



EAST-WEST CENTER

The China Syndrome: Rising Nationalism and Conflict with the West

YU BIN

Asia Pacific

I S S U E S

Analysis from the East-West Center

No. 27

May 1996

The U.S. Congress established the East-West Center in 1960 to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among the governments and peoples of the Asia Pacific region, including the United States. Funding for the Center comes from the U.S. government with additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, corporations, and Asian and Pacific governments.

The AsiaPacific Issues series contributes to the Center's role as a neutral forum for discussion of issues of regional concern. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Center.

SUMMARY Seven years after the end of the Cold War, China has yet to take its place in a number of international fora or have a summit with the United States. For the Chinese, this is bitterly reminiscent of events after the First and Second World Wars, when, despite their country's contributions to victory, they were left out of the post-war deal making. Today, many in China complain that the West ignored abuses under Mao in exchange for China's partnership against the Soviets, only to criticize and discard China when the Cold War was won. Current frustration is contributing to an intense debate between nationalist and internationalist schools over how China should relate to the rest of the world. Few issues so feed this debate as that of Taiwan's future, and recent stirrings on that island and apparent shifts in U.S. policy have heightened China's expression of a confrontational nationalism. With U.S.-China relations fraying, Western interests would be best served by a genuine policy of engagement.

*Increasingly
treated as an
outcast nation,
China responds
with assertive
nationalism*

On two early occasions in this century, China was disregarded in and excluded from the remaking of the world order. The consequence was to fuel Chinese nationalism at home and to introduce regional and global instability. That tragic pattern appears to be reappearing today, propelling China to behave in an assertive and troubling fashion.

At the end of World War I, the victorious European democracies ignored China's contribution to the allied cause. Despite the claims of Wilsonian democracy to champion the cause of national self-determination, the major powers transferred Germany's colonial holdings in China to Japanese control. The West rode roughshod over a weak and divided China. While bringing an end to the fruits of Austrian and German imperialism in Eastern Europe, creating such independent nations as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia in response to the yearnings of the peoples in those areas, the Western powers sought to retain the colonial order in Asia.

The impact of this policy on subsequent Chinese history was profound. The Treaty of Versailles stimulated the rise of Chinese nationalism and gave birth to the Chinese Communist Party. It turned the gaze of many patriotic Chinese nationalists away from Western democracies, whose behavior at Versailles betrayed the trust many Chinese liberals had placed in them, and toward the newly founded Soviet Union that promised a global end to imperialism.

The end of World War II saw a similar disregard of Chinese interests. Though China bore the brunt of Japanese expansionism in Asia (the number of Chinese who died from 1931 to 1945 as a direct result of the Japanese invasion is conservatively estimated at 35 million, more than perished in the Soviet Union as a result of German invasion) the future of China was decided at the Yalta conference without Chinese participation. Stalin's successful demand for Manchurian holdings in exchange for Soviet operations against the Japanese consolidated the Soviet position in the Far East four years before the Chinese Communists came to power. Thus, in some respects, the Soviet Union's position in East Asia after World War II was secured not through the rise of the Chinese Communists but because of a policy of the United States that ignored Chinese interests. To

be sure, the United States did insist on China's becoming a permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council, but the United States believed that the then weak Republic of China would be a pliable client of Washington in its designs for the post-war East Asian order.

Despite China's de facto alliance with the West during the Cold War, China today is not participating in the formation of a post-war order. It is not present at some major post Cold War fora, such as the meetings of the G-7 plus Russia. Nor is it allowed to be a member of the New World Trade Organization. Its leaders have neither been welcome to visit Washington nor has an American president journeyed to Beijing for seven years. While the world appropriately recalled the Soviet sacrifices against fascism during the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the end of World War II, the world conveniently neglected the Chinese contribution.

The result of China's being increasingly treated politically as an outcast nation, especially by the United States, is predictable: a rising tide of assertive nationalism, a resort to obstructive behavior, and an intensifying debate in China over how to respond to China's situation at this historical turning point.

Nationalists vs. Internationalists

Chinese leaders are under growing pressure from the more nationalistic sectors of both China's intellectual and foreign policy-making communities not to make further major concessions to the West. An emerging assertive and confrontational *nationalist* sentiment over the more entrenched *internationalist* view in China is increasingly evident, and is clear in a recent survey of intellectual discussion in some influential journals. Their differences can be juxtaposed, as follows, with regard to several key issues concerning how China should relate to the outside world:¹

Internationalists. China's earlier failure to "join the world" hurt it, internationalists say, and the same mistake should not be made again.

Nature of the so-called globalization trend. The trend toward global interdependence will lead to a win-win situation. The faster, bigger, and more active its participation in the existing international system, the faster China will modernize.

Approach to the existing world trading system. China should have a deeper understanding of, adopt a more active attitude toward, and aim at a higher standard for the process of global interdependence. If the country desires to eventually become a rule maker in the global game, China must first become familiar with and accept the existing rules. This is the only way to satisfy China's nationalist feeling in the next century.

Role of the West and the United States. Cooperating and coexisting with the world system will be more beneficial for China in the long term. Past efforts by both the former Soviet Union and China to create another system independent of the most comprehensive and most powerful capitalist one proved to be either inefficient or disastrous. If China had been a junior partner of the United States and boarded the "American ship" for a "free ride," China could have been much stronger today and, perhaps, could have been today's Japan.

Role of Chinese nationalism. Chinese nationalism appears to be harmful when viewed with a historical perspective, and it is at least as dangerous and destructive as the Western-centric imperialism that was strongly resented by Chinese scholars. China has a rich legacy of extreme, xenophobic, and strident nationalism; it would not be a blessing for China to embark upon a chauvinistic road in the future. If China genuinely aspires to peace and coprosperity with the world, the country should not view the development of world civilization from a narrow nationalistic perspective.

Nationalists. The limits and potential harm, rather than the purported benefits, of globalization are emphasized by the nationalists.

Nature of the so-called globalization trend. Globalization is an idealistic vision and an unrealistic dream. There will be more and stronger barriers to China's unrequited love for the existing international system. Prudence and patience are recommended in dealing with the West. Be alert!

Approach to the existing world trading system. China should be cautious in approaching the existing global trading system which has been dominated by Western powers whose interests are not necessarily in line with those of China. Which rules of the

game will be accepted depends not upon the quality of the rules, but upon who has the most power. The West demands "free trade," then ties trade with China to political issues. How then can China have faith in a "free trade" system? Strong states do what they will, while weak states do what they must. China should not expect to be able to make acceptable rules for the more powerful states.

From a technical point of view, an export-oriented economic approach is by no means a universal developmental strategy and is suitable only for small countries. The sheer size of China's economy cannot be attached to nor accommodated by any existing economic systems.

Role of the West and the United States. The United States is the dominant power in the current international economic system, and it therefore controls the process, speed, and scope of China's globalization. What would be the result if the United States, the rule maker of this international process, were not generous enough to make a set of unbiased rules of the game? What if China learns how to play the games more skillfully than the United States? The United States has not necessarily demonstrated that it has sufficient wisdom to preside over a world ridden with regional, racial, and religious conflicts.

Role of Chinese nationalism. Not all nationalism is bad for China and the world at large, but only that which is at the extremes. What China needs is intelligent and wise nationalism. A great nation cannot be forever silent when it is repeatedly humiliated. That the Russian extreme nationalists won most votes in the parliamentary election at the end of 1993 demonstrates that if no enlightened (*mingzhi de*) nationalists come forward, the populace will have to accept the more extreme ones. Nationalism is a fact of life, whether one likes it or not. It should be guided, not simply suppressed.

Not just an intellectual discussion. The debate between internationalists and nationalists in China is by no means conclusive. And although both schools of thought view globalization, or interdependence, as the current and future trend in the world, they differ strongly on its impact on China. Neither of the schools views China's and the Soviet Union's past

An influential book argued that Western intervention in China would be a "criminal act"

attempts to create separate systems as alternatives to participating in the existing international system, but they are deeply divided over the question of *how* China should relate to the outside world. Although these different views represent scholarly opinions, their influence on China's official policy should not be underestimated: many of these scholars are part of the policy-making community. Indeed, this internationalism-vs.-nationalism polemic is clearly influenced by, as well as influencing, the official policies of the PRC.

These issues are not being debated only among a few well-connected scholars. In a broader sense, China's intellectuals, after a few years of inactivity following the 1989 crackdown, are becoming increasingly concerned about the future of the country and its relations with the outside world, particularly in light of growing pressure from Washington.

Perhaps nothing has been so widely and hotly discussed in the past year as a book entitled *Looking At China Through A Third Eye*. Ostensibly written by one Luo Yi Ning Ge Er,² it is generally believed to be the work of a group of scholars and bureaucrats. The book presents a highly pessimistic view of a host of current social, political, and economic issues in China from a historical perspective. Although the bulk of the book deals with domestic issues—including boldly articulated assessments of Mao, Deng, and current leaders—it opens and ends with strong warnings to the West not to intervene in China's internal affairs.

According to the writer, such action against China will fail at best, as was the case of the post-1989 sanctions; at worst, it will amount to a "criminal act," in that China's natural course of political and economic development will be set back indefinitely. The author argues that Western interventions, no matter how well intended and how carefully executed, will be futile in a huge country burdened with 800 million poorly educated peasants, historically immature intellectuals, and hopelessly corrupt bureaucrats. Reform in such an environment is not only difficult, but an extremely dangerous experiment, the book asserts. No existing theories and models, be they from the East or the West, can solve China's problems. Social and political sta-

bility, therefore, will be paramount for the country during the current and future transitions.

Forces Behind the Debate

Underlying the debate between the nationalists and internationalists is the profound sense of uncertainty in China's thinking about its future. This sentiment was expressed recently by a journal with a strong governmental and military background:

We are living in a time of dramatic change. Everything in the future remains uncertain and awaits exploration.

We are still unclear what the world will be like after the collapse of the bipolar system which we dislike but had grown accustomed to. What are the consequences of the exhaustion of natural resources, deterioration of the environments, and rapid growth of world population? Can science, technology and the conscience of mankind ensure, with enough future resources, balance among the economic, political, and spiritual development of mankind? Will the beginning of the third millennium be the new start of human progress or a turning point from prosperity to decline?

We are still unclear what the future of China will be after its rapid social transformation. What regional and social interests will emerge and what new balance will be achieved between them? Who will be our friends and our enemies in the future world? Will our ancient civilization be able to generate new wisdom to free ourselves from decline and stand on our feet in the family of nations under the pressure of decreased resources, deteriorated environment and a growing population?³

Part of China's current uneasiness is caused by ongoing profound changes within China. Rapid economic growth and marketization have led to some serious unintended outcomes, including high inflation, growing population and unemployment pressures, inequality and social unrest, corruption, and deterioration of the environment.

The country is in the midst of its largest peacetime social transformation and population migration (millions of people are moving from rural to urban and from north to south in seek of work). At the same time, the state is experiencing a considerable decline in its extractive and regulatory abilities. Indeed, the ability of the state to penetrate society is now the weakest in the history of the People's

Republic of China. These developments, among others, have created a dilemma for China: the need to guide a rapidly changing society and the lack of ability—perhaps even willingness—to do so. The situation is compounded by the change of guard from Deng's Long-March generation to the younger technocrats whose capacity and vision for China's future remain to be tested.

However, the current deep uneasiness within the country is, in the eyes of many Chinese elite, primarily caused by China's relations with the outside world, particularly with the Western powers led by the United States. They argue that the United States is unable to accept the rise of a major power whose ascent it is not guiding; that the American goal may be to slow and even reverse China's modernization. After all, they say, America is pressuring China on many fronts at the very time the country is struggling to accommodate a massive and rapid transformation from Maoist totalitarianism to more tolerant authoritarian politics; from a centralized economy to a market-guided one; from a rigid control of society to an increasingly emergent and active population. Many political and intellectual elite complain that the West largely ignored the worst human rights record in China under Mao in exchange for China's partnership against the Soviet threat. Then, after the West "won" the Cold War, it simply discarded China precisely when China's human rights record was the best in PRC history.

These developments, along with American statements and action on a number of issues—trade and Most-Favored-Nation status, Hong Kong's future, weapons sales, nuclear testing, and prison product exports (as well as China's recent bids for the Olympics and GATT membership)—are seen in Beijing as by no means unrelated, if not carefully orchestrated, efforts of the West to contain China.

The Taiwan issue. For many Chinese, what they believe to be the West's fundamental, unspoken hostility toward China is most apparent in the Taiwan issue. From Beijing's view, a collision course is being charted by an increasingly aggressive independence movement in Taiwan, based on and facilitated by the local democratic process and assisted by outside powers.

The United States and other Western powers have recently sold Taiwan large quantities of advanced weaponry, have upgraded their relations with the island, and have been more willing to admit it into various international fora. The United States decision in 1995 to allow Taiwan's president to visit the United States as a private citizen and the subsequent passage of the U.S. aircraft carrier Nimitz through the Taiwan Strait at the year's end (the first such passage since the 1978 normalization of relations) is viewed by Chinese as the first steps toward Washington's reversing relations with Beijing and Taipei. As a result, Taiwan is now seen as steadily and perhaps permanently drifting away from the mainland, at the very time that China is the most stable and prosperous it has been in the past 150 years. All of this has occurred within months of the mainland's starting to take a more pragmatic approach, beginning with conciliatory gestures toward Taiwan in early 1995—gestures that were quickly reciprocated. Many Chinese question whether the real issue for America is Taiwan independence or if Taiwan is simply being used as pressure point, a way to punish China for its independence and assertiveness.

Though China's behavior during the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis may seem excessive, the United States should not underestimate Chinese seriousness and resolve. No government on the mainland, whether communist or not, can afford an independent Taiwan. The reason is simple: Most Chinese, including most liberal-minded intellectuals, do not want to see Taiwan slip away from the mainland. Loss of Chinese territory is something few are ready to accept: Taiwan still accuses the mainland of "selling Outer Mongolia to Soviet communism" and would certainly argue that Tibet is part of China.

To some degree the Taiwan issue is one case in a worldwide trend of continuous breakdown of centralized authority. The world has fought against, throughout the twentieth century, the concentration of power in the hands of states and dictators. At the end of the century, we are just beginning to learn that there is, and perhaps should be, a limit to the breakdown of authority in the name of freedom and self-determination. Such a trend has already led to serious problems, ranging from ungovernability to

Some argue that the United States cannot accept the rise of a major power whose ascent it is not guiding

outright anarchy in places like Bosnia and the vast “near-abroad” area of Russia. Although freedom and self-determination are desirable, man may live with order without liberty, but not with liberty without order.⁴

Responding To China

How to respond to an increasingly assertive China? If the rise of confrontational nationalism in China today is, as in the past, primarily fueled by unsatisfactory relations with the West, then a policy of genuine engagement will be the most productive response.

A policy of engagement would promote values the American people can support, while acknowledging Beijing’s concern about the need for domestic stability. If the 1989 Beijing crackdown did not stop the social, economic, and political changes moving China away from Maoist totalitarianism, one can reasonably expect that the country will continue to depart from its past legacies. But patience is needed. History shows repeatedly that it is possible to convert, almost overnight, a weak democracy to a communist/authoritarian system and a free market economy to a centralized one. The reverse is not necessarily true. Building a stable democracy takes time, as the historical progress of most Western democracies did. The functioning of an effective market requires both entrepreneurship and the rule of law, which cannot be developed by a “shock therapy” approach.

For example, instead of pressing Beijing to improve its policy toward only a small number of political activists, the United States and West could work with the Chinese to institutionalize the rule of law. Though there are many laws and regulations in China, the necessary effort to enforce them is often lacking. One result is abuse of the people by public officials. (Another result can be seen in the failure of the Chinese to enforce agreements between the United States and China on the issue of copyright infringement. In fact, the poor enforcement is mostly due to an inability of the government to enforce the rules.)

Working to institutionalize the rule of law could mean more exchanges between Chinese and foreign

legal and judicial institutions; joint efforts to develop more transparency in both domestic and international business transactions; even training of Chinese lawyers and law enforcement officers. Promotion of the local election process is another area that the two countries can work on together. An increasing number of Chinese local officials are elected, and Westerners have been invited to advise on these elections. Efforts such as these will help to eventually create a socio-political environment conducive to less arbitrary exercise of power, fewer corrupted officials, and, eventually, more responsive and more representative government.

One area in which the United States and China are ready to work together is the environment. Representatives from both countries met at the White House in April 1996, just weeks after U.S.-China relations were severely strained over the issue of Taiwan. The meetings were possible, said a U.S. official, because “the environment is a priority that supersedes those problems.” Whether or not China-U.S. cooperation on what is, after all, an essentially technical problem will contribute to improved understanding on such far thornier issues as human rights and security remains to be seen. But productive contact between the two countries on any issue must be welcomed.

Keeping The Post-Cold War Peace

Fifty years ago, Washington chose to side with the Chinese Nationalists, perceiving Chinese Communists as communists first and Chinese second, despite the Communists’ repeated effort to gain U.S. recognition and economic assistance. Later, Mao’s reluctant lean toward the Soviet Union and the Korean War froze bilateral relations for some 20 years until Beijing and Washington found the Soviet Union a common enemy. Once that enemy was gone, bilateral relations became strained again. Today in China and the United States the feeling of novelty of the 1970s and the partnership of the 1980s have been replaced by skepticism and even animosity. Although the overall structure of the Sino-American relationship remains, and has even expanded to new areas from time to time, the trust that is essential for a stable relationship is being

A policy of engagement would promote values Americans support while acknowledging Beijing’s concern for stability

For Washington and Beijing, keeping the post-Cold War peace has proved more challenging than maintaining a Cold War partnership

steadily eroded to the point where what many Chinese feel to be relatively minor issues can be easily blown out of proportion. Compromise and mutual accommodation have proven to be still attainable, but only after hard bargaining and with considerable use by both sides of punitive measures instead of positive rewards.

Indeed, the relationship has oscillated between "friends" and "foes," but has not been based upon a normal working relationship regarding some outstanding international and bilateral issues. The recent deterioration of relations between China and the United States points to the urgency of a fundamental rethinking of the respective roles of Beijing and Washington in the post-Cold War world and the nature of their bilateral relationship, instead of allowing a free fall of an already fragile relationship. For Washington and Beijing, keeping the post-Cold War peace has proved to be a more challenging mission than maintaining a Cold War partnership. The United States and China do not have to love one another for a stable relationship, but they do need to understand each other's interests and culture.

Notes

¹For views of internationalism, see Li Shenzhi, "Cong Quanqiuhua Guandian kan Zhongguo de Xiandaihua Wenti" [The global viewpoint of China's modernization], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and management], No. 1 (1994), pp. 5–6; "Quanqiuhua yu Zhongguo Wenhua" [Globalization and Chinese Culture], *Taipingyang Xuebao* [Pacific Journal], December 1994, pp. 3–11; Wang Jisi, "Wenming Chongtulun de Lilun Jichu yu Xianshi Yiyi" [An analysis of the theory of the clash of civilizations and its contemporary implications]; Feng Tianyu, "'Wenming Chongtu Juedinglun' Bianxi" [On 'the determinism of the clash of civilizations'"], in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Jikan* [Chinese social sciences quarterly], No. 7 (Spring 1994), p. 28 and pp. 42–43.

For views of nationalism, see Shi Zhong, "Zhongguo Xiandaihua Mianlin de Tiaozhan" [Challenges facing China's modernization], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and management], No. 1 (1994), pp. 7–8; Liu Liqun, "Chukou Daoxiangxing Jingji Fazhan Moshi bu Shihe Zhongguo Guoqing" [Export-oriented mode of economic development does not fit China's national conditions], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and management], No. 2 (1994), pp. 43–46.

²Luo Yi Ning Ge Er, *Looking At China Through A Third Eye* (Shan Xi People's Publishing House, 1994).

³Introduction to the journal *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and Management], No. 1, November 1993.

⁴Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order In Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 7–8.

⁵*New York Times*, April 30, 1996.

About this Publication

The *AsiaPacific Issues* series reports on topics of regional concern. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Center.

The contents of this paper may be reproduced for personal use. If you would like to reprint, excerpt, or adapt the contents, or for additional copies or other information, please contact the Centerwide publications office, East-West Center, 1777 East-West Road, Honolulu, Hawaii, 96848.
Telephone: (808) 944-7197
Facsimile: (808) 944-7376
E-mail: ewcbooks@ewc.hawaii.edu
Series Editor: Elisa W. Johnston

Recent AsiaPacific Issues

No. 21. "Memory Wars: The Politics of Remembering the Asia-Pacific War" by Geoffrey M. White, July 1995.

No. 22. "Indonesia in the 1990s: More than Meets the Eye" by Adam Schwarz, July 1995.

No. 23. "The Rise of Global Intellectual Property Rights and Their Impact on Asia" by Sumner J. La Croix, August 1995.

No. 24. "Sweeping Changes Shape a New Pacific Asia" by Richard W. Baker, September 1995.

No. 25. "Chinese Women's Lives: Rhetoric and Reality" by Nancy E. Riley, November 1995.

No. 26. "Nuclear Energy Thrives in Asia" by Ronald E. Hagen, November 1995.

About the Author

YU Bin is an assistant professor, Department of Political Science, at Wittenberg University in Ohio, and a faculty associate in the East Asian Security Program at the Mershon Center at Ohio State University. From 1994 to 1995 he was a visiting fellow at the East-West Center. He has served as president, Chinese Scholars of Political Science and International Studies, Inc., (1992-1994) and as a research fellow, Center for International Studies, State Council, China (1982-1985). His PhD in political science is from Stanford University. He is editor of the forthcoming *Dynamics and Dilemma: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in a Changing World* (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc.) Telephone: (513) 327-6106