

# State patriotism versus popular nationalism in the People's Republic of China

Research >  
China

Mao Zedong's claim that 'China has stood up', made on the founding day of the People's Republic, may well be the defining statement of Chinese self-assertion. There has never been a retreat from this basic position. While the Chinese Communist Party continues to mobilise nationalism to secure its legitimacy, what is new in the 1990s is the emergence of a popular nationalism outside Party control, one that limits the autonomy of the Chinese state to pursue rational and coherent strategies.

By Phil Deans

National self-assertion as a core value of Chinese political elites predates the formation of the People's Republic. Two strands of nationalism emerged as a response to imperialism and modernity: the conservative nationalism of the urban bourgeoisie inspired by Western liberal democratic ideas, and the radical nationalism of the peasantry and working classes, inspired by the Marxist tradition. These clashed in the Chinese Civil War. Subsequently, Chinese nationalism in the Leninist PRC remained dominated by state objectives; only in the 1990s did growing economic, political and military capabilities enable China to exert sustained influence on regional and global politics.

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to mobilise nationalism to secure its legitimacy, the emergence of its popular variant is increas-

economic reforms, these, too, were part of the broader nationalist project. Mistakes made during the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and visible realignments of ideologically imbued foreign policy by the late 1970s, however, undermined CCP authority. Deng Xiaoping thus launched a series of reforms to bolster the Party's economic credentials.

The CCP leadership has continued to appeal to Chinese nationalism to legitimise its role, using media and education to promote a particular vision of China and its future. Disagreements within the leadership over emphasis, and how to deal with nationalist aspirations in the Chinese periphery, most notably in Taiwan and Tibet, led to a shift towards a more inclusive patriotism (*aiguozhuyi*). Economic and political reforms since 1978 saw the CCP transform itself into a conservative nationalist party.

defined nationalist objectives and the priorities of economic reform are visible in a number of policy areas, including foreign policy. Conflicts exist in the Chinese leadership over prioritising national self-assertion or economic growth, and these tensions, combined with growing popular nationalist aspirations, may hinder the autonomy of the Chinese state to pursue rational and coherent strategies. This has been readily apparent in the cross Straits relationship with Taiwan, where the unresolved Chinese civil war continues to challenge the CCP's legitimacy. The recovery of Taiwan is of fundamental importance to the CCP's nationalist project; it remains the last act in bringing down the curtain on the 'century of shame and humiliation'.

PRC policy towards Taiwan has undergone significant shifts since 1949; the current strategy appears to be one of locking the Taiwanese economy into the Chinese developmental trajectory while maintaining a hard line on Taiwan's international status. Taiwan is a major investor in the PRC; a dynamic economic relationship has developed over the past 15 years. The emergence of separatist Taiwanese nationalism, however, challenges the PRC's objectives; the Chinese leadership's response to changes on Taiwan could threaten the entire reform process by generating a regional military conflict.

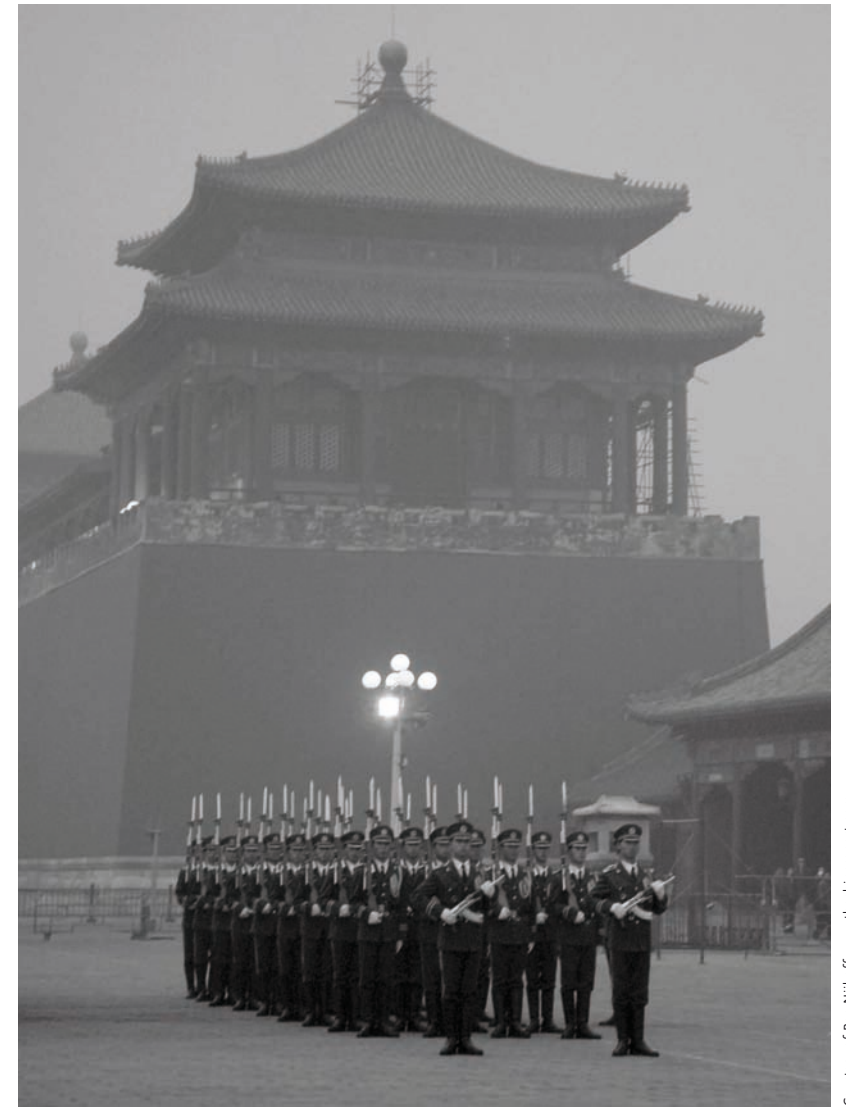
Self-assertion and popular nationalism have generated problems in the PRC's relations with Japan. Fifty years of Japanese aggression have become central in discourses of Chinese identity, and popular anti-Japanese sentiment appears to be growing. In 2003, Chinese responses to the discovery of Japanese chemical weapons stockpiles left over from the war and the activities of Japanese sex tourists in China demonstrated the depth of popular hostility. At the same time, Japanese investment, whether direct or via intermediaries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, is

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necessary for the PRC's economic development. Economic inter-dependence, however, has not translated into an improved political relationship. While the Chinese leadership wants to pursue a pragmatic policy, the mobilisation of the historical legacy limits the ability of the Chinese leadership to develop and maintain a rational relationship.

## Ideological self-assertion

Self-assertion is evident in the ideological areas of Chinese policy. The PRC continues to assert itself in international society as the self-styled



The Armed Peoples Police Unit, Tiananmen Square 2002

'leader' of the third world. Its entry into the World Trade Organisation notwithstanding, the Chinese leadership routinely criticises the liberal assumptions underpinning the ideology of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While this has not led to significant changes of policy within the Bank or the IMF, it has won support for China among developing countries. Ideological self-assertion is also evident in Chinese criticism of the international human rights regime. Since the early 1990s, this criticism has become more sophisticated; the PRC has mobilised support from other Asian countries to include economic and cultural particularities in any discussion of rights. Finally, the PRC has been a staunch advocate of state sovereignty in international society, at a time

CCP, however, is leveraged on more than improving living standards; promoting the Chinese nationalist project remains crucial. Increasingly, the leadership is under pressure from elements within Chinese society not only to deliver the economic goods, but to satisfy growing nationalist aspirations.

At times these objectives may be complementary; at others there will be significant contradiction, and popular pressure may reduce state autonomy. As such, self-assertion may be a sign of weakness rather than strength. Self-assertion is more likely to be dynamic in the ideological realm, in criticising Western universal pretensions or American unilateralism. While recent years have witnessed Chinese engagement with multilateral institutions, the leadership is likely to pursue international cooperation only when this will not antagonise popular nationalist sentiment. The issue of sovereignty is so enmeshed within the nationalist agenda that any changes will be cautious.

This has implications for non-regional powers such as the United States and the European Union. Chinese nationalism is likely to respond negatively to outside involvement or intervention. Outside powers are therefore advised to await invitation rather than threaten intervention. <

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Peoples Liberation Army

ingly a constraint on, and a threat to, the CCP. It has led to a reduction of state autonomy in a range of areas, including policy towards Taiwan, the United States and Japan. For the CCP, Chinese self-assertion is less problematic when it challenges international financial institutions and the universal aspirations of the human rights regime. What has emerged in recent years is a tension between the state nationalist project and the aspirations of popular nationalism; the key question is whether the 'Fourth Generation' of leaders under President Hu Jintao will act as a moderating influence on growing popular demands for China to assert itself.

## Nationalism and legitimacy in the PRC

Since the founding of the PRC, the CCP has derived much of its legitimacy from its nationalist credentials; this has necessitated its policy of self-assertion, most evident in the realm of rhetoric. While the CCP's legitimacy was also based on the charisma of its revolutionary leadership and its social and

Significantly, nationalism has become the rallying cry of those who challenge the CCP on a range of issues. The student-led reform movement of 1989 is perhaps the key turning point in the emergence of a new, popular nationalist discourse existing outside CCP control. The mid-1990s saw the growing expression of popular nationalism through the publication of books such as *The China that Can Say 'No'* and the use of the Internet as a forum by Chinese nationalists. While the CCP continues to mount patriotic campaigns, popular nationalist discourses are increasingly challenging the Party, witnessed in popular reactions to the dispute with Japan over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the death of a Chinese pilot in a collision with an American spy plane.

## Self-assertion versus economic growth

A neat fit between the economic goals of the reform programme and national self-assertion is far from guaranteed. The conflict between narrowly

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