

China's Self-Absorbed Nationalism – It's Worse than It Looks

by Robert Sutter

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The mid-August popular demonstrations in Chinese cities and accompanying media and internet commentary against Japan over disputed islands in the East China Sea put pressure on Chinese officials to be firm in protecting Chinese claims and countering Japanese “intrusions.” They followed calls by prominent Chinese commentators and other constituencies for Beijing to adopt a tougher approach on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing in that case employed extraordinary measures including repeated use of security forces, economic sanctions, fishing and oil ventures, administrative fiat, diplomatic warnings and other intimidating means short of military force in thus far successful efforts to cow Southeast Asian claimants and preclude ASEAN from taking a united stand in the face of China's power.

Foreign commentators are correct that a good deal of the impetus for popular and elite pressure for a tougher Chinese approach on territorial issues rests with the type of nationalism that has been fostered with increased vigor by the Chinese authorities since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of international communism. The nationalistic discourse emphasizes that since the 19th century China has been treated unjustly and its territory and related sovereign rights have been exploited by other powers; China remains in a protracted process of building power sufficient to protect what China controls and regain disputed territory and rights. On the whole, the nationalistic discourse leads to a sense of “victimization” by Chinese people and elites, who are seen having greater influence on China's foreign affairs decision making now that the strong-man politics of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping have given way to a collective leadership that is more sensitive to nongovernment elites and popular views.

Image building in foreign affairs

Unfortunately, the emphasis on perceived past and current victimization represents only part of the self-absorbed nationalism fostered by Chinese authorities. As important are the extensive efforts to build an image of China as a righteous actor on the world stage, different from other world powers seen to follow selfish pursuits of national interests. These efforts have been carried out by the Chinese foreign ministry, various other government, party and military organizations that deal with foreign affairs, ostensibly nongovernment organizations with close ties to Chinese government, party and military offices, and the massive publicity/propaganda

apparatus of the Chinese administration. They boost China's international stature while conditioning people in China to think positively about Chinese foreign relations.

Thus, for example, China's foreign policy is said to follow principles in dealing with foreign issues that assure moral positions in Chinese foreign relations; principled and moral positions provide the basis for effective Chinese strategies in world affairs. Remarkably, such strategies are seen to insure that China does not make mistakes in foreign affairs, an exceptional position reinforced by the fact that the People's Republic of China is portrayed as having avoided publicly acknowledging foreign policy mistakes or apologizing for its actions in world affairs. Undoubtedly, some Chinese foreign policy officials and specialists know better and may privately disagree with the remarkably righteous image of Chinese foreign relations; but they don't depart from the official orthodoxy which is broadly accepted by elite and public opinion. Whatever criticism elites and public opinion register against Chinese foreign policy tends to focus on China being too timid and not forceful enough in dealing with foreign affronts.

Today, China's image building efforts support a leading role for China in Asian and world affairs, which enjoys broad support from Chinese people and various constituencies in China; they forecast optimistically that China will follow benign policies emphasizing recent themes stressed by the Chinese administration. The themes include promoting peace and development abroad, eschewing dominance or hegemonism in dealing with neighbors or others even as China's power grows, and following the purported record of historical Chinese dynasties in not seeking expansionism.

Sacrificing truth

Such image building in the nationalistic discourse of modern Chinese foreign relations is a lot further from the truth than the victimization depicted in Chinese discourse. China was oppressed by various powers for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. In contrast, the evidence of a moral, principled, and benign approach has been the exception rather than the rule in the zig-zags of the often violent foreign relations of the PRC through much of its 60 years. This has been the case particularly in the area surrounding China in Asia, the region that has long been the area of greatest Chinese influence and the area that has received the lion's share of Chinese foreign attention. Most of China's neighbors have experienced intrusions or invasion by PRC security forces; they and others further away have contended with insurgent armies or armed proxies fully supported by China and targeting them. Such violence and excesses continued after Mao's “revolutionary” rule. Strong Chinese support for the radical Khmer Rouge increased in the later Maoist years and remained high throughout Deng's rule. During such turmoil, Chinese leaders

avowed support for principles and righteousness in foreign affairs, but from the viewpoint of the neighbors and foreign specialists, the principles kept changing and gaps between principles and practice often were very wide.

In the post-Cold War period, China has tried with mediocre results to reassure neighboring leaders who well remember the violence and threatening Chinese practices of the past. China's recent truculent behavior in the South China Sea and in the East China Sea has recalled past Chinese efforts at intimidation and coercion. Part of the problem in Chinese efforts at reassurance is that Chinese elite and popular opinion shows almost no awareness of past Chinese violence and excesses, and therefore has little appreciation of the reasons behind the suspicion and wariness of many neighboring governments, and of the main outside power in the region, the United States. Regarding the latter, one other practice seen throughout the history of PRC foreign relations and supported by the strong nationalistic discourse in China has been to register strident opposition to efforts by outside powers to establish and sustain positions of influence and strength around China's periphery. Such moves, by the US but also by the Soviet Union in the past and Japan and India up to the present, are repeatedly seen by Chinese authorities as well as supporting elite and public opinions in grossly exaggerated terms of being a threat to China, involving a revival of Cold War "containment" or other schemes.

Implications

Chinese elite and popular opinion is strongly influenced not only by nationalistic discourse emphasizing China being victimized by other powers. As important, Chinese nationalistic discourse also involves a unique and strong sense of morality and righteousness in foreign affairs. As a result, Chinese opinion sees whatever problems China faces with neighbors and other concerned powers including the United States over sensitive issues of sovereignty and security as caused by them and certainly not by China. Thus, it has little patience with the complaints of other claimants and calls for China to compromise on sensitive issues involving sovereignty and security in nearby Asia. As a result, Chinese elites and public opinion push for tougher policies in defense of Chinese interests in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Chinese image building has successfully conditioned Chinese opinion; it adds to the difficulty of managing tensions in the seas near China and makes resolving those issues unlikely in the foreseeable future.

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