

Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy: A Cause for Concern or Patriot Games?

Written by Benjamin William Moles

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Opening Pandora's Box. Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy: A Cause for Concern or Patriot Games?

"Why does the dog wag its tail? Because the dog is smarter than the tail. If the tail were smarter, it would wag the dog." [1]

"Sometimes the wildest notion, the most apparently impossible idea, takes such a firm hold of the mind that at length it is taken for something realisable... More than that: if the idea coincides with a strong and passionate desire, it may sometimes be accepted as something predestined, inevitable, foreordained, something that cannot but exist or happen!" [2]

Western analysts and historians are cognisant of the central and devastating role nationalism has played in the shaping of twentieth century world history; the negative connotations that resonate from the word 'nationalism' today stems from our experience of the past. [3] However, it would be a certain mistake to transfer our understanding of nationalism from the early twentieth century European experience and from it, and through its application, extrapolate conclusions for what nationalism means within the modern Chinese context. It is necessary to understand the origins and multiple forms of Chinese nationalism, the extent to which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controls nationalism and the *actual* impact and influence nationalism has on the formulation of Chinese foreign policy. To paraphrase von Clausewitz, it is important to understand the essence of China's unique form of nationalism; not mistaking it for, or try to turn it into something it is not. The danger for not heeding this advice, from a Western policy perspective, is the production of faulty analysis and perhaps erroneous policy calculations- that have potential disastrous consequences.

This essay investigates the relationship and *actual* impact Chinese nationalism has on the formulation of Chinese foreign policy and seeks to determine whether nationalism is a 'Pandora's box' and problematic 'cause for concern'- that it is an uncontrolled key determinate driver of Chinese foreign policy or whether it is in fact one of multiple factors in the Chinese foreign policy calculation, and is merely a tool carefully controlled and manipulated by the CCP to serve its own end, 'Patriot games.' This essay will do this predominantly using realism as a theoretical lens as it has historically been and remains the dominant International Relations (IR) perspective in China: [4] viewing the state as the primary actor; state sovereignty and survival as the states principal interest and understanding that in an anarchic international system a strong powerful and unified state capable of resisting exogenous interference is the best means of achieving this end.

The essay will explore and answer the question in three stages. Firstly, an investigation into the emergence of China's nationalism, its historical context and understanding the role it plays in defining broad security and foreign policy themes; looking at the transition from a heterogenous empire, unified through 'Chinese civilisation', to nation state and the post-1989 recognition and need for a unifying ideological replacement to supplement Marxist-Leninist-

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Maoist Communism. Secondly, an examination of the various manifestations of nationalism extant in China: ethnic nationalism, nativism, anti-traditionalism, Liberal nationalism and pragmatic nationalism. Finally, an analysis of just how China *actually* formulates its foreign policy and how, if at all, and to what extent, the dominant form of nationalism, 'pragmatic' nationalism,[5] *actually* impacts on Chinese foreign policy calculations.

To conclude this essay will demonstrate that the CCP pragmatically controls nationalism. As the highest representatives of a hierarchical authoritarian state, the CCP hold and maintain a monopoly on violence and the use of force, balanced with a historically demonstrated willingness to use it against its citizens, a citizenry of whom are acutely aware of this. Furthermore, the state propaganda machine and its control of, and access to, information reinforce and strengthen the fundamental and absolute control of the state.[6] Concerning the current status of Chinese nationalism and its *actual* impact on Chinese foreign policy, it remains 'the dog that wags the tail' and not *visa versa*; nationalism, for now, very much represents a demonstration and expression of 'Patriot Games'. However, and a caveat to add to this, is that a continued exploitation of this tool by the CCP coupled with any degree of democratic political liberalisation could certainly and dangerously transform Chinese nationalism into a 'Pandora's Box' that eventuates in the 'tail wagging the dog'.

Understanding What We Mean

Importantly, it is necessary to define the terms nationalism and patriotism and to understand that, despite at their core, both appearing to represent similar ideals, both are primarily used for political ends to label states' behaviour as to conform to a pre-conceived idea. The Oxford English dictionary defines *Nationalism* as a patriotic feeling, a policy of national independence; and *Patriotism* as a zealous defence of ones country's prosperity and freedom. Both are interconnected and permeate an expression of a *love of country*, although nationalism does so with negative connotations and patriotism with positive connotations.

Alexander Wendt outlined a framework for constructivist social theory in 1992. A fundamental principle of his theory is that people's actions towards objects, or other actors, are based on the meanings that they personally assign to them; "States act differently towards enemies as they do friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not".[7] Similarly, whether we label an expression of *love of country* as nationalistic or patriotic is dependant on how we construct the other. This essay argues that in large part, and to paraphrase Wendt, Chinese nationalism or patriotism will remain what we decide make of it.

Historical Context: The Emergence of Chinese Nationalism

A key determinate factor in the construction of Chinese foreign policy, essential to understanding Chinese *weltanschauung* (philosophy of life and conception of the world) and China's largely defensive security outlook (from the construction of the 'Great Wall' to the 'Great fire-wall' of China) is an appreciation of China's unique history,[8] from which nationalism emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century. Central to understanding the construct of Chinese security and foreign policy is that history really does matter.

The concept of nationalism did not exist in China prior to the nineteenth century. A pre-nineteenth century China existed as a heterogeneous Empire unified through its 5000 year old 'Great Civilization'[9]- a values based cultural entity fused through culturalism.[10] China existed as a Confucian hierarchical ordered state. Chinese *weltanschauung* centred on China as the Middle Kingdom from which reverberated and radiated Chinese centric spheres of influence commonly known as the tributary system; influence was greater closer to its core and lesser on its periphery.[11] During this period Chinese international relations were conducted as an extension of Chinese domestic policy, a position that would only change during the nineteenth century. Then, China was forced to re-evaluate its self perceived position as the centre of world power as Chinese sovereignty became increasingly eroded by expansionist imperialist European nation states,[12] particularly after the Opium Wars of the 1840's.

John Merson, *et al*, argues that it was at Versailles in 1919 that Chinese modern state-centred nationalism was born.[13] At the conclusion of World War I China anticipated that German concessions in Shandong would be restored to them, however, China was both shocked and angered to discover they were to be conceded to Japan.

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China awoke to the realist contention concerning the systemic condition and nature of the Western constructed Westphalian nation state system; that in great power politics the strong do as they will while the weak suffer what they must. This culminated with the first Tiananmen Square riots and mass expression of nationalistic out-pouring on May 4th 1919, and a realisation that to compete in this new world order, China needed to develop into a modern nation state.

Fruition of this goal, largely hindered by the ideologically motivated isolationist policies of Mao Zedong, was only actively pursued after 1978 under the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Deng sought to open China up under his 'open door policy' recognising that domestic stability was essential to the survival of the ruling regime, as was economic integration within the existing world order, and that a state of perpetual revolution was not conducive to achieving this end.

However pragmatic, Deng's policy equated to too great an ideological concessional shift culminating in the 1989 Tiananmen Square riots where students demanded democratic liberalisation, forcing a violent government reaction to secure its own primary interest, survival of the CCP ruled political system.[14]

What was realised post 1989 was that Communist ideology could no longer be the dependant unifying ideological force that had sustained CCP one party rule from the inception of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 and that maintaining the CCP position would require a replacement. A conscientious decision was undertaken by the party leadership at the time, and maintained today, that pragmatic nationalism would supplement Communism tethering the people to the state and by proxy the party.[15]

Prior to a further in-depth analysis of pragmatic nationalism and its exploitation by the CCP as a tool of statecraft it is essential to understand three historic lenses through which China views its international environment. These help form a narrative defining China's broad core security and foreign policy interests, within which Chinese history and nationalism remain imperative.[16] Firstly, National Revitalisation, or Rejuvenation: China is a 5000 year old civilization whose turbulent history has given rise to a more highly attuned sense of destiny than is apparent in other countries. Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong believes "The rise of China is granted by nature... [The Chinese] believe China's decline is a historical mistake which they should correct".[17] Secondly, a Victim mentality: Stemming from the 'Century of humiliation' the CCP has successfully fostered the victim narrative as a nationalistic unifying force, explaining China's endogenous problems as having their origins in malevolent exogenous forces. Mao, in his 1949 'China Stands up' speech declared "...ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation".[18] Thirdly, a defensive security outlook: Cognisant that throughout China's history its greatest threats have emerged endogenously and have been compacted by exogenous interference.[19] The CCP recognises the interconnection of both and so seeks to create a secure external environment in order to maintain and focus on internal security and development. Thus explaining the significance China places on policies that maximise peripheral security and territorial integrity and repeated confidence building measures to assure China's neighbours concerning the benign nature of 'China's rise.'

This demonstrates the significance and interconnection of history and nationalism to the broad themes influencing Chinese security and foreign policy goals. Different strands of nationalism have historically influenced, but never solely driven, Chinese foreign policy. The modern nationalistic goal has always been a restoration of China to its historical position of greatness. However, the strategy, or means, for achieving this is contested by advocates of competing forms of nationalism. Despite the CCP focus on and utilisation of pragmatic nationalism, it is necessary to understand the other forms extant and competing, in China to understand why.

China's Competing Nationalisms

The earliest expression of nationalism in China was ethnic nationalism, a divisionary form of nationalism based on ethnicity. Utilised by the Han in the early twentieth century to overthrow the ruling Manchu dynasty it was quickly established as a divisionary and fractious tool, considering the Chinese Empire consisted of 56 recognised ethnic groups[20] and modified to encompass a broader Chinese nationalism, recognising the whole to be greater than the sum of its individual parts.[21]

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Suisheng Zhao has classified Chinese nationalism and identifies four core groupings: anti-traditional, nativist, liberal nationalism, and pragmatic nationalism.[22] Anti-traditional nationalism, analysing recent Chinese history, maintains that the source of China's weakness and century of humiliation was endogenous, and China's stringent adherence to Chinese traditions was to blame. Adherents seek a rejection of Chinese culturalism in favour of Western cultural, economic, and political models. In direct contrast to anti-traditional nationalism the nativist school believes Deng's 'open door policy' to have "...cost China its socialist integrity, corroded its culture with negative foreign influences, and compromised China's sovereignty and autonomy in world affairs".[23] It views exogenous forces impeding China's restoration to its rightful 'Great Power' status.

Zhao claims that post 1989, the two aforementioned nationalisms have found their expression through Liberal nationalism. Liberal nationalism is Janus faced. It seeks the promotion of China's national interests in the arena of international politics and increased individual rights in the domestic political realm. It exogenously identifies Western powers that seek to contain China as an existential threat, while at the same time indicating that the CCP constitute an endogenous challenge and threat to China's rise.

Liberal nationalism represents a challenge to the CCP's monopoly on power. Through state patriotic education during the 1990's and advancing pragmatic nationalism as a tool of statecraft, the CCP today, has successfully created a state focussed and centred on patriotic nationalism. Identifying the CCP with the nation state makes criticism of the CCP unpatriotic; "Nationalism has been used to rally popular support behind a less popular regime and its policies by creating a sense of community among citizens".[24] But, just what is pragmatic nationalism, how does China construct foreign policy, and what influence does nationalism actually have on Chinese foreign policy?

Pragmatic Nationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy

China has a long history of authoritarian rule that has penetrated every facet of society, from the early Emperors to the present governing elite. Indeed it could be argued that the CCP represent a modern manifestation of a traditional dynastic succession and that the extant political system is a continuation of the ancient Confusion hierarchical order. Realism contends that the primary concern of the state is to ensure its very survival and is a manifest responsibility conveyed on those whom claim political legitimacy to rule. Under the 'Mandate of Heaven' authority to rule was granted by balancing social, economic, and cosmological harmony and this relevance resonates today.[25]

China's currently defined core national interests, proclaimed by state councillor Dai Bingguo are "... defending its fundamental systems and national security, preserving national sovereignty and unification and maintaining the steady and sustainable development of its economy and society".[26] These, similarly to the aforementioned metrics under the 'Mandate of Heaven' are mutually reinforcing policies conveying legitimacy to rule. Imperatively important to the CCP is maintaining its position as sole political power in China. China's stated core interests provide metrics by which CCP performance is measured.[27] The CCP remains cognisant that achieving the long-term goal of China's revival to 'Great Power' status can only be realised through maintaining territorial unity and key to this is a content society with economic opportunities. All are interconnected; removing one aspect from this trinity would have dire consequences for the others.

Pragmatic nationalism is a CCP manipulated tool of statecraft. It is the dominant form of Chinese nationalism and is essentially state orchestrated, goal orientated, and Machiavellian in that the end it seeks, CCP maintenance of power, justifies the means by which it is achieved. Zhao identifies three characteristics of pragmatic nationalism: *instrumentality*, its use as a tool of statecraft; *state-centeredness*, the state, and by proxy the CCP, is the referent object to be secured, and *reactiveness*; that it is fluid and responsive to issues vital to securing national interest and not religious dogma or political ideology.[28] Since 1989 pragmatic nationalism has become the cohesive, unifying, substitute for ideology in China.[29] Pragmatic nationalists are flexible in their approach to foreign policy calculations. Through the application of a *realpolitik* cost-benefit analysis to specific issues they ultimately seek non-confrontation, recognising that national interests can be furthered through working with and not against the norms of the international system. However, on matters pertinent to securing China's vital interests, for example, sovereignty and territorial disputes like Taiwan, there can be no compromise, recognising that the CCP's own legitimacy to rule is interconnected to successful policy outcomes in these areas.

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Evan Medeiros posits a pyramid framework for analysing just how Chinese foreign policy is actually calculated. At its base, China has long-term diplomatic priorities, including protecting sovereignty, economic development, and achieving international respect. At the next tier is China's foreign policy outlook, this is determined by historical experience, the aforementioned three lens' of rejuvenation, the century of humiliation, and a defensive security outlook. China then considers perceptions of the changing international security environment, key is the link between China's prosperity with that of the international community and uncertainty concerning the impact of threats on China's vital interests. Factoring these considerations, China subsequently formulates its foreign policy objectives. Finally, at the pyramids apex, Chinese foreign policy actions reflect a *realpolitik* cost-benefit analysis on how best to achieve these objectives.[30] Nationalism is a central and important component within China's foreign policy outlook, however, is not a determinate driver of Chinese foreign policy *per se*.

In contrast to China under the leadership of the omnipotent Mao, today authority over foreign policy construction and key decisions is fractured and fragmented amongst a plethora of competing agencies and powerful individuals, including the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministries of Commerce, State Security and Finance, the National Development and Reform Commission and, perhaps to a lesser degree than many analysts might contend, the Peoples Liberation Army.[31] However, these are pragmatic agencies staffed and lead by individuals that recognise the inextricable interconnection between foreign policy and domestic policy, and that their individual positions of power can only be maintained through domestic stability. Chinese foreign policy is *actually*, and inherently therefore, an extension of domestic policy that ultimately seeks domestic stability above all else. It is pragmatically recognised that foreign policy being dictated by the demands of an aggressive nationalistic populous would be detrimental to this end.

Outside China, concern over the impact of nationalism on Chinese foreign policy is overstated. It must be understood that there is a vast difference between rhetoric aimed at a domestic audience and international behavioural actions. Chinese leaders are pragmatic and, when forced to choose, will pursue a pragmatic policy that maintains economic stability over pursuit of nationalist goals;[32] "Talking tough but acting prudently is the pragmatists' way".[33]

The CCP exercises control over two key areas that enable the effective management of public nationalist sentiment: a monopoly on force and demonstrated willingness to use it to suppress its citizenry, coupled with high level media and technology control.[34] In reaction to last years 'Jasmine Revolutions' in the Middle-East, the CCP demonstrated a more vehement determination to crack down on internal dissent. During the 2011 National Peoples Congress it was determined that China would devote more financial resources to internal security and resisting internal security threats than to the PLA and traditional external security threats, \$95 billion and \$91.5 billion respectively.[35] Outside China there is an increasing discourse concerning the impact of 'netizens' within China, a reference to China's 420 million internet users and bloggers.[36] However, the means by which information is accessed and disseminated and what information is available is tightly regulated by the CCP. Control measures include the use of internet monitoring systems, the 'great firewall of China', shutting down publications or websites deemed inappropriate, and the deterrent act of jailing dissident journalists and blogger-activists. In 2005, in response to planned May 4th anti-Japanese demonstrations the CCP went so far as to send text messages to mobile phone users in major cities warning against partaking in such illegal demonstrations.[37]

As a tool of statecraft, the CCP can and, indeed, has manipulated popular nationalism as a political signalling mechanism-encouraging it in order to strengthen China's position *vis-à-vis* other states. Exemplary is the anti-US demonstrations following the Belgrade Chinese Embassy bombing in 1999, with a more recent example being the 2010 anti-Japanese demonstrations, a response to increased tension between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.[38] A democratic government can excuse its policy actions, or inaction, as being reflective and conforming to the demands and expectations of its electorate; an authoritarian government like the CCP cannot. Public expressions such as those demonstrated and allowed subsequent to the Embassy incident, and the 2010 anti-Japanese demonstrations, enable a CCP explanation of constrained government action and limited manoeuvrability more reflective of the will of its people. However, such displays of public nationalism that would indeed prove problematic in a democracy are not so, to the same extent in China – China is no democracy. The CCP was implicit in allowing a government controlled reaction to the bombing of their embassy in Belgrade to manifest into violence directed at the US embassy in Beijing, the CCP "...allowed for a limited level of demonstrations, and, when it

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considered that that level had been reached, it had the power to halt them right away”.[39] This is demonstrative of both the absolute power the CCP wields in China and the CCP’s use of controlled nationalism for ‘Patriot Games.’

Conclusion

In China, Pandora’s Box has certainly been opened and Chinese nationalism cannot be restored to it, nationalism is very much part of the modern Chinese psyche and consciousness. Although it has been argued that nationalism is not *the* current determinate factor steering Chinese foreign policy, and that Chinese expression of nationalism is in large part a reflection of government controlled ‘patriot games,’ two instances could certainly transform nationalism into a cause for concern leading to a scenario eventuating in the tail wagging the dog.

Firstly, democratic political liberalisation, leading to lessening of restraint over media and information freedom and weakening in government use of force as a suppressive control measure, could compel a Chinese government to become more sensitive and responsive to the nationalistic demands of its people. Secondly, an abject failure on behalf of the CCP to secure China’s defined core national interests could lead to a nationalist inspired uprising or a determined push for an assertive militaristic response from nationalist elements within the CCP, or PLA, similarly to the 1996 Taiwan-straits crisis, or the 2001 EP3 incident.[40]

However, for the time being, the CCP’s absolute power remains absolute and the impact of nationalism on Chinese foreign policy calculations should not be overstated. Nationalism, to utilise a Chinese proverb, causes “a lot of thunder, but little rain”.[41] Furthermore, it should be remembered that perceptions matter:[42] Chinese patriotism or nationalism will very much remain what we, the outside observer, decide to make of it, and cognisant of this Western policy should not seek to create a realist self-fulfilling prophecy.

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[23] Shambaugh, p.10.

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[25] Merson, p.37.

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