

Nov. 24. Session 9, Nationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy

The authors here demonstrate how different sources, analytical methods and the historical juncture or paradigm in which a paper is written lead to divergent perspectives on Chinese nationalism and its effect on Chinese foreign policy. The authors diverge on how much political control and oversight of nationalist sentiment the Politburo effectively holds. The review here focuses on Xiaolin's (2017) statement that 'Chinese nationalism is not simply an elite instrument, but has deeply political, historical, cultural and external origins' which requires more systematic empirical study, contrasted to the event-driven approach of Weiss (2013) and Reilly (2013) who examine the intensity and propagation of nationalist sentiment in the Diaoyu protests of 2013. On the one hand, unifying the two approaches requires deconstructing the rational actor model of Chinese foreign policy toward a time-sensitive pressure model where hot cognition perspectives and prospect theory inform how the CCP interact with the public in situational crises. On the other hand, understanding nationalism in China requires generating new time-series data that explores nationalist sentiment as a heterogeneous phenomenon. An interesting question is raised by Xiaolin (2017) of how representative data-sets of Chinese nationalism are or whether selective capture over-represents the extremes and under-represents more moderate nationalists, anti-nationalists, centrists, and a lot of other apolitical people in China. In particular, this inability for western scholars to see the emergence of a 'rational public' in China might be a result of the Great Firewall, a linguistic void, or inertial heuristics of how an 'authoritarian' foreign policy-polity nexus works.

For structural realists and neoliberal institutionalists, domestic society and politics do not matter: it is the system-level relations among nations, such as the balance of power, that drive foreign policy. Other IR theorists counter, however, that what occurs within states does shape international affairs. The authors here form a three way split between an instrumentalist, rationalist bargaining theory which sees the Chinese state as an effective overseer and coordinator of nationalist sentiment for international bargaining purposes (Weiss, 2013; Reilly, 2013); a structural theory that sees the CCP increasingly stuck between the rock of domestic nationalists and the hard place of international politics where lack of control over nationalist sentiment either constrains foreign policy or actually drives foreign policy (Gries, Steiger and Wang, 2016); and a bottom-up methodological theory that sees Chinese nationalism as more complicated than the instrumentalists have assumed and calls for more systematic empirical analysis of demographic and social-economic variance in Chinese nationalism within China. (Zhao, 2013; Xiaolin, 2017). For Zhao, after a century slowly fomenting among Chinese intellectuals, national sentiment has captured and redefined the consciousness of the Chinese people during the last two decades of China's economic boom.' Xiaolin argues that rather than simply examining the extreme spectrums of nationalism in response to intensive events such as the Diaoyu protests, in-depth analysis should focus on the heterogeneity and plurality of perspectives across increasingly divergent economic groupings in China.

What is interesting to note are the dates of each paper, suggesting that as Xi has emerged to increasingly stake the CCP's right to rule upon its foreign policy performance, the Pandora's box paradigm has grown increasingly influential whereby nationalist sentiment is seen as less a malleable constraint than a direct driver of Chinese foreign policy and one that reduces the policy manoeuvre space of Xi in a crisis. As Gries, writing in a 2019 rejoinder to Reilly's 2012 book *Strong Society, Smart State*, argues 'is the CCP really as adroit at blending responsiveness, repression, and persuasion as Reilly suggests? Is it "smart," or was it just lucky that the events that Reilly chose to re-examine were

relatively manageable?’ Interestingly, Zhao (2013) who as editor of the *Journal of Contemporary China* holds a position at the meeting point of many of these perspectives, locates the loosening of the Politburo’s ‘pragmatic control of popular nationalism to the global financial crisis of 2008 and to popular publications such as *China is Not Happy* that tapped into what the authors believed to be a widespread public feeling of disgruntlement with the West and urged China to assert itself militarily, diplomatically and in every other way.’

In this capacity it would be interesting to explore the recent China-India border dispute through Weiss and Reilly’s “outdated” argument. Weiss opens up an under-explored perspective when she theorises that anti-foreign protests are not an uncontrollable variable but an instrument the Politburo uses to signal its space of manoeuvrability in a crisis. Weiss suggests that ‘Chinese leaders strategically manipulate popular nationalists to signal either resolve (e.g., the Belgrade bombing of 1999) or a willingness to cooperate (e.g., the Hainan EP-3 spy plane incident of 2001) in their diplomacy toward the United States. When a major event occurs, which mobilizes Chinese nationalists and creates the necessary conditions for mass protest, the CCP chooses to either “nip protests in the bud” by giving a “red light” to domestic nationalists, thus reducing domestic audience costs, or allow protests to develop, giving a “green light” to domestic nationalists, tying their own hands and communicating resolve to their diplomatic foes.’

Much of Weiss’s more recent work broaches the issue of the CCP operating to obscure substantial domestic heterogeneity: ‘some issues, like Taiwan and Hong Kong, unite rather than divide domestic opinion. Other issues, like trade and the environment, involve a range of competing domestic interests. Even when there is a domestic consensus about the desired outcome, such as Chinese sovereignty claims to islands in the East and South China Sea, there is often still heterogeneity in views about the appropriate means and timeframe for achieving those goals.’ In a Working Paper for the Penn Project on the Future of US-China Relations, Weiss (2020) further notes that ‘while the January 2020 phase-one trade deal produced a temporary softening in Chinese rhetoric, the CCP turned again to “wolf warrior” diplomacy after COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan and spread around the world, prompting widespread criticism of China’s initial reporting delays and suppression of local doctors’ warnings. Chinese diplomats hit back by using social media and other platforms to attack foreign critics and highlight the inadequacy of foreign responses to the coronavirus, even peddling conspiracy theories about the U.S. origins of the novel coronavirus.’

Reilly argues that ‘as a wave of mobilization grows stronger, leaders’ cost-benefit calculations begin to shift toward demobilization. In this capacity, Weiss and Reilly’s instrumentalist theory might be held against the coronavirus or the recent China-India border dispute: did Chinese diplomats eventually dial down on social media platforms their attacks on foreign critics? What signal was Xi’s leadership core seeking to make in the China-India border dispute? Diversionary foreign policy to deflect attention from domestic problems of the coronavirus? Or was the incident a surprise? A case of PLA over-reach or a Xi sanctioned move? Were protests intensified or dialled down in order to signal to the Indian foreign ministry resolve or willingness to cooperate? How did nationalist sentiment figure in Indian crisis decision-making? Did nationalist sentiment drive or constrain the resolution? Was nationalist sentiment an independent variable? Or did international constraints, the reaction of the international community, the nuclear dimension, drive the foreign policy signalling process? Quek and Johnston (2017) raise an interesting counterpoint to Weiss’s argument that signalling is instrumentalised through controlling anti-foreign protests by arguing that the success

of backing down or exercising restraint in a crisis can also rest on the structural ambiguity of intra-foreign ministry statements as well as the ability of the Politburo to mobilise non-nativists and doves against more extreme political groupings. A bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy analysis might also contend that elite contestation is a far more important driver of Chinese foreign policy than public sentiment. Gries et. al's distant and proximal cause analysis is an interesting model in this regard.

Xiaolin (2017) makes the argument that, while intuitively plausible, the vagueness in causal directions and fallacies in reasoning limit the practical use of both elite instrumentalist and nationalist sentiment as driver theories of Chinese foreign policy making. Xiaolin (2017) offers an important rejoinder to this paradigm, suggesting that while most China analysts believe Chinese nationalism is on the rise, few notice the declining trend of extreme nationalism. Xiaolin notes the emergence of a competing set of evidence on ordinary Chinese, like people in other countries, who care more about domestic problems—such as corruption, income disparity, environment protection, food safety and social care—than foreign affairs. Xiaolin further critically assesses the hidden assumption in much western scholarship that nationalism and nationalists' pressure on statesmen's foreign-policy decisions only increase and accumulate, but never ease. 'China observers implicitly or explicitly believe that, as long as China is not a democracy, Beijing will continue to rely on nationalism to fuel its legitimacy of rule, particularly considering that the social problems worsen and the Chinese economy is slowing down. The risk will eventually accumulate to a dangerously high level, and then Beijing will find itself no option to please domestic nationalists, but to initiate wars.'

This view is implicit in Rana Mitter's 2020 book - *China's Good War: How World War II is Shaping A New Nationalism* and Gries's chapter in David Shambaugh's *China and the World* which argues that young mainland Chinese are socialised into a social Darwinian view of the world that is hierarchical and competitive, and that 'as China's relative economic and military power increase, we can expect elite and popular Chinese nationalists to increasingly push China's leadership to take tougher foreign policy positions at a time when populism and nativism are on the rise around the world.' A further pessimistic view of the possibility of a rational public emerging in China asks: 'what costs would a powerful authoritarian leader such as Xi pay for ignoring public opinion when he faces no popular elections, when he commands a vast internal security apparatus as well as the military, and when he has powerful propaganda tools to guide opinion or, if necessary, suppress it?'

I found greatest resonance with Xiaolin's argument of nationalism as a heterogenous phenomenon that is not solely political but economic and technological. To study nationalist sentiment as a heterogenous phenomenon requires not only a pluralisation of the heuristics, methodologies, evidence sets and models for how the Politburo and nationalist public opinion interact but also a pluralisation of perspectives from scholars in other Asian nations looking in on China's foreign policy apparatus and their own. Likewise greater provincial and local granularity, differences across economic groupings, perspectives from the Chinese diaspora and longitudinal studies might add depth to breath of scope on the levers between nationalist sentiment and foreign policy decision-making. As Johnston (2020) notes, there may be other factors that explain China's coercive diplomacy on maritime issues such as 'elite opinion, the personal preferences of top leaders, security dilemma dynamics, organisational interests, or some combination thereof.' Add to this, the Politburo's growing sense of containment, economic vulnerability and technological decoupling and nationalist

sentiment as driver or constraint or outcome of foreign policy-making is a complex quandary. In order to move toward a more integrated theory of Chinese nationalism and foreign policy, research in hot cognition / cool cognition might bridge the approaches here of an event-driven (Weiss, 2013; Reilly, 2013) and a long evolutionary theory (Zhao, 2013; Xiaolin, 2017; Gries et. al, 2016).

Weiss's concept of control and instrumentality might also be deepened alongside Chinese concepts of control. Similarly, the role of economic and technological transformation in individual and collective nationalist sentiments should be further explored (Xiaolin, 2017); and a comparative political economy developed that examines the genesis and effects of nationalist sentiment on foreign policy decision-making in other Asian countries of comparable size and development trajectory such as India. As Weiss notes, in 1988 in a longitudinal study of survey data, Page and Shapiro disputed Wildavsky's 'two presidencies' theory in *Foreign Policy and the Rational Public* identified that changes in public opinion on international events regularly preceded changes in American foreign policies. To what extent does a 'rational public' exist in China today? I sense that the focus on China's authoritarian system generates an exceptionalist lens that actually limits our ability to see the development of a rational public in China and its positive effects on Chinese foreign policy. Sentiment is linguistically complex. As equally, there is a need for more comparative research between scholars in China's neighbour economies experiencing comparable development trajectories and transformations in the nexus of nationalist sentiment, economic grouping divergences and foreign policy-making.

Questions

What form does nationalist sentiment take within China's overseas diasporas? With the signing of RCEP in Southeast Asia, to what extent might more cosmopolitan structures of sentiment emerge? Can they emerge amidst strong nationalist sentiment over the South China Sea?

How might nationalist sentiment and foreign policy decision-making interact if OBOR in the post-COVID world begins to recede from view?

To what extent does the focus on China's authoritarian system by Western scholars generate an exceptionalist lens that limits the ability to see the development of a 'rational public' in China and its positive effects on Chinese foreign policy?

To what extent might Weiss's instrumentalist theory be applied to the 2020 China-India border dispute?

Within the Politburo, why are the hawks hawks and the doves doves?

How does the recent film *the Eight Hundred* 八百 figure in discussions of Chinese nationalism? Are there voices in Chinese cinema moving the other way?

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