern European countries, using belt-and-road enticements.

With the addition of India and Pakistan, the share of the world’s population who are citizens of SCO members will balloon to nearly half: Chinese officials proudly point out that the group will embrace three-fifths of the Eurasian land mass. But managing the newcomers’ bickering could absorb China’s energies, reducing the forum to little more than a talking shop about terrorism and trade. As for the South China Sea, China has been strangely quiescent since an international tribunal a year ago lambasted its territorial claims in the sea. It has been at pains to get on with neighbours it has disputes with, especially the Philippines and Vietnam.

No such thing as a small matter

Since at least the days of Napoleon, the world has been gasping at the scale of China’s potential. China certainly knows how to play to that imagining. And the propaganda directed at its own people emphasises a return to historical importance every second of the day. Yet China is reluctant to push really hard on the outer boundaries of what it might hope to do. Just as it is browbeating neighbours over the South China Sea less than some had predicted, so, for all that it relishes being referred to as a leader in climate change, it is far from keen to take on a leader’s responsibilities. And at Shangri-La, China didn’t even send any senior leaders, merely what Washington wonks call “barbarian handlers”: lower-level functionaries whose job is merely to parrot their government’s line. Being a world leader involves being able to handle criticism on an international stage. China remains very unwilling to risk that. And the reason is simple: fear of how any slip-up might play at home. *Waishi wu xiaoshi*, goes the saying: there is no such thing as a small matter in external affairs.