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## Chinese nationalism in the global era

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## **The Resurgence of Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era**

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After joining the WTO and aligning with the United States in the War on Terror China has been accepted as a major force in the global economic and security systems. With the 2008 Olympic Games scheduled for Beijing, it is also on the way to establishing a newly respectable cultural status. Yet incidents such as the anti-Japanese protests that rocked Shanghai last spring still raise questions about the kind of society China is becoming. How the rise of popular nationalism might influence its foreign policy is an issue of particular concern.

It can be argued that the resurgence of Chinese nationalism that has taken place since the mid-1990s is a 'bottom up' phenomenon— with popular opinion constraining the options open to decision makers. On the one hand, China's leaders and academics go to great lengths to present the 'rise of China' as 'peaceful' and emphasise 'good neighbourliness' in forging relations with neighbouring states. On the other hand, popular writers win their place in a burgeoning commercial market by speaking ominously about 'China under the shadow of globalization', or despair over the lack of national self-confidence that is revealed by the proliferation in Chinese streets of signs advertising 'China's Long Island,' and 'The Manhattan of the East'. Whenever tensions rise with Washington, Tokyo or Taipei, Chinese Internet bulletin boards are bombarded by correspondents demanding their government adopt a tougher stance.

The demonstrations last year were merely the latest in a stream of such outbreaks against Japan and the United States, starting with the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-6 and running through the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

Such a 'bottom up' interpretation has to be called into question, however, by the particular nature of China's ideological and institutional systems. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has placed nationalism at the centre of its claim to maintain a monopoly on political power ever since the days of Mao Zedong's leadership. For decades the Party has consistently claimed that its credentials as the saviour and guardian of a nation threatened and humiliated by a coalition of enemies within and abroad is what entitles it to hold a monopoly on political power. Rather than disappear with Mao's demise, the narrative of the CCP leading the nation to victory in the war against Japan and the struggle with the Nationalists in the Civil War has been given new significance during the period of 'reform and opening' that began in the late 1970s. At the heart of the ideological orthodoxy of 'Deng Xiaoping Theory' lies a call for loyalty to the nation rather than class struggle and socialist egalitarianism. And according to ideological orthodoxy, loyalty to the nation means loyalty to the CCP.

An important aspect of this strengthening of the nationalistic elements of CCP ideology is the need to suppress popular calls for political reform that have accompanied the departure from socialist egalitarianism and class struggle. When Deng crushed calls for democracy during the 'Beijing Spring' of 1979 he insisted that what the 'scarred generation' of the Cultural Revolution needed was not democracy but a revival of the patriotic values that had been cherished by the young in the days

before and after Liberation. Dissidents were condemned as the lackeys of enemy foreign powers.

This use of patriotism to legitimate the CCP dictatorship under ‘reform and opening’ is what makes demonstrators and dissidents attempt to legitimate their own positions by capturing the patriotic high ground. In response, the CCP has to constantly reinforce its own nationalistic credentials. This was most evident when a ‘patriotic education campaign’ was launched after the Tiananmen Massacre, deploying emotive memories of the ‘hundred years of humiliation’ that began with the Opium War in 1840 and finished with the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Special emphasis was given to recalling the war against Japan and the civil war with the Nationalists, with traumatic events such as the Rape of Nanjing singled out to remind the population that the CCP is the party of national salvation.

Yet despite this ratcheting up of patriotic emotions under ‘reform and opening’, the CCP leadership has also had to ensure that its version of nationalism is compatible with the economic requirements of attracting foreign investment and know-how. This dilemma goes back at least as far as the attempts by Confucianist reformers of the nineteenth century to preserve the imperial system by using foreign ‘functional knowledge’ (*yong*) to preserve Chinese essence (*ti*). It can currently be seen in such programs as the claim to be building a Chinese ‘socialist spiritual civilisation’, or ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. While such a formula can appeal to conservatives who want to combat ‘spiritual pollution’ and ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ from abroad, it can also be calibrated to allow the incorporation of fashionable themes such as the ‘world scientific and technological revolution’.

The overall result is a peculiar globalisation of nationalism that allows some sense to be made of oxymoronic concepts like the ‘socialist market economy’. It also provides an ideological justification for the emergence of an elitist techno-nationalism appropriate for the current generation of leaders. This was systematically formulated as Party orthodoxy when the theory of the ‘Three Represents’, coined by then CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin, was put alongside Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as an element of the Party line at the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002. Social groups that have arisen under the impact of market mechanisms and the belief that science and education can ‘rejuvenate the nation’ have been given a new political status as entrepreneurs, technical personnel, and managers of non-public and foreign enterprises have been recognised as ‘builders of socialism with Chinese characteristics’, allowing them to join the CCP.

This globalistic nationalism, however, also remains open to appropriation by actors who feel it is their duty to speak out for those whose security and welfare are being eroded under ‘reform and opening’, including many of the ‘intellectuals’ and educators upon whom the Party relies to safeguard and disseminate its orthodoxy. Since the mid-1980s there has been a strong tendency for demonstrators angry over issues ranging from corruption to bad campus food to identify themselves with iconic nationalistic student movements from the past, frequently choosing to bring their activities to a head on the anniversaries of well-known patriotic movements. Those who demonstrated in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 identified themselves with the May Fourth patriotic student movement, so-named after the demonstrations on that date in Peking in 1919, expressing outrage against the weakness of a

government that allowed the transfer of German territorial possessions in China to Japan at the Paris Peace Conference. This is one reason why the Chinese authorities decided to stop the anti-Japanese demonstrations before the arrival of 4 May last year.

Growing discontent has meant that nationalist politics has been fed into broader public discussions of key policy areas, especially as the Internet and a commercialised publishing industry have opened up new spaces for dissent. Yet it is the particular characteristics of the CCP version of nationalism that gives such protest its broader significance. At the root of this linkage is the way in which Deng Xiaoping Theory justifies economic reform by making it the condition for successfully opposing ‘international hegemony’ and bringing about the ‘unification of the motherland with Taiwan’. When Deng listed these goals as the ‘three main historical tasks’ for the CCP leadership in January 1980, he created a linkage between areas of policy-making that has become a hostage to fortune for his successors.

The use by the CCP elite of symbols of the great Han cultural tradition to appeal for domestic unity, for example, does not sit well with the official policy towards the non-Han groups in the border areas of Tibet and Xinjiang that the PRC is a multi-national state in which all ethnic groups are equal. Conversely, many residents of Taiwan and Hong Kong reject the reduction of patriotism to loyalty to the CCP by using democratic notions of sovereignty when they are appeals to on the basis that they are all ‘descendants of the Yellow Emperor’.

Since 1998, when the Beijing municipal authorities prohibited demonstrations against atrocities committed against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, balancing the patriotic

rhetoric that the CCP aims at its domestic audience has become particularly difficult to reconcile with the conduct of foreign policy. For neighbouring states, the credibility of China's 'peaceful rise' has to be put in the balance with popular demonstrations against Japan and the United States, the refusal to rule out the use of force to unify with Taiwan and a rapid arms build-up. The current Chinese leaders now faces the nightmare scenario of a presidential election in Taiwan in March 2008 (and probably a referendum related to the island's international status), just before the Olympic Games that year. From this perspective, the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations are just a blip in a much broader and longer-term struggle over the legitimacy of CCP leadership.

It is true that such challenges can be seen as the result of 'bottom up' pressures from an increasingly restive population. However, such problems could not be used by a variety of actors if China's leaders did not themselves constantly deploy the nationalistic elements of 'Deng Xiaoping Theory' to legitimate the rule of a communist party overseeing the introduction of market-based reforms. There has been much speculation over whether or not democratisation would encourage the rise of an aggressive Chinese nationalism and convincing predictions can be made both ways. Yet what is clear from the history of 'reform and opening' to date is that the dependence of a one-party state presiding over market oriented reforms for its political legitimacy is what gives nationalist politics in China its current significance. Movement towards a more democratic claim to power is one of the conditions for reducing that dependence.