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Trajectories of Nationalisms in East Asia

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Introduction

Globalization is a concept that has dominated much of the intellectual discourse on world affairs in the United States and Europe in the last decade. This notion of globalization has even penetrated the popular consciousness in recent years. Globalization implies the process of becoming one—the integration of the peoples of the world into a collective unit. Some thinkers have argued that the forces of globalization are irresistible, and that these forces are weakening the nation-state, which will eventually lead to its irrelevance, or even to its demise. Much of the discourse on globalism, however, is driven by Americans and Europeans. While Westerners stress the onslaught of the forces of globalization—this process of the peaceful international integration of ideas, world views, and cultures *as well as* goods and products—the appeal of nationalism, national assertiveness, and national military power have been growing alarmingly in East Asia in the last two decades. In other words, there is much evidence to indicate that the recent massive wave in the globalization of manufactured goods, capital flows, and service industries and the wealth that all this has brought to East Asia is *not* contributing to a convergence of fundamental value systems and world views. On the contrary, it has fueled nationalist ambitions and expectations, exacerbated long-smoldering historical hostilities, and spawned new nationalist passions among East Asian nations.

In the past 50 years, the global political, economic, military, and even cultural contexts within which American–East Asian relations have evolved have been profoundly transformed. Several stunning developments must be taken into account—developments that have contributed greatly to the rise of dangerous nationalist impulses in East Asia. First, since the demise of communism in Russia and breakup of the Soviet Union, American–East Asian relations can no longer be seen through the prism of the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Russia has lost much of its relevance as a major player in East Asia since the collapse of

the USSR. With a greatly weakened and fragmented Russia, Chinese nationalists have been clamoring for Russia to relinquish territories China lost in the 19th and 20th centuries. In March 2013, on the eve of President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow, thousands of Chinese demanded, "We want our land back, take away your Marxism-Leninism."

Second, the People's Republic of China has emerged with astonishing speed as the second largest economic and industrial power in the world. According to Goldman Sachs, by 2050, China will have overwhelmingly the largest economy in the world, possibly an economy even double the size of the U.S. economy. Since military and political power rest on economic strength, the balance of global power will shift from the Western world, which had begun to dominate the globe in the 16th century, to a China-centered East Asia. This projection of Chinese power is already sending shockwaves throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia—and indeed the world.

A third striking development is that the nature of the Chinese state itself has changed dramatically—to the point where one can contend that China is no longer a communist state although it is still controlled by the Communist Party. Intense nationalism has replaced the communist ideology as the key ideological force in China. Starting with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, China, arguably, has been increasingly operating under an authoritarian capitalist, rather than communist, regime. This also represents a return of an economically successful authoritarian capitalism, which has been nearly absent since the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945.

Fourth, nationalist sentiments in Japan also have been increasing dramatically in the last two decades since the demise of the socialist political opposition forces in Japanese politics.

Fifth, militant nationalism on the Korean peninsula has not subsided since the Korean War in the 1950s. In fact, the trajectory of Korean nationalism has become even more dangerous over the decades. Particularly disturbing is the fact that the repressive North Korea regimes of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and now Kim Jong Un have continued to develop nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles to deliver them. The recent erratic behavior of Kim Jong Un has threatened peace on the Korean peninsula—Kim boasting that the regime will use nuclear weapons against the United States as well as South Korea and Japan.

Finally, there has been the widespread impression in East Asian countries that the United States is in the slow process of an irreversible decline as a superpower.

The purpose of this chapter is to bring awareness of the explosion of nationalist passions that have been increasingly driving both the domestic and foreign policies of East Asian nations in the past two decades, and to suggest what this might mean for future American–East Asian relations.

A conflict in East Asia would endanger America's national security. The United States could not easily walk away from involvement with impunity as it has done from its wars in the Middle East in Iraq and Afghanistan. The stakes could not be higher.

Fanning the flames of nationalist passions

Among the above-mentioned developments in American–East Asian relations in the past twenty years, nothing has been of more paramount importance than the rise of China into a massive global economic power—and the perception of American weakness due largely to the great trade and capital flow imbalances. When asked how the United States should adjust its strategic policies to deal with the rise of China, Lee Kuan Yew, arguably one of East Asia's greatest 20th-century statesmen, replied: “The size of China's displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance in 30 to 40 years. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. This is the biggest player in the history of the world” (Allison 2013: 42). Lee also went on to warn the United States: “Do not treat China as an enemy from the outset. Otherwise, it will develop a counter-strategy to demolish the U.S. in the Asia Pacific; in fact, it is already discussing such a strategy” (Allison 2013: 43). But how should America cope with this rising China?

David Shambaugh, discussing China's global impact on the world in *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, noted that in the past two decades, “China has moved from the periphery to the center of the international system” and that “China's emergence on the world stage is accelerating dramatically in pace and scope—and it is important to understand the different manifestations of its ‘going global’” (Shambaugh 2013:4–5). A central message of Shambaugh's comprehensive study is that China is still a “partial [world] power,” and that its role is currently being hotly debated and contested. Chinese intellectuals hold a very wide spectrum of views, from what he calls “Nativists” and “Realists” on the left to “Selective Multilateralists” and “Globalists” on the right. That is to say, China's new international identity has not been solidly established. It is in a very fluid situation, and highly susceptible to oscillations and erratic swings in response to both internal domestic politics and unpredictable international events. As evidence of this, as Shambaugh asserts, over the past six decades the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China has undergone ten distinct phases, six of which took place in the past twenty or so years, beginning with Deng Xiaoping's rise to power.

Shambaugh also argues that China's response to “global governance” has been slowly evolving, but he further emphasizes that “China is, in essence, a very narrow-minded, self-interested, realist state, seeking only to maximize

its own national interests and power” (Shambaugh 2013: 310). However, “various voices in China call for a more assertive foreign policy and defense posture, and the world saw evidence of Beijing's assertiveness during 2009–2010” (Shambaugh 2013: 316). What motivates China's behavior? He gives us a strong clue: “China displays periodic evidence of being a dissatisfied, frustrated, aggravated, and angry nation that seeks redress against those that have wronged it in the past or which is has disagreements at present” (Shambaugh 2013: 311). China's interaction with the world is frequently characterized by an “intense nationalism—often negative, xenophobic, and directed against the foreign ‘other’” (Shambaugh 2013: 54). While some analysts argue that China is assimilating itself into the international world order, there is much evident to suggest that China does not accept the existing liberal world order and that China's growing participation in various world organizations is simply a tactic until it can overturn the system or “hollow it out from within.”

Another explanation for the intensification of an acerbic populist Chinese nationalism in recent years is related to the evolution of China's state ideology. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, the forces of nationalism and communism became inextricably intertwined and tied to the state. Beginning in 1980s, however, Deng Xiaoping's reforms began to gradually loosen the grip of radical militant communist ideology on the Chinese state. As a result, by the beginning of the 21st century, nationalism had become practically the sole legitimizing ideological factor left in China linking the ruling Communist Party with the Chinese masses. Particularly revealing was when Chinese President Zhang Zemin allowed capitalists to join the Communist Party, a policy totally unimaginable under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Zheng Wang explains that a new Chinese generation of anti-Western, anti-Japanese patriots resulted from a deliberate change in the educational policy of the Chinese Communist Party. He writes: “After 1991, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had no choice but to put aside the banner of communism and wholeheartedly embrace nationalism” (Wang 2012: 119); and “Lacking the procedural legitimacy of democratically elected governments and, at the same time, facing the collapse of communist ideology, the CCP has fallen back on using nationalism as its societal glue” (Wang 2012: 119).

As another astute observer of global geopolitical trends stated it, the Chinese state is rapidly evolving into an “increasingly nationalistic authoritarianism in charge of state capitalism,” or more bluntly put, a fascist state. To understand the Chinese mindset, it is also instructive to keep in mind that unlike in the case of Mustafa Kemal, the father of the modern Turkish nation-state, who made no attempt to regain control of the lost non-Turkish

Ottoman Empire provinces, neither did the Chinese nationalists nor the Chinese communists relinquish control over non-Chinese territories such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, all conquered by the Qing Dynasty in the 18th century.

China's intense nationalist emotions of hatred are directed, for the most part, against the Western world in general and to Japan in particular, both blamed for the "century of humiliation" from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. With regard to American–Chinese relations, a number of issues quickly inflame nationalist passions, but few things rile Chinese anger more than America's support for the *de facto* independence of Taiwan. In 2005, for example, General Zhu Chenghu, the head of China's National Defense University, asserted that China should use nuclear weapons in the event of a war with the United States over Taiwan. It was a reiteration of the words of another general, Xiong Guangkai, who in 1995 threatened to use nuclear weapons against Los Angeles if the United States defended Taiwan in a conflict with the People's Republic of China. Noteworthy is that neither general was reprimanded for those comments, indicating that the remarks by the two generals represented the official policy of the Chinese government.

New sources of tensions have emerged to the center of the American–China relationship in the last few years. For instance, Chinese economic nationalists such as He Yafei, China's Vice Foreign Minister, gloated over the Western global financial crisis of 2008–2009, gleefully displaying a kind of malicious pleasure of the triumph and the superiority of an authoritarian state-guided capitalism over the American-led liberal *laissez-faire* economic world order. At the same time, Chinese nationalists feel justified in engaging in an aggressive, no-holds-barred form of cyber intrusions of American institutions and economic warfare against the United States. According to a U.S. national intelligence estimate, between 50 and 80 percent of all American intellectual property theft originates from China.

Chinese nationalist hostility has been equally—if not more so—directed toward Japan. Chinese still continue to seek redress for Japan's atrocities committed against China during World War II. They are particularly galled when Japanese government officials visit the Yasukuni Shrine, the Shintō religious war shrine where Japanese military leaders are enshrined and paid worship. Anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in the People's Republic of China in the spring of 2005, demonstrations that were organized in major cities throughout China, and turned violent in many cases. More recently, in a dispute over Japan's detention of the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler in 2010, the Chinese showed their anger by blocking exports to Japan of critical rare earth minerals used in sophisticated manufacturing.

Chinese nationalist passions unleashed toward Japan are not confined to government-to-government relationships. Resentment against the Japanese

is very deep-seated, and it is imbedded in the popular consciousness of the Chinese masses. For instance, in the past decade there has been a sharp rise in anti-Japanese films and dramas shown in China. Liu Zhijiang, a well-known Chinese film producer connected with the Zhejiang Hengdian Film Production Company, now the largest film-staging area in the world, remarked that "anti-Japanese shows are the most popular in part because they reflect 'recorded history'" (*The Economist* 6/2013: 48). It is instructive to note that in 2004 only 15 anti-Japanese shows were approved for distribution, whereas in 2011 and 2012, as many as 177 anti-Japanese films were approved, a figure that accounted for up to one-fifth of all dramas authorized by the Chinese government in those years. In short, in today's China, the Chinese masses are constantly being bombarded with an historical narrative that has produced a deep-seated hatred toward the Japanese for Japan's aggression in World War II. To exacerbate matters further, the Japanese have not unequivocally renounced the radical ethnic Shintō ultranationalist ideology that mobilized the Japanese masses for war against China in the 1930s and 1940s. Incredible as it may seem, many powerful politicians in Japan today still stubbornly spout the fallacious historical narrative that Japan waged war in Asia and the Pacific to expel the Western powers from the region and liberate Asia.

On the other hand, Japanese xenophobic sentiments are now primarily directed against the People's Republic of China—and against the Chinese people themselves. According to a Pew Global Attitude Project, 84 percent of the Japanese people polled in a 2008 survey had a very unfavorable view of China; the same poll found that 73 percent of the Japanese had an unfavorable attitude toward Chinese people. This negative attitude toward China was by far the highest percentage among all the countries polled. By startling contrast, the United States–Japan relationship has improved dramatically over the last few years, and the favorable attitude of Japanese toward America has never been higher.

Further aggravating the Chinese–Japanese relationship and fanning the fires of Chinese nationalism are the current policies of the new Japanese Abe Shinzō administration. Revision of the postwar Japanese constitution is a high priority on Abe's agenda, and among the proposed amendments for constitutional revision is changing the role of the emperor. Japanese Shintō nationalists propose to constitutionally make the emperor the "head of state." Incomprehensible as it may seem, they want to turn back the clock and reestablish a constitutional legal link between the Japanese state structure and the Shintō religion, something that many fear would set the stage for the eventual reemergence of a toxic popular religious nationalism in Japan as seen in the prewar period. One clear recent manifestation of the clash of Chinese and Japanese nationalisms is the spate over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. I personally have received from both Japanese government sources and Chinese government officials carefully

crafted arguments (along with detailed maps) designed to justify their positions on this territorial issue.

This might come to a surprise to many people, but the explosion of nationalist tensions between the Chinese and the Japanese is even contributing to the increasing militarization of outer space. In 2007, the People's Republic of China launched an anti-satellite missile, destroying one of its own aging satellites, suggesting that China is planning to militarize outer space. In a report "China's Air and Space Revolutions" (April 2013), Lt. Col. Thomas R. McCabe, USAFR (Ret.), identifies China as an emerging air and space superpower, and reviews in detail the Chinese revolutions in advanced military combat aircraft, support aircraft, unmanned air systems, long-range precision-guided missiles, air defense, and anti-satellite capability, and manned space systems. Shambaugh also notes that "China has been steadily improving and expanding its military capabilities over the past two decades and, by some measures, can be considered to possess the No. 2 military in the world today" (Shambaugh 2013:269).

China's military buildup has not gone unnoticed in Japan. In *In Defense of Japan: From the Market to the Military in Space Policy*, Saadia Pekkanen and Paul Kallender-Umezu argue that Japan too has been militarizing space. Still more, the Liberal Democratic Party's Policy Affairs Research Special Committee on Space Development "took a cue from the rapid development of missile launches by North Korea and China's burgeoning space program to heavily criticize the existing institutional and strategic space policy structures for its failure to consider integrated space developments and utilization in a way that spoke to Japan's national security" (Pekkanen 2010:18). Thus, it appears that Japan intends to compete with China for preeminence in the East Asian region.

It should be noted too that Japanese-Korean relations on a popular level have also dramatically deteriorated. For example, in Tokyo, where I lived, studied, and worked for over a decade, I noticed that there has been a sharp increase in anti-Korean demonstrations. In May 2013 in Tokyo's Shin-Okubo district, which is the home to many Korean businesses and restaurants, Japanese nationalists protesting against foreign Korean residents openly described the Koreans as "cockroaches." The Japanese nationalist group, *Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai* (Citizens' Group That Will not Tolerate Special Privileges for Foreign Residents in Japan), founded in 2006, has been noted for its blatant racism and death threats against Koreans and Chinese, and many individuals in the group have publicly urged that Korean residents should be "Holocausted."

Meanwhile, as "China's ambitions are beginning to surface more openly, with nationalistic assertiveness increasingly undermining the carefully cultivated veil of official modesty, national moderation, and historic patience" (Brzezinski 2012: 129), other lesser powers in East and Southeast Asia have been struggling to realign themselves and adjust to the new geopolitical

realities in the region. In general, Asian nationalists on the periphery of China now see the United States as the only power to prevent China from dominating East and Southeast Asia in the future.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, we find in East Asia the rise of dangerous nationalist passions, military buildups and a revolution in military capabilities that are affecting the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Powerful voices in China are calling for the establishment of a new world order rather than seeking to reform the existing liberal international world order established by the United States after the end of World War II. Preoccupied with remaking the Middle East during the administration of George W. Bush, the United States has been slow to realize the strategic global significance of these developments. This surge in nationalism in East Asian countries must surely be a wake-up call to those who predict the obituary of the nation-state, illustrating with unmistakable clarity that the nation-state is still the fundamental institutional political unit within which global relations take place, and that nationalism, the ideological force designed to cement the peoples of the nation-state into a cohesive unit, is still by far the most powerful political force in the world. Indeed, this was the central message of Benedict Anderson's world-renowned book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

President Barack Obama responded to these developments in Asia through a major strategic reorientation in the United States' foreign policy—the so-called "pivot" to East Asia. In other words, this "pivot" to East Asia was a clear signal to America's Asian allies that America is still an Asia-Pacific power and that it would fulfill its commitments to maintain peace and stability in the region. This was a wise move. As Zbigniew Brzezinski put it in his book *Strategic Vision*, "Asian nationalisms, especially if reinforced in some cases by religious fervor, are thus a major threat to the political stability of the region" (Brzezinski 2012: 156). He came to the conclusion that the "existing international system is likely to become increasingly incapable of preventing conflicts once it becomes evident that America is unwilling or unable to protect states it once considered, for national interest and/or doctrinal reasons, worthy of its engagement" (Brzezinski 2012: 102). Still more, he also predicted that a "highly nationalistic and assertive China—boastful of its rising power—could unintentionally mobilize a powerful coalition of neighbors against itself. The fact is that none of China's important neighbors—Japan, India, and Russia—are ready to acknowledge China's entitlement to America's place on the global totem pole if it becomes vacant" (Brzezinski 2012: 85).

It seems that Brzezinski's prediction has already become a reality. Shambaugh notes that in the so-called 2009–10 year of assertiveness the

People's Republic of China picked fights with and irritated relations with Australia, ASEAN countries, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. As a direct result of this, "all these nations turned to Washington in a worried fashion" (Shambaugh 2013: 77). But what are China's ultimate intentions? Do the Chinese wish to become a stakeholder within the liberal-democratic Western world established by the United States following World War II? Or, does China aim to alter it in a fundamental way in the future? These fundamental questions are difficult to answer. But one thing is very clear: the very fact that such questions are now being seriously discussed at the highest levels of government itself reflects the immense power and influence in the world that China now wields. Responding to a question of whether the current Chinese leaders are serious about displacing the United States as the number one power in Asia, Lee Kuan Yew bluntly stated:

Of course. Why not? They have transformed a poor society by an economic miracle to become now the second-largest economy in the world—on track, as Goldman Sachs has predicted, to become the world's largest economy in the next 20 years. They have followed the American lead in putting people into space and shooting down satellites with missiles. Theirs is a culture 4,000 years old with 1.3 billion people, many of great talent—a huge and very talented pool to draw from. How could they not aspire to be number 1 in Asia, and in time the world? (Allison 2013: 2)

But Lee believes that the Chinese will not try to contest the United States militarily for world power as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War and as the Germans and the Japanese tried to do in World War II. The Chinese leaders are rational, prudent, and patient. They will not, accordingly to Lee, confront the United States militarily—at least until China has overtaken the United States in terms of economic power and technological power, which they calculate will take thirty or forty—or perhaps even fifty—years.

But can a prudent Chinese leadership contain the powerful forces of nationalism in China? The Chinese now more than ever continue to harp on their "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western imperialism and the Japanese invasion in the 1930s and 1940s. Is now the time for the Chinese to end their "victimization narrative of history" and put this behind them as they emerge as a world power? Have they conveniently forgotten the literally thousands of years of their imperialistic domination of East Asia, absorbing countless ethnicities and groups of people to the point that they no longer exist? In response to growing Chinese and Korean nationalism, will the Japanese eventually renounce their postwar pacifist constitution and rearm with nuclear weapons as some Japanese nationalists advocate? In other words, can xenophobic sentiments and ethnic nationalisms be contained in East Asia? Some people maintain that economic growth and global

economic integration will necessarily lead to a peaceful, harmonious world. Historically, however, this is false. Anyone who believes that a globalization of the economy and homogenization of material goods will somehow lead to the abandonment of deep-seated cultural traditions and fundamental values is dangerously dreaming. It is instructive to note that most Europeans believed before the start of World War I in the beginning of the 20th century that war, if it were to break out, would not last long because the economies were all interconnected. We all know what happened. Now, in the 21st century, will the same mistake be repeated?

Let's hope that President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping can forge a lasting relationship based on a broad agreement of a liberal global world order where nations play by the same rules. Meanwhile, however, Zbigniew Brzezinski offers a proposal designed to balance the growing power of China and insure the continuation of a Western-led world order throughout the 21st century. His *Strategic Vision* calls for a unified and reinvigorated Western civilization—and an expanded Western civilization to include Russia and Turkey as well as the United States and Western Europe and its offshoots such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. South Korea as well as Japanese Shintō civilization, which historically has been independent or outside the traditional Chinese-controlled world order in East Asia, would also be included in this Western alliance. But Brzezinski and other strategists know very well that such a vision hinges on the leadership capabilities of the United States. Can America retain its position of global leadership? There is reason for optimism if America can first put its house in order and get its foreign policy priorities straight.

Suggested readings

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