

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR CHINA'S RULERS

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On July 28, China's President and Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping visited the Military Museum, a massive Soviet-style complex in west Beijing that abuts the headquarters of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA, which turned 95 on August 1, was marking the "double anniversaries" — the CPC turned 100 last year — with an expansive tribute to itself.

The message was direct, conveyed in four sprawling exhibits — each focusing on key periods in the PLA's history, from the revolutionary era to its current modernisation in the past decade under Mr. Xi, which received the biggest display, including everything from China's three aircraft carriers to its "carrier-killing" missiles.

For China, which suffered in the early 20th century both internal turmoil and humiliation by outside powers, a strong army was the only guarantor of both stability and national pride. And, the message conveyed, key to ensuring the army remained strong was who, in Mao's words, controlled the gun — the Party and Mr. Xi.

National revival

Mr. Xi, while touring the exhibition, hailed what he called a "historically great achievement" in national defence, and called on the military to make "persistent efforts to provide strategic support for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Mr. Xi, who completes 10 years in office this year and will begin an unprecedented third-term at a once-in-five-year Party Congress likely in October, has since taking over emphasised the "Chinese dream" (" *zhongguo meng* ") of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as a central theme.

To be sure, the idea of China's "rejuvenation" long predates Mr. Xi. Indeed, even Sun Yat-sen, who became the first President of the Republic of China in 1912, founded a "Revive China society" as early as 1894.

In China's more recent history, however, Mr. Xi has, more than his predecessors, emphasised the idea of "revival" and of a "strong country" (" *qiangguo* "). The Party has, under Mr. Xi, declared a third "new era", turning the page from the Deng Xiaoping era (which followed the first Mao era) where the emphasis was not on showing strength but as Deng famously put it, "biding time" and "hiding strength".

There is a reason for this shift. After three decades of a focus on economic growth, Mr. Xi and the Party leadership believed they needed to address a sense of drift and a widening chasm between the Party and the people, with Communism and Maoism fading as an ideological tether. Searching for a new binding glue, Mr. Xi has settled on "rejuvenation", which is essentially an appeal to nationalist sentiment.

Asset and liability

Nationalism, for the Party, has certainly emerged as a powerful asset, a theme carefully nurtured by State propaganda that relentlessly portrays the Party as the defender of Chinese pride in the face of an unceasing onslaught from "hostile foreign forces" in all directions.

An example of how this messaging appealed to younger Chinese is the launch of an app that became the country's most widely used in 2019, called 'Study to build a powerful country' (Or "*xuexi qiangguo*", which, intentionally, can alternatively be read as "study from Xi, build a powerful country"). Users on the app, which provides a one-stop shop for news about Mr. Xi's political doctrine (officially called 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era') and on the country's achievements, can earn points depending on how much time they spend on it and in their participation on its quizzes. Party members are required to use the app, which the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* described as "the party's most successful propaganda effort to date"

On the other side of this effort are increasingly frequent outpourings of anger at China's adversaries. In 2012, Japan's move to nationalise the disputed Senkaku or Diaoyu islands triggered street protests, which initially appeared to be blessed by the state in a country where protests are usually not tolerated, but then briefly seemed to get out of hand as protesters vandalised Japanese car showrooms.

Protesters in front of the Japanese Embassy in Beijing marched with photos of Mao, in what was then seen as a subtle dig at the then Hu Jintao administration for its perceived weakness. In 2017, it was the turn of South Korea, as mass boycotts targeted Lotte stores in China after South Korea agreed to host the American THAAD missile defence system.

Of more recent vintage was last year's mass targeting of retailer H&M, which was essentially disappeared from the Internet in China and taken off major e-commerce sites such as Alibaba, after it said would stop buying cotton from Xinjiang amid allegations of forced labour. The cancelling of H&M was so widespread that it was even taken off car-hailing apps so it became impossible to book a ride to any of its stores.

Even China's own retailers haven't been spared: just this month, the Miniso Group tendered a public apology for styling itself as a Japanese-inspired brand after describing a doll as a "Japanese geisha doll" when it was wearing a traditional Chinese dress, leading to an outpouring of online anger. The company said it is now removing all Japanese elements from its stores and "correcting its wrong path".

If the Party has seen nurturing this sentiment as an asset, it can, however, quickly turn into a liability. Indeed, the very week of Mr. Xi's museum visit served a reminder of the double-edged sword of nationalist feelings, when the Chinese government came under fire from social media users after its public warnings failed to deter U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from visiting Taiwan on August 2.

Leading the charge against Ms. Pelosi was Hu Xijin, the firebrand former editor of the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* — a paper that has on occasion become a headache even for China's diplomats by setting an expectation that is almost impossible, so much so that the Foreign Ministry has been said to have received calcium pills in the post from the paper's readers (a message to grow a backbone, and one they seem to have heeded in the Xi era's pushing of what's been called "wolf warrior diplomacy").

"If U.S. fighter jets escort Pelosi's plane into Taiwan, it is...invasion," he said, adding that the Chinese military "has the right to forcibly dispel Pelosi's plane and the U.S. fighter jets, including firing warning shots and making tactical movement of obstruction." "If ineffective," he added, "then shoot them down." China's military, of course, did not, leading to uncomfortable questions for the government if its actions were weaker than its words. Mr. Hu subsequently deleted the post.

The question of dissent

Another consequence of the wave of nationalism is that anyone who questions it is very quickly swept under its tide. Dissent is seen as being not just against the Party but against the nation, as the writer Fang Fang discovered during the early days of the pandemic in Wuhan, from where her accounts of the early chaos became widely read. She was subsequently denounced as a traitor as China emerged from the pandemic and avoided a national second wave — a success that its leadership is still trumpeting as evidence of the superiority of the Chinese model. Criticism of the current “dynamic zero-COVID” strategy is similarly seen as not just debating public health strategies but as being against the nation. “Shave your head or kill yourself to atone for your sins”, said one poster in Wuhan station directed at Fang Fang, according to a photo that went viral, while she was relentlessly attacked online.

Questioning the military is particularly sensitive, as the investigative journalist and blogger Qiu Ziming found when he questioned China’s delay in announcing that it had, some eight months after the June 15, 2020 Galwan Valley clash, lost four soldiers. After questioning the number of casualties as being implausibly low, he was jailed for “defaming heroes and martyrs” under a new defamation law.

Chinese military’s unprecedented drills surrounding Taiwan in the wake of the Pelosi visit were widely seen as being aimed at the island. In fact, they were as much directed at the audience at home. China’s Foreign Ministry said as much, as it slammed the West — and the G7 group — for criticising its military response. “They clearly believe they live in the time of 120 years ago,” she said, comparing the G7 to the eight-nation alliance that invaded China in 1900.

“We no longer live in a world where Imperialist powers can ride roughshod over Chinese people on Chinese land. Today’s China,” she added, is not the old China of 100 years ago that was humiliated and bullied.”

In Focus

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