China’s leaders are acutely aware that the country’s growing economic might and its increasing voice in international affairs are stirring concerns about how it will employ its newfound power and influence in the future. That presents China’s new leadership with the daunting challenge of building trust with the rest of the world. Wang Yizhou outlines the issues involved.

To better understand the current challenge of building mutual trust between China and the world, it is important to understand the background of China’s new leaders, President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. They are the first generation of leaders born after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. As a result, they carry fewer historical burdens than did Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who were well aware of the humiliating experiences of China’s modern history.

It is a sad and well-known fact that China, one of the world’s earliest civilizations, fell into a semi-colonial state following the First Opium War in 1840, oppressed and humiliated by the Western great powers. As a result, the Chinese people underwent revolution and struggle for a hundred years, leaving deep scars on the country’s political psychology. But Xi and Li grew up, were educated and pursued their careers during China’s era of reform and opening, and therefore have a tendency to look forward with confidence. They are leaders fully committed to Deng Xiaoping’s path of “progress through co-operation and development from reform.”

They also have assumed leadership at a crucial moment, when this nation is being recognized as an ascendant power by its neighbors and the international community. Thus China’s new leaders somehow possess a different global consciousness than their predecessors — more confident, ambitious and enterprising. To quote Xi, “Leaders in this term of office areshouldering the great mission to realize the dream of Chinese national revival.”

Realizing the dream
In my opinion, the “Chinese dream” as it is discussed by Xi and other officials includes the following goals:

First, to double per capita income during their term in office, from the current $5,000 to $10,000 by 2020. Conservative forecasts suggest that China will overtake the United States as the world’s largest economy by the middle of this century, when the PRC will celebrate its 100th anniversary. Making up one-fifth of the world’s population, China is poised to become a new-style great power in the East, relatively rich and prosperous, its people living in peace and working in contentment.

Second, to make strong gains in technology for national defense and to lay a solid foundation for national unification, territorial integrity and the settlement of sovereignty disputes. Though China is now a global power with worldwide influence, most foreigners hardly know that the Chinese people still have something painful in their hearts. This is the fact that the nation is still not truly unified, because of the legacy of civil war (1946-1949). Taiwan Island is still divided politically from the mainland. Therefore, China’s new leaders will work hard to realize the dream of national unification and integrity, which is also why it is vital to modernize the country’s defense capabilities. Besides, China’s land boundary and its coastline are especially long, with 14 neighbor countries by land and eight by sea, among which 10 have long-term sovereignty disputes with China, varying in nature and degree. Maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity is one of the most important sources of political legitimacy. As a result, China’s modernization of its military and national defense is focused on advances in quality rather than quantity.

The third goal of the Chinese dream is to act as a newly emerging great power and contribute to peace and prosperity in East Asia, as well as global development. In fact, all leaders of the PRC have had global ambitions, although their direction and emphasis may have differed. For Mao Zedong, it was to complete the revolution in China and push forward the world revolution, fighting an international system dominated by the West, especially when the red star faded in the Soviet Union. For Deng Xiaoping, it was to solve the problem of poverty and economic growth in China, gaining more appeal and charm for socialism with Chinese characteristics in an economically globalized world. Later leaders, namely Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, are following Deng’s path and emphasizing China’s role as a responsible great power.

I believe China’s new leaders are committed to leading a peaceful, ascending and constantly stronger nation dedicated to the cause of helping to create a more reasonable and just world order, thus gaining more respect from the world. However, these ambitions are encountering some doubts and challenges.

Challenges, doubts and tricks
First is the suspicion and resulting containment policies of the world’s superpower. Sino-US relations are complex, with both positive and negative aspects. In the view of many Chinese people, the US would like to keep close economic and trade ties with China, while at the same time making every attempt to guarantee that China won’t be a threat to America’s position as a superpower. This is the main source of uncertainty in relations between China and the world.

Second is the challenge that is posed by the anxieties and little tricks of China’s neighbors. Given the sheer size of China and the country’s rapid economic growth, combined with complex foreign relations throughout its history, the...
China’s new leaders are committed to leading a peaceful, ascending and constantly stronger nation dedicated to the cause of helping to create a more reasonable and just world order, thus gaining more respect from the world. However, these ambitions are encountering some doubts and challenges:

First: the suspicion and resulting containment policies of the world’s superpower.

Second: the challenge posed by the anxieties and little tricks of China’s neighbors.


Finally: the rise of nationalism within China means more pressure on China’s leaders.

China finds itself surrounded by more than 20 neighboring countries that hold contradictory and sometimes negative attitudes toward China’s ascent — with Japan and the Philippines being examples.

The third challenge concerns the shockwave of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which came into effect in the 1990s and has provided opportunities for nations to exploit resources at sea, adding to international disputes. It is estimated that more than 60 out of the 150 coastal states face bilateral or multilateral maritime disputes concerning fisheries, island ownership, seabed resources and the exploitation of the Polar region. China is involved in numerous disputes. To handle them well or not is a question directly connected to stability and peace in East Asia, and it also concerns the peaceful ascent of China.

Finally, the rise of nationalism within China means more pressure is coming to bear on China’s leaders. It is not a coincidence that various versions of the “Chinese threat” have emerged. China and certain countries have new problems and difficulties in their political-security relations; internal debates, sometimes fueled by nationalism, are occurring in which rash opinions are sometimes expressed. As China continues its rise, we should seek and find solutions to the problems that undermine international trust. This will require various efforts.

First, it is necessary to build a smart balance of contention and co-operation between China and the US in order to keep the two going in the same direction. In traditional Chinese strategic thought, we should try “to resist but not fight, to co-operate but not assimilate.” This is a guideline with which China’s current leaders are obviously familiar. Of course, the US and China have major differences and structural contradictions. The former is the largest and most developed capitalist state while the latter is a newly emerging socialist country led by a communist party. Mutual distrust is inevitable, as are the increasing frictions in bilateral and international affairs. After all, the US is the only nation capable of imposing a real block on China’s ascent. However, since the era of Deng, Chinese leaders are clearly...
This is an important source of China’s unprece-
dented growth of the last 30 years, and it is also
the cornerstone for China’s promise of a peaceful
realization of China’s maritime sovereignty and
other rights.

Third, China must explore an effective way to
keep the balance between solving problems on
the basis of international common practice and
provide public goods with Chinese character-
istics, thus pushing forward a new world order in
its neighborhood, especially in East Asia. From
my observation, one defect in China’s foreign
dpolicy leadership is that they are not familiar
with or fond of using international practices or
forms (including the UN Convention on the
Law of the Sea). They are not skillful at creating
win-win results through multilateral regimes; they
would rather choose bilateral negotiations that
may give them a possible advantage. In a certain
sense, this is a reflection of China’s nervousness
as a newcomer to the international system, and
it needs to be overcome. It is necessary for China
to become accustomed to international common
practice and routine in dealing with all kinds of
disputes. This is an essential process for a great
power to learn to live in a modest way with oth-
ers. As a newly emerging great power with a long
history of civilization, China, in accordance with
its ability, should be able to provide more pub-
lic goods to the world, including those related to
security issues, such as efforts to build a new
security framework in Asia.

The recent improvement of relations between
Beijing and Taipei is inspiring. Despite still being
divided, the two sides demonstrate a political
willingness and creative involvement that has
relieved the once dangerous confrontation, cre-
aturing a “co-operation but not assimilation” effect.

Similarly, the Six-Party Talks on North Korea’s
nuclear program, the Shanghai Co-operation
Organization, various initiatives in the Mekong
River region, the signing of an ASEAN agreement
for a nuclear-free zone and flexibility in dealing
with maritime disputes are all public goods for
security that are provided, or will be provided,
by China. If over time China sustains these types
of initiatives on trust and security, the notion of a
“Chinese Threat” may one day pass away.

Finally, China must deal with the double-
edged effect of rising nationalism domestically,
making use of its constructive function as a
unifying force while at the same time mitigat-
ing its destructive power. In East Asia, the rise
of nationalism in China, South Korea and Japan
provides leaders with an opportunity for domes-
tic political mobilization. On the other hand, it
can also bring about new confusions and chal-
dles. Leaders in China have never forgotten
that during the country’s decline that began in
1840, China suffered greatly from Japan’s
extreme nationalism and militarism. But before
that, neighboring countries also suffered from
China’s strong national power.

BEAUTY AND UNITY
China’s current nation-building project should
carry on and promote the country’s fine tra-
ditions of thought and civilization, while try-
ing to remove the sense of national self-import-
tance or conceit that has been an antipathy to
other countries. Political leaders should get their
inspiration from sociologist and anthropologist
Fei Xiaotong, a great thinker in contemporary
China, who called on people to “find your beauty
and that of others, share the beauty and achieve
unity.”1 That is to say, leaders should have con-
fidence in guiding the people to learn and carry
forward their nation’s best culture, while at the
same time appreciating and absorbing the cream
of the cultural heritage of other countries. When
this reaches equilibrium, the prospect of a har-
monious world will come true. As a great coun-
try with a history of civilization for thousands of
years, China has an opportunity to pursue and
manage this equilibrium.

After many years of research into East Asian
security issues, I have the impression, unlike
some in the media and elsewhere, that it will not
be that difficult for China to build mutual trust
with the rest of the world. The true difficulty lies
in recognizing the nature of the problem.

Wang Yizhou is Associate Dean of the
School of International Studies at
Peking University.

1 In remarks delivered by Fei Xiaotong in Tokyo on Nov. 2, 1990,
on the occasion of his 80th birthday. See http://iea.cass.cn/
content-BA0720-2011052403304837805.htm