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### **Whispers in the wind**

By Joergen Oerstroem Moeller

At the end of February, a few days before China's annual parliament session, Premier Wen Jiabao commented on China's political system and its future by saying, "The country has the full capacity to establish a nation of democracy governed by laws within the framework of a socialist system." He also stated, "China shall develop democracy in its own way."

At the opening ceremony for a new semester at the Party School of Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, Vice President Zeng Qinghong spoke about "education on democracy" and "inner party democracy".

These statements can be interpreted in various ways. As Wen Jiabao explicitly links democracy to the socialist model, while adding that it may take 100 years to reach a mature socialist system, the omens for political reforms may be deemed remote.

But the mere fact that the premier and vice president entered the stage and commented on democracy might reveal that the political leaders sense pressure from the grassroots for a more open political system.

This may not augur well for democracy in China, but it may be a first step toward a debate about values and principles associated with democracy in the Chinese political system. It may also confirm that China listened carefully when then-US deputy secretary of state Bob Zoellick invited it to become one of the stakeholders in the global political and economic system.

To influence global development, a stakeholder must be able to project an image of itself, projecting the values embedded in its political system.

Geopolitics over the past couple of years bears witness to that. Unilateralism has lost its magic. Cooperation and partnership is back in vogue. Military power does not deliver what policymakers seek: changes in political philosophy and political culture.

Ideas and ideals stand out as more suitable and more effective instruments to engineer alterations of political and cultural conditions, not the least in a global setting increasingly dominated by values and ethics.

Neither of these lines of thought was to be found in US President George W Bush's policy statement about the Iraq war or in the State of the Union speech. Although they are the key to

ending the debacle in Iraq, the chosen instrument still seems to be found inside conventional wisdom focusing on military instruments for a non-military problem.

Only political endeavors making it worthwhile for the majority of Iraqis across religion, tribal connections and ethnicity to join and support a new political system will turn chaos into an orderly situation. And that will only last if accompanied by diplomacy and policies convincing the main powers in the Middle East that a neutral or even better supportive role is in their interest.

The Europeans were ridiculed by the US a few years ago when then-defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld spoke about "Old Europe" and "New Europe", rubbing in his contempt for the posture taken by a majority of Europeans, who said that the US might win the war in Iraq, but not the peace. There probably were a variety of reasons behind Old Europe's thinking, and some of the motives may not be praiseworthy, but at the end of the day Old Europe has been proved more correct in its assessment than the US.

Europe itself tasted the bitterness of self-conceit in 1991 when some Europeans spoke about the honor of Europe facing the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. The Europeans were, simply speaking, not capable of dealing with the rogues they faced. Only when the United States decided to join a common US-European engagement was the stalemate unhinged and a political settlement negotiated.

The lesson learned by the Europeans and the Americans over the past 15 years - with no small cost in casualties and global prestige - reveals that a value-based approach is necessary to maintain balance, equilibrium and the stability that military power itself cannot bring about.

It is a watershed to come to this conclusion. Mao Zedong's famous phrase that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun has become a questionable guideline. Now power depends on the ability to reconcile cultural identities and in making societal models attractive for the larger majority of people, not just the part of the population constituting a majority.

Power is synonymous with the ability to persuade people to do the right thing measured against a moral yardstick that comes as close as possible to the international community's norm. A superpower necessarily leads the efforts to draw up this grade book but does not dictate how it should look.

The first page is to create common values that unfold their full potential when turned into universal values. People around the globe must embrace these values because they want to do so, because they have come to the conclusion that such a course offers them a better life, not because they fear for the consequences if they choose other values.

The US and Europe have their well-known societal model and political systems, although cracks and self-examination cast doubts over how robust the model is under the pressure of globalization and multiculturalism. The picture for Asia is not so clear.

There may be elements of convergence when looking at the economic models applied by the

Asian countries, with market economies and to a large degree export-led growth being in the driver's seat. But no similar convergence is discernible looking at political systems and governmental style.

Some observers subscribe to the view that economic growth will stumble unless political systems are opened up for a democratic style of government. It may sound good, but there is no basis for such a theory. Asia and the Asian countries may very well continue the run of high growth without fundamentally changing the present political systems.

This is not the point. The point is whether the Asian population in due course will expect more than just high growth and an increasing material standard of living.

The young people growing up in the new economic powerhouses may not wish to copy the North American or European political model, but they certainly look for enhanced influence on the domestic political process and qualify transparency and accountability as issues to be taken seriously. They do not associate universal values with the exact form of government, but the principles governing the political system irrespective of its form.

Asia and its political leaders face the challenge of finding some kind of Asian political model founded on ideas and ideals attractive for the people of Asia. The crucial question is whether they can invent a model accommodating the wish for influence and transparency with the high degree of political stability enjoyed by a number of Asian countries.

If so, Asia may still be blessed with stability supported by high economic growth with potential foreign-policy confrontations under control. If no, the future looks a good deal more uncertain and risky.

This is the main reason that statements and policy declarations coming out from the annual session of China's parliament, taking place right now, and the 17th Party Congress scheduled for second half of 2007 will be scrutinized with a magnifying glass.

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