

BEHIND CHINA'S WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

In the last few years, 'nationalism' has returned as a governing theme of global politics and relations among major world actors. However, of late, a peculiarly abrasive brand of nationalism has come to be associated with China, and more importantly with the persona of Chinese President Xi Jinping. While Beijing's recourse to nationalistic aggression as a foreign policy stratagem has gained the euphemism of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' only recently, it has been a work-in-progress for much longer and involves a state-sponsored and systemic indoctrination campaign. Under Mr. Xi, this process has become even more intense and has acquired the dynamics of 'Chinese nationalism with Xi Jinping at [the] Core'.

The Chinese Communist Party initially embraced nationalism as a co-option strategy in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Consequently, nationalism was turned into a state dogma to embed the Chinese Communist Party in the political subconsciousness of the country, and secure the filial piety of its populace. While this process marked the Chinese Communist Party's transition from a revolutionary to a national party, it forever transformed the Chinese nation-state into a Party-state. It is this 'Party-state' brand of nationalism that the international community is being confronted with.

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Today, this nationalism derives its inspiration from the idiom of 'Great Rejuvenation' and its obsession with re-achieving the glories of an imaginary past. Mr. Xi has turned this old Chinese Communist Party jargon into a hallmark of the Party's success and a tool to advance his personal ambitions. Therefore, Chinese nationalism presents a hedonistic combination of the Chinese Communist Party's *raison d'être* to remain as China's political master, Mr. Xi's relentless quest to cast the Party into his own image, and a popular sentiment fed on the rubric of the 'China Dream'. Hence, this version of nationalism is as much domestically oriented as it is directed at an international audience.

The first concerted attempt by the Chinese Communist Party to shape Chinese nationalism came with the launch of the 'Patriotic Education Campaign' in the 1990s. Consequently, a narrative of 'Century of humiliation' was invented and etched in public memory as a historical fact. At the core of this campaign was the grand design to project the Chinese Communist Party as the harbinger and sole guarantor of the peace, prosperity and sovereignty of the eternally 'victimised' Chinese nation. As such, the very legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party within Chinese politics is based upon an imaginary enemy or a threat perception.

As Mr. Xi tries to rewrite the rules of the Party, and indeed the contours of the existing world order, he needs his own enemies. Therefore, nationalist mobilisation based on an aggressive posturing and display of strength in international affairs is an important currency in this larger scheme of things. At the domestic level, this nationalist fervour has been secured through patriotic indoctrination campaigns, promotion of a leadership personality cult, and the now legendary anti-corruption drive.

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Contrary to most international analysis, the drive has become a key component of nationalist sentiment in China. This is so because corruption has for long been recognised by the Chinese Communist Party as the single biggest challenge to its existence and thereby the survival of the

Chinese nation in the political dynamics of a Party-state. In fact, the campaign has earned Mr. Xi the epithet of ‘fandui fubai’, or the one who is opposed to corruption among the Chinese public.

On the issue of propaganda operations, their centrality in Mr. Xi’s politics can be gauged from the fact that after Mao, he has become the only Chinese leader to appoint a Party theoretician (Wang Huning) on the Politburo Standing Committee.

The Chinese Communist Party’s patriotic indoctrination efforts consist of dedicated programmes for both the Party members, and the general public. The new ‘Patriotic Education’ guidelines were introduced in 2019, along with the ‘2019-2023 National Work Program for the Education and Cultivation of Party Members’. Though largely similar in content with their previous avatars, they present a much hard-line version of Communist ideology and aim for a wider dissemination of ideological indoctrination throughout Chinese society.

In addition to dictating the academic curriculum, these guidelines promote extra-curricular activities such as ‘Red Education’ history tours which include visits to Chinese Communist Party museums and ‘martyrdom commemoration sites’, ‘Study Lei Feng Volunteer Service’ programmes, etc. The stated aim of such programmes is to achieve Mr. Xi’s mission to cultivate future generations of Chinese youth with ‘Red DNA’.

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The Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda machinery also designs customised programmes that target specific sections of society as per the Party’s perceived challenges. For instance, in 2018, the Party launched a “patriotic striving spirit” campaign to ‘enhance patriotism’ among Chinese intellectuals. This came in the wake of the famous letter by (recently sacked) Tsinghua Professor Xu Zhangrun in which he had criticised Mr. Xi. Similarly, Chinese media outlets have been asked to follow the dictum of “telling China’s stories well” to shape domestic and international opinion as per the Party’s diktats.

While such top-down measures might elicit non-compliance or criticism from a public increasingly exposed to western ideas, the Party-state secures absolute acquiescence through the promotion of a personality cult around the core leadership, whereby all his actions become a rallying call for the masses.

The promotion of the Xi Jinping personality cult has become an intrinsic component of Chinese nationalism, as with Mr. Xi’s ‘Two Centennial Goals’, the meticulously cultivated nostalgia of the Chinese people for the fabled Middle Kingdom appears more tangible than ever.

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Though Mr. Xi’s personality cult has percolated into practically all aspects of Chinese society, academic establishments have emerged as its primary targets. This follows his clarion call, back in 2016, to turn China’s universities into “strongholds of Party Leadership”. Today, several elite institutions in China have either established research centres or introduced mandatory courses in ‘Xi Jinping Thought’. Interestingly, even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently inaugurated a ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ study centre to guide the “theoretical construction” of China’s foreign policy.

The Xi Jinping cult of personality is set to gain further momentum after the recently concluded fifth plenum of the Party which approved a plan for China to become a global leader in technology by 2035. With this 15-year plan, Mr. Xi has further declared his intentions to remain at the helm of China’s affairs long after his due retirement date as General Secretary of the Party in 2022.

While the decks of China's politics will only become clear with the 20th Party Congress, the international community is poised to face an increasingly aggressive Chinese nationalism as Mr. Xi continues with his march to further entrench the Chinese Communist Party's within Chinese society, and establish a personal legacy that surpasses all those of his predecessors.

Shikha Aggarwal is a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan Fellow at the National Chengchi University

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