

DIPLOMACY: CHILD'S PLAY FOR UNDERAGE WELCOME PARTY

BEIJING: She is only 10, but Dai Jingya has already come face to face with more heads of state than most people will in their lifetimes. She has rubbed shoulders with Chinese President Xi Jinping four times, and greeted the leaders of Singapore, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Denmark. Dai is one of a group of children culled from Beijing schools to wel-

come the constant stream of foreign dignitaries coming to the capital to pay their respects, alongside People's Liberation Army soldiers and a host of top Chinese officials. The ritual has echoes of both the personality cult rule of Communist founding father Mao Zedong and the way emperors embodied the state in the era of imperial China, experts say.



BEIJING: This photo taken on November 12, 2014 shows children practicing before taking part in an official welcoming ceremony for US President Barack Obama during his visit to the Great Hall of the People. — AFP

In closely choreographed performances that always takes pride of place on the state broadcaster CCTV's main evening news, Xi and his guest first review the honor guard at the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square. Next the pair walk past the phalanx of around 40 children, who on cue burst into ecstatic screams of "Welcome to China" in Chinese and English, jumping up and down waving a Chinese flag in one hand and the visitor's emblem in the other.

"I really like coming here to welcome the foreigners, we get to miss school and sometimes I get to see myself on the evening news," Dai said, waiting under a hot sun for a ceremony to begin. But she has yet to glimpse US president Barack Obama, she said, adding he was the leader "I want to see the most". The welcome ceremonies have a long history, but the presence of children was re-introduced after Xi took power in 2012, following a decades-long gap.

Like an emperor

When then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited China in 1954, he became the first non-Communist leader to visit the People's Republic. It was a crucial endorsement of Mao's rule with the world

order in flux as decolonization and revolution redrew the map, and his host pulled out all the stops in the way only an absolute leader can. About 300,000 people lined the six mile route that the prime minister's limousine took from Beijing's airport to the city, according to a report at the time in London's News Chronicle. "The six miles between the city and airport were walled by unbroken banks of humanity, clapping, cheering and crying," wrote the newspaper's correspondent James Cameron.

Under Mao, smiling children in red neckerchiefs from the Young Pioneers, a Communist Party youth organization, were frequently on hand to welcome foreign leaders. After his death in 1976 and the end of the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, China moved the formal welcome ceremonies from the airport to the Great Hall of the People, and two years later government stopped organizing citizens to line the roads. In 1989, under Jiang Zemin, the protocol department ordered that primary and middle school students would no longer take part in welcoming state visitors. But Xi—who is seen as having acquired more power more quickly than any Chinese leader since Mao—has revived the practice. — AFP

JAPAN LAWMAKERS FIGHT OVER CONTROVERSIAL SECURITY BILLS POLITICIANS CLIMBED ON TOP OF EACH OTHER

TOKYO: Japanese lawmakers scuffled yesterday as they tried—and failed—to stop the security bill that could see the military fight abroad for the first time in decades. Opposition lawmakers climbed on top of one another as they tried to grab the committee chairman's microphone to prevent him calling a vote on the controversial bills.

In scenes uncommon for Japan's normally sedate parliament, the suited committee members lashed out at each other, pushing and shoving in a huge scrum in the second melee of the day. But the mad-dash tactics, which came after hours of tortuous debate, failed to stop them from being approved as members of the ruling coalition stood up to signify their votes in favor.

The bills, which could see Japanese troops fighting abroad for the first time since World War II, are now expected to go to the full upper house later yesterday or today, where they will likely be passed to become law. Some 500 protesters braved wet weather to gather outside parliament in plastic raincoats waving their umbrellas and shouting "stop the bills" as the committee debate rumbled on inside.

Some held up pictures of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a Hitler haircut and moustache. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to vent their anger during almost daily rallies over the past weeks, a show of public feeling on a scale rarely seen in Japan. A total of 13 people were also reportedly arrested on Wednesday evening for "interfering with officers" during a rally that saw an estimated 13,000 people gather outside parliament in Tokyo.

The bills have taken a toll on Abe's once high popularity and opinion polls also show most voters oppose them. Abe and his supporters say the bills are necessary to deal with a changing security environment marked by an increasingly assertive China and unpredictable North Korea. Critics say the changes are unconstitutional and could drag Japan into American wars in far-flung parts of the globe.

'Are you listening?'

Tensions were running high in parliament after the committee vote was repeatedly delayed through Wednesday night, as opposition lawmakers blocked doorways and packed the corridors of parliament in protest. During the committee session, opposition lawmaker Tetsuro Fukuyama made an



TOKYO: Japanese ruling and opposition lawmakers scuffle at the Upper House's ad hoc committee session for the controversial security bills at the National Diet. — AFP

emotional speech outlining why his party had submitted a motion to delay the bills, which could see Japanese troops fight abroad for the first time since World War II.

"Is the ruling party listening to the voices of the public? You can do whatever you want to do because you have a majority—is that what you think?" he said, on the verge of tears. But Masahisa Sato, a senior ruling lawmaker who has promoted the bill, hit back after the bill was approved, saying: "This is

legislation necessary to protect lives and happiness of Japanese people."

Opposition lawmakers were expected to propose a series of censure motions against Abe and his ministers at the plenary session, seen as a delaying tactic that would take hours to finish but will likely be voted down by the ruling bloc. Under the planned changes, the military-known as the Self-Defense Forces would have the option of going into battle to protect allies such as the United States even

if there was no direct threat to Japan itself or its people. Although the constitution, which bars troops from taking part in combat except in pure self-defense, was imposed by US occupiers, many Japanese feel strongly any change in the law would alter the country's pacifist character. Abe is keen to get the bills passed before a three-day holiday next week. The proposed legislation sailed through the lower house—where Abe's coalition commands a two-thirds majority—in July. — AFP