

The Shifting China Narrative: From 'Rise' to 'Fall?'

Written by Harry Kazianis

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/28/the-shifting-china-narrative-from-rise-to-fall/>

HARRY KAZIANIS, SEP 28 2012

Over the last several years there has been a gradual shift in the conversation when it comes to all things China. If such a shift is deemed accurate, it will have profound global ramifications for how we look at our world and the future of international relations overall.

From 1995 until about 2010, scholars, journalists and pundits alike sang the collective praises of China's rise to global prominence and power (one notable exception to this trend is that of Gordon G. Chang, author of *The Coming Collapse of China*). Countless books, articles and careers were made on the subject, including in some respects even my own. The peak of such talk culminated in the People's Republic passing Japan as the world's second largest economy (by measure of GDP). Even more countless articles predicted in how many years China would pass America as the world's largest economy. Estimates ranged from twenty to a wildly speculative five years. In 2008-2009, China would seemingly escape the global "Great Recession" by pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into its domestic economy. Chinese influence and power seemed on an unstoppable upward trajectory with some in the media even to this day referring to China as a "superpower."

It seems fairly certain the tenor of such talk – the narrative that China's rise was a foregone conclusion- has now changed.

For the last year, chatter concerning China's ever-increasing laundry list of problems has grown several fold. To be fair, many of the challenges China faces have always been present, but were masked by its amazing economic success story. The cornerstone of China's global rise, rapid economic growth, has slowed. The PRC's economic model of export led growth has been endangered by weak demand from Europe and the United States. Many of the large scale infrastructure projects financed by Chinese banks to stave off an economic downturn several years ago might never be paid back. Pictures on the internet along with videos on YouTube depict what have been referred to as "ghost cities" – modern marvels of economic development that are amazingly devoid of people. Rumors persist that Beijing's GDP stats are for "reference only" – or faked. Economists speak of a property bubble. Demographic trends suggest the rapid 'graying' of China's population. Regional tensions are on the upswing as disputes in the South and East China Seas spark fears of Beijing's claims of "indisputable sovereignty" in contested areas as America 'pivots/rebalances' to the region. And did we mention that there is a once-in-a generation leadership transition about to take place?

In some respects, China maybe a victim of its own success – seemingly being crushed ever-so-slowly by the weight of expectations that may have been placed prematurely. Beijing has succeeded in pulling millions of its citizens out of poverty, created a world class economy despite present economic difficulties (only in China would a 7-7.5% growth rate be called a 'problem'), and became a global power in its own right. One could argue that the shift in the China 'narrative' is one created by the ever increasing success story of China itself. No nation can grow at near double-digits forever. Logic suggests that as China's economic power translates into increasing military power that its neighbors may grow anxious. Any area of possible tension around China's periphery will only garner ever-increasing scrutiny as China fields new aircraft carriers, anti-ship ballistic missiles and other weaponry once only privy to the West.

As the saying goes "perception is reality." While I am not a big believer in such phrases, popular-media it would seem

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has certainly shifted the conversation when it comes to China. What was once an avalanche of reporting promoting China's growing clout globally has moved to a more somber tone. Such a shift in many respects is to be expected. Regardless of whatever the current narrative depicts now and in the future, China in many respects has already 'risen.' It faces economic, demographic and strategic challenges many of world's powers have faced arguably for decades. Beijing also has a tremendous amount of potential: its economy still has decades of strong growth ahead as its economic revolution moves further west. Millions more Chinese will join the ranks of the middle-class raising per-capita income. If China's economy can shift from an export-led economy to one that embraces service industries and consumption, what China may lose in growth it may gain in stability. And the narrative could shift once more...

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About the author:

Harry serves as Editor-In-Chief for *The Diplomat* as well as a CSIS: WSD Handa Fellow. He has served in the past as Deputy Editor for e-IR. He specializes in security studies with a keen interest in modern Chinese military strategy and foreign policy. Harry has written in publications including *The Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum* and the *Foreword Report*.