

# China's leaders fly the extra mile to push foreign policy

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IF THEY could claim air miles for their overseas travels this year, China's President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang could have qualified for elite-class frequent flyer programmes by now.

Since they took office seven months ago, a newly confident Chinese leadership has wasted no time in advancing China's diplomatic and economic interests abroad.

They have visited a total of 21 countries, more than double the nine countries visited by their predecessors - former president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao - in the same time period in 2003.

Between them, President Xi is the more jet-setting, visiting 14 countries to Premier Li's seven. Together, they left footprints across the globe: Central America, Central Asia, South-east Asia, Europe and South Asia.

True, the Hu-Wen team had been briefly grounded in 2003 by the Sars pandemic that killed 349 nationwide.

But analysts believe that pressing foreign policy needs explain why the Xi-Li pair travelled so far and wide in their first year.

"There is more business to do a decade after China's further growth, such as major-power diplomacy with Russia and the United States, and more attachment to neighbouring relations such as with India, Pakistan and Asean countries," Fudan University foreign policy analyst Shen Dingli told The Straits Times.

Chinese media like the China Daily newspaper, quoting observers, said the current duo's travels show a more confident leadership taking the initiative in advancing China's diplomatic interests.

Shifting dynamics in China's domestic environment and the in-

ternational arena also explain why the two current leaders have travelled more, say analysts.

China is keen to protect its relationships with countries that supply oil, gas and minerals to fuel its economy, hence the visits to nations in energy-rich regions like Central Asia and Africa, said retired US diplomat Don Keyser.

And recent warmer cross-strait ties between the mainland and Taiwan allowed President Xi to travel more as he could "address the Taiwan challenge with something akin to benign neglect", added the non-resident fellow at the University of Nottingham.

Other reasons for their travels include China's growing involvement in multi-lateral groups like the Brics group of major emerging economies - comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa - and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional group comprising Russia and four Central Asian states.

Observers say the countries visited by the current duo reveal China's foreign policy priorities.

"I think the strategic importance of Russia and Central Asia, as well as the return of China's charm offensive in South-east Asia are rather clear," said Professor James Tang, dean of the Singapore Management University's social sciences school.

Days after assuming the Chinese presidency in March, Mr Xi visited Russia, Tanzania, Congo, and South Africa, where he attended the Brics summit.

In June, he visited three Central American countries - Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica, Mexico - followed by the US where he met US President Barack Obama in an informal summit.

In September, after the Group of 20 summit in Russia's St Petersburg, he visited four Central Asian states - Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan - and attended the SCO



Mr Xi and his wife at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Bali last month. He has visited 14 countries since he took office. PHOTO: REUTERS

summit. Last month, he visited Indonesia and Malaysia, as part of China's new charm offensive towards the South-east Asian region.

Mr Li visited India, Pakistan, Switzerland and Germany in May, followed by Brunei, Thailand and Vietnam last month.

But analysts are split over whether their travels have advanced China's foreign policy interests.

Professor Shen said that to some degree, they have helped stabilise relations with the US and India, both viewed as China's strategic rivals, and also assured Asean countries amid fears of China's growing assertiveness

over South China Sea disputes.

But Mr Keyser said Beijing "still does not enjoy the goodwill and trust from most nations of the world that it seeks to earn".

That means the duo will have to put in more work - and more overseas travels - after the Third Plenum this weekend and the year-end festive break.

Where next?

Perhaps the Middle East, said Peking University analyst Wang Dong. "Ensuring energy security will be crucial to the success of the economic reform packages that the Third Plenum will unfold," he said.

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