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The Rise of Nationalism in China: Is it a Threat for the CCP?

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established control over China after fighting a major war against Japanese forces and driving out the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang). The CCP argued that the Nationalists were not patriotic but were corrupt and in alliance with Japan. On 1 October 1949 Mao Tse-tung, leader of the CCP, declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) with the pronouncement that, "the Chinese people had stood up".

In subsequent decades, Mao Tse-tung's attempts to adapt communism to China left the country's economy in shambles. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping advocated the reform and opening up of the Chinese economy. Deng advocated economic reform with slogans like "it does not matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it can catch mice". There have been major transformations within the Chinese society in the post reform era. And the economic changes in China have also affected the way the state and society functions and interact today. These changes have also transformed the level of importance which ideology enjoyed.

With rapid economic growth and a shift towards 'capitalism', the CCP has realized that economic growth, not communist ideology, is modern China's binding force.

This has forced the CCP to look for alternative means to attain legitimacy and remain in power. The party realized that providing economic growth and a higher level of living would prevent the emergence of any kind of opposition. However, this hasn't always prevented tumult. The Tiananmen Square events of June 1989 clearly showed that allowing economic reform while opposing political reforms can bring instability.

With time 'nationalism' emerged as a means of ordering compliance. In the backdrop of Tiananmen, the party launched the "patriotic education campaign" in 1991. According to William Callahan, "[t]he solution to this problem, the leaders decided, was to shift the focus of youthful energies away from domestic issues back to foreign problems. A patriotic education policy was formulated not so much to reeducate the youth (as it was in the past), as to redirect protest toward the foreigner as an enemy, as an external Other".¹

As highlighted by Suisheng Zhao, "the basic tenant of this campaign was the current one-party rule would help maintain political stability, a prerequisite for rapid economic development. Pragmatic leaders' assertions that foreign powers were bullying China were an indication that China's backwardness in economic development



should share some blame for its past humiliations and current weakness. Reinforcing China's national confidence and turning past humiliation and current weakness into a driving force for China's modernization, nationalism has become an effective instrument for enhancing the CCP's legitimacy, allowing for it to be redefined on the claim that the regime would provide political stability and economic prosperity".²

Minxin Pei has expressed similar sentiments, arguing that "Chinese nationalism is partly a creation of western imperialism".³ On the other hand, Liu Kang argues that, ideology is what provides the legitimacy to the party. The government is more dependent on nationalism for legitimacy than from the Marxist-Communist ideology.⁴

Another important characteristic of China's newfound nationalism is its orientation against the United States, Japan and Taiwan. In the years following the opening of the Chinese economy the party has used nationalism with respect to foreign policy. In a number of instances the government has stoked nationalism as it realized the benefits to the government. The government has often 'fanned' the perception of discrimination against China whenever the government's popularity ebbs. This argument is further expanded by Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, who have argued that, "[d]riven by nationalist sentiment, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international power, China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia".⁵

Suisheng Zhao argues that Chinese nationalism is a product of top-down and bottom-up forces. He also argues that there are two types of nationalist forces in China, state nationalism and liberal nationalism. State nationalism is supported by the state and is based on the argument that individuals should work towards state and the state speaks for the nation. Liberal nationalism can also be termed as popular nationalism and is primarily driven by the people.⁶

Another important argument that has been put forth by Suisheng Zhao is that the Chinese government has been using the increasing nationalism very pragmatically. The primary aspect of this increase in the level of support and outburst is that the party is trying to use nationalist sentiment in order to keep society and the nation together during the post-communist period. He further adds that the party is aware of the fact that if allowed to grow uncontrolled and non-monitored these sentiments can greatly harm the two most important aspects of Chinese political system: economic development and political stability, the two pillars of CCP legitimacy.⁷

The number of incidents attended by nationalist outbursts has increased of late. This article argues that 'nationalistic' feelings supported by the Chinese state are not always for the wrong-headed. The level of pride the Chinese people experienced during the Olympics and space achievements are genuine. However the ba-

sic problem the Chinese government faces today is the separation of 'bad nationalism' from 'good nationalism'. Scholars argue that nationalism is not constant but ever changing and dynamic. Thus the question arises: With an increase in events and incidents which witness nationalistic outbursts by the Chinese people, has there been a corresponding greater blurring of the line between bad and good nationalism in China? This article discusses both types of nationalism, with regards to a variety of cases.

Belgrade embassy bombing

In May of 1999 NATO bombs hit China's embassy in Belgrade. The United States explained the mistake on account of outdated maps.⁸ Still, the general reaction in China was anger. Chinese state media reported that this was a deliberate attack and the government encouraged discontent. Reports also suggested that the Chinese government helped the students in their protests. University students were allowed to protest and even provided with transportation and other facilities.⁹ Beijing used the public uproar to bolster a hard line approach in its relations with the United States.

Japanese textbook uproar

According to *China Daily*, "in 2005 the Japanese Education Ministry approved the book by Fuso Publishing as one of eight used to teach students aged 13 to 15. (...) These textbooks according to critics "'whitewashes' Japan's past history of aggression".¹⁰ This has been an ongoing issue. The Chinese government has repeatedly demanded that the Japanese should apologize for past offenses. When the Japanese government attempts to defend its decision, Chinese nationalism intensifies. Historic animosities continue to resurface in current bilateral relations.

The textbook announcement also generated huge public outcry. There were major demonstrations throughout China, including as many as 20,000 demonstrators in Beijing. Stone throwers targeted a number of Japanese owned shops and restaurants.¹¹ This is a clear indication of the degree to which nationalist sentiments can gain momentum. Although the two countries have strong economic relations, when it comes to political issues they are constantly at loggerheads. Similar reactions have also been witnessed during the visits by Japanese Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine.¹²

Beijing Olympics

China used the 2008 Olympics, held in Beijing, to showcase its economic development, as well as the strength of China's national unity. Successfully hosting the event was essential for China in extending its diplomatic standing and to highlight its elevated status. As it has been stated by Susan Brownell, "Olympic games promote both nationalism and internationalism".¹³ The government took major precautions in order to avoid mishaps that



might have tarnished its image. Upheaval in Tibet, which happened before the Olympics and during the torch relay, was greatly criticized by the party controlled media and was seen as an attempt to tarnish China's image. International sympathy towards the Tibetan people was also criticized by Beijing as a foreign attempt to block China's road to international glory. The Chinese government utilized these sentiments to take a strong stand against its problematic minority regions, especially Tibet and Xinjiang.

Space achievements

China has made strides in the space arena, establishing itself as leading space faring nation in the past decade. The Chinese space program has a strong security and strategic component attached to it. On the other hand, China's space programme also has a strong economic component. Still, the Chinese government has always portrayed the Chinese achievements in space as 'national accomplishments' and has used them to garner public support.

As quoted by *Voice of America*, popular Chinese sentiment includes opinions like, "the technology of this Tiangong-1 is more advanced than America's space technology when they were doing this".¹⁴ As it has been rightly highlighted by Stuart Wiggin, "amid reports of an economic slowdown and as domestic issues arise which may draw ire from some sections of society, the Chinese space program is a perfect way to reignite the nationalist, patriotic spirit of the people which ensures that development in China remains peaceful both socially and politically".¹⁵

Analysis

The CCP is undertaking a very tough balancing act. It encourages nationalist sentiment when it is favorable while it controls and monitors nationalism whenever it perceives a threat to its objectives. This act may prove problematic for the party in the future. However the actions of the party show that it is fully aware of this task and plans to manage popular sentiment while working toward an enhanced international standing, especially with regard to the United States and Japan.

The development of the new media systems in the post reform period, especially after the withdrawal of the subsidies and the introduction of cell phone and the Internet has further complicated the situation. The media is 'more' free and active as it has to survive in a competitive environment. Media outlets are now continuously defying party norms and publishing articles they independently deem to be important. In addition it is becoming increasingly tough for the party to monitor websites. Though the government is investing heavily in the 'great Chinese firewall'¹⁶ it is becoming increasingly difficult for the party to control the flow of information.

However, nationalism has greatly helped Beijing craft foreign policy, especially with respect to United States. Beijing has used nationalist sentiment at home as reason for not negotiating on a number of international issues.

Another important aspect of this debate is a growing militaristic stance, which the party has adopted with respect to Taiwan. The party could showcase its displeasure during the first democratic elections on Taiwan by firing across the Taiwan Straits. Since then, the party has proclaimed it will attack Taiwan in case it formally declares independence. The nationalistic discourse attached to Chinese 'reunification' does not leave much room for bilateral diplomacy. Indeed, this is one aspect of Chinese diplomacy which is highly controlled by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Internet and nationalism

There has been a steady increase in the number of web users in China since the 1990s. In 2012 the number of Internet users in China reached 505 million.¹⁷ The average Internet user is young and educated. According to Minxin Pei, "young, urban, and educated Chinese are more nationalistic and they are the ones using the Internet".¹⁸ The Chinese people visit the Internet when they require information about major news developments. They know that the print and other form of media is filtered by the government and thus there is a general perception that the Internet has free and uncensored information. With an increase in the number of people accessing the Internet it is becoming tough for the Chinese government to control the type and level of information available to the people. Even though the government has invested large amount of money in developing filters, known as the 'great Chinese firewall', the Chinese people have managed to device ways to gain information. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese government is concerned about this burst of information. The general rule as per a communist state is that the government decides on the level and kind of information available to the people. However this major tool of control is getting weaker. This is a major cause of concern for the CCP and especially so since the Internet is also the place where the Chinese people debate and discuss the nationalistic feelings.

According to *BBC News* reports, "China's nationalists are often critical of their own government too, saying it is weak, not doing enough to stand up for China's interests".¹⁹ One of the most prominent examples is the petition against the Japanese bid to join the United Nations Security Council. According to reports, around 22 million Chinese signed an online petition against such a bid.²⁰ Indeed, in the last few years the Internet has been used to garner support for various causes and the importance of this trend can also be gauged from the fact that the top leadership in China is also focusing on Internet debates. For example, on 20 June 2008, Hu Jintao interacted with Chinese Internet users through the People's Daily Online.²¹

Examples of nationalist outburst

There has been in the past some major outbursts of nationalistic feelings which have great impact in terms of



foreign business concerns in China. The international business community is constantly treading a very thin line and has to be constantly on guard not to 'hurt' the nationalistic feelings of the Chinese people. With an increase in the overall economic strength of China there has also been an increase in the level of nationalistic outburst against international business entities. To quote a few examples, as argued by Emily Parker, "in 2004, Nike ran an ad on the mainland that featured American basketball star LeBron James battling, and defeating, Chinese symbols such as dragons and a kung-fu master. Secondly Toyota ended up pulling and formally apologizing for advertisements featuring stone lions bowing to a Prado SUV. The issue was that lions, ancient symbols of Chinese power, were bowing to a Japanese product. Several years before that, some Chinese accused Toshiba of treating them as inferior because, following accusations of a laptop defect, the company compensated US consumers but not their Chinese counterparts. This led to a major drop in sales in China".²²

Party and nationalism

The Chinese state selectively promotes nationalism among the Chinese people. The major factor behind this is the general fear among ruling elite that the masses should not rally under any other banner except the one supported by the party. With a decline in ideology adherence over the last six decades, the Chinese government has shifted its focus from communist ideology to economic growth. However things have not progressed smoothly. There has been a general increase in discontent amongst the people with respect to income inequality. As argued by Susan Shirk, "the worst nightmare of China's leaders is a national protest movement of discontent groups-unemployed workers, hard pressed farmers and students-united against the regime by the shared fervor of nationalism".²³ She also quotes the views of a PLA general: "demonstrations against the Belgrade Embassy bombing or against Japan aren't really about foreign policy. They are the result of an accumulation of people's grievances against the Chinese government, just the same as in the Qing Dynasty and the Republican government. They are not really anti-foreign. Demonstrations on foreign policy actually reflect domestic politics".²⁴

To sustain its legitimacy, the party is using the nationalist feelings of the people. But with the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor, this nationalism could backfire. The party has to constantly try to direct these feelings. It has managed to keep them under control until now, but the future course that Chinese nationalism will take remains unclear. As has been highlighted by Will Hutton, "Chinese communism and Chinese nationalism are an uneasy coalition; the more nationalism gains upper hand in an authoritarian state, the more China will want to behave according to its own criteria".²⁵ The argument is further strengthened by David Shambaugh when

he states that, "as China grows strong, Chinese nationalism grows stronger".²⁶ In the words of Michel C. Oksenberg, Michael D. Swaine and Daniel C. Lynch, "this rhetorical nationalism is a two-edged sword. The use of nationalistic appeals appears to rally the populace behind the leaders. But it makes the leaders captives of the sentiments they have cultivated, probably reduces their own flexibility on these issues, and surely alienates the objects of their wrath".²⁷ The impact of this nationalist sentiment on foreign policy has been rightly articulated by Suisheng Zhao in the statement that, "this nationalism has also driven China's foreign policy in a more irrational and inflexible direction".²⁸ However as a counter argument one can also cite Suisheng Zhao, who deems that "Beijing talks tough but acts in a highly calculated manner".²⁹

Moreover, it would not be wrong to argue that nationalism plays a very critical role in foreign policy as well as the domestic policy discourses in China today. To a certain degree, the government is bound to try and appease the people's nationalistic sentiments, even though it seems that with passage of time this may limit the space of the government to enjoy leeway in policy making (both foreign and domestic). As more as these sentiments gain strength and prominence, they may take anti-party, anti-government shape, given that most of the grievances which the Chinese people face today are connected to the functioning of the government and the party.

The general perception and feeling among scholars is that the PRC will get trapped in a problem of its own creation. To date it has been successful in keeping the attention of the nationalists upsurge focused on some foreign 'enemy', often the United States and Japan. However, with the increase in the number of problems which the Chinese society is facing, from corruption, environmental degradation to income inequality, general discontent is on the rise. In the last year, according to Sun Liping, Chinese society witnessed around 180,000 protests.³⁰ With an increase in the level of discontentment and illusion with the rule of the party, the masses might rally against it. Nationalism can become a unifying force if the masses happen to regard the party as not working for the people. The historical Chinese understanding of 'mandate of heaven' can be used by the people in order to oust the rule of the Communist Party and replace it with a system that they regard as worthy of ruling. As has been argued by Peter Hays Gries, the difference in response by the PRC to Diaoyu protestors 1996 and Belgrade bombing demonstrators in 1999 showcases a shift "from suppression and towards co-optation", thus reflecting "the emergence of a popular nationalism that is increasingly challenging the Party-state".³¹

Conclusion

The article argued that the fears of the CCP with respect to nationalism are becoming more apparent. To



date the Chinese government had used the sentiments of the people in order to achieve its goals. However with the increasing problems within the society and economy, the government has realized that 'nationalism' could be used against it. The Chinese government has realized that there is a need to work towards controlling this as it may hurt its viability. The idea to associate nationalism with almost each and every achievement can become problematic for the party. The party is creating a very strong sense that China is succeeding and is on its way to becoming a superpower in both economic and military realms. The problem is how people will react in case of failure. Will the Chinese people be in a situation to forgive the party if it fails to deliver what it has set to achieve and has told the people that it is their right to gain? Constant failure of the CCP to check the grievances of the people can force the 'nationalist' forces to look for alternatives. As a creation of the CCP, nationalism may just prove the cause of its ultimate downfall.

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