



CHINA ON THE MOON: WOULD THE FEAT EMBOLDEN DRAGON TO EXHIBIT MORE BELLIGERENT BEHAVIOUR?

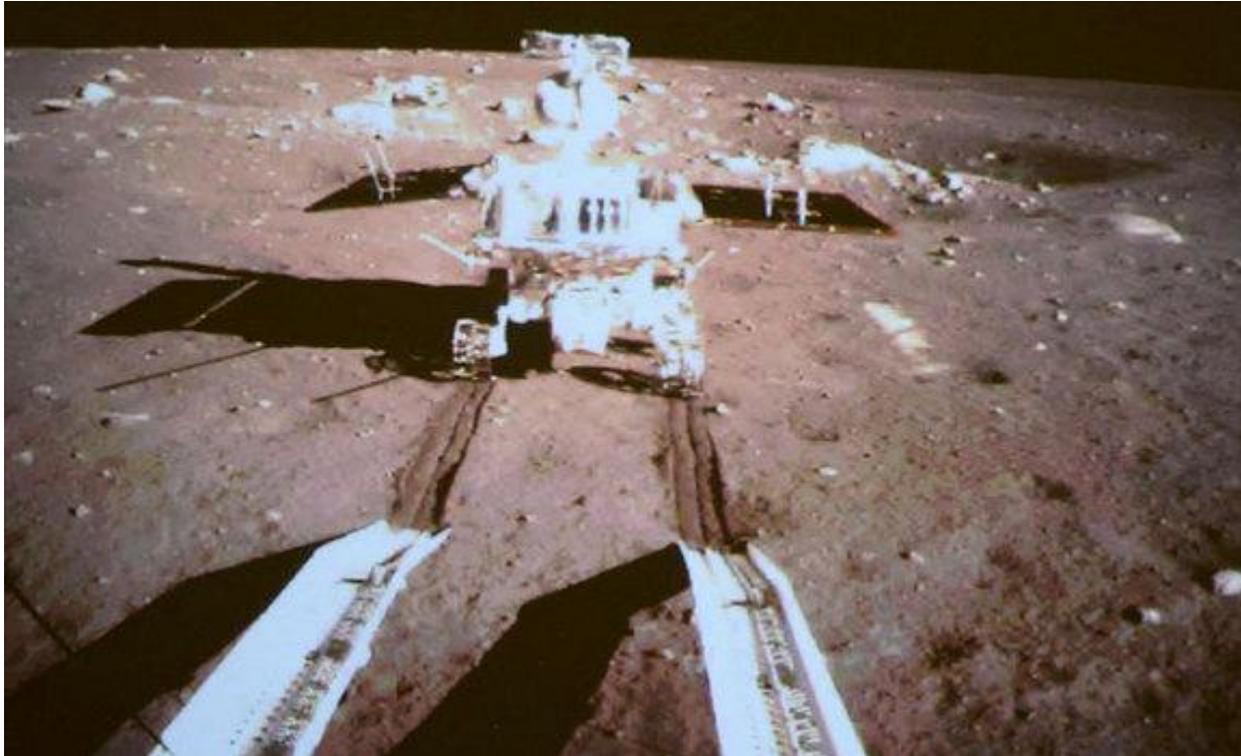
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“That's one small step for (a) man; one giant leap for mankind.” Neil Armstrong’s quote on stepping onto the lunar surface in July 1969 is one of the most inspiring phrases ever to have been uttered. Yet the sad truth is that this December has marked the 41st anniversary since – Apollo 17 astronaut Eugene Cernan - last set foot on the Moon. The school children who have learned Armstrong’s words by rote (with or without the ‘a’ depending on who you listen to) over the past four decades have often wondered as they grew up whether they would ever have the chance to do the same. A return to the Moon, in fact, is starting to look increasingly likely and the words uttered by the next person to hop down from a lunar-lander look certain to be spoken in Mandarin.ⁱ

When China successfully landed a craft carrying a robotic rover Jade Rabbit (Yutu) on the surface of the moon on 14 December 2013, it seems to have come one notch closer to realizing the prophesy. This was the first soft landing on the lunar surface in 37 years. It is the only third country, after the US and Russia, to have achieved this feat. Yutu has already sent back snaps from the moon indicating that the mission has become fully operational.ⁱⁱ

The Chinese are on the moon, realizing a long held dream, and becoming the third lunar “power” after America and Russia. The probe Chang’e 3 made the first soft landing in nearly four decades to roll out a rover, Jade Rabbit that will explore for three months. Chinese pride is soaring with success. In 1969 Neil Armstrong became the first American to walk on the moon, and only Americans have repeated the feat. The Russians then sent a

rover to explore the surface, in 1976. Since then, nothing has gone to our nearest neighbour. The Chinese have come a long way in a short time, and will not stop here. By 2025 they want to walk on the moon, too, among other things. China's ambitious space programme began in the 1960s, but has only really taken off in the last 20 years, in parallel with the economic boom. The challenges, however, are not only economic.ⁱⁱⁱ



Just days after its successful landing on the Moon China's Jade Rabbit has rolled away from the Chang'e lander and is exploring its landing zone, the Bay of Rainbows.

Apart from international prestige, national patriotism is bolstered by these proud exploits. In 10 years, from 2003's first man in space to 2008's first space walk, China has overtaken its pacesetter Asian rival Japan, and newer entrant South Korea. The Shenzhou programme has reaped rich dividends. It has created a new breed of heroes for the People's Republic and now manned flights are the norm, and increasingly the priority, as China bids to have an operational fulltime space station by 2020. Last June three Taikonauts, including the first Chinese woman in space, spent 15 days in orbit, a vital stage

before placing station modules into the right spot. Billions of Euros are being spent as China seeks to conquer space, to prove it is a true superpower, and break the monopoly of certain nations that were thought to go unchallenged for years. However critics warn the effort is mostly about finding ways to deny enemies the use of their orbital assets if conflict should break out, and not so much about exploration or science.^{iv}

It was, as a Chinese newspaper put it, “a new beginning for the Chinese dream”. The eleventh president of China, Jinping, launched the “Chinese dream” slogan within days of taking power in November 2012. It has since swept the nation, appearing everywhere on billboards and propaganda posters. It featured twice in a resolution adopted by the Communist Party’s Central Committee at a plenum last month that marked the tightening of Mr Xi’s grip. He has said that the Chinese dream includes a “dream of a strong nation” and a “dream of a strong army” and, especially since the plenum, he has been living up to the strongman image.^v

Would the confidence generated by this feat, result in China becoming even more belligerent? In the recent past Chinese actions in the region have been appearing more and more aggressive. On 5 December 2013 a Chinese naval ship had a tense encounter with an American cruiser in the South China Sea. Both sides kept quiet about it until more than a week later when American officials revealed that their vessel, *USS Cowpens*, had been forced to maneuver to avoid hitting the Chinese ship, which had passed in front. The incident occurred while the American cruiser was watching China’s new and only aircraft-carrier, the *Liaoning*, as it made its first foray into the area, which is driven with competing maritime claims. (The *Liaoning* features in a special issue of four “Chinese dream” postage stamps issued in September; two others show Chinese spacecraft and one a deep-sea submersible.) America lodged protests with

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China about the near-miss in international waters. The encounter is likely to add to American concerns of China trying to claim the sea, a vital trading route, as its backyard.^{vi}

The maritime near-miss came after the announcement on November 23rd of an “Air-Defence Identification Zone” in the East China Sea that would require all aircraft flying through it to report to the Chinese authorities. This enraged Japan, which controls islands within the zone, and was criticized by other countries, including America and South Korea. On December 16th during a visit to Hanoi, America’s secretary of state, John Kerry, said the zone had increased the risk of a “dangerous miscalculation or an accident”. China’s enforcement of it seems to have been scant, but nationalists at home have hailed the move. On the same day as Mr Kerry spoke, China’s defence minister, Chang Wanquan, was in Jakarta, where he said that critics of the zone were causing “a hundred harms and no benefits”.^{vii}

Though China wants to maintain the posture of a responsible country by chanting the slogan of “Peace Loving China”, China’s ambition to live up to the sobriquet “Zhongguo-Middle Kingdom” and claiming their supposedly rightful place on this planet is also no longer a secret. Successful landing of the Jade Rabbit might trigger more and more belligerent behavior from the Dragon’s side. The world in general and Asia in particular, needs to be vigilant.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

End Notes

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