

# Is Nationalism Crucial in China-US Relations?

## —Evidence from a Comparative Analysis

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### Abstract

Due to China's assertive diplomacy in maritime space, nationalism, described as an element of a "newly assertive China", arouses concern among Americans. With Donald Trump, who caters to both the far left and the far right, becoming the 45<sup>th</sup> US president, China-US relations have entered a period of historic uncertainty. There has been speculation that nationalism is rising in both China and the United States, which will have a profound effect on bilateral relations. Does nationalism play an essential role in China-US relations? In order to respond to this question, this essay explains the different meanings of democracy in China and the United States, and then analyzes these two different kinds of democracy how to influence the nationalism of those two countries. This essay also clarifies the relationship between nationalism and interests. We can find that international politics is inseparable from domestic politics. China's nationalism tends to be a political appeal from top leaders to the public, which can be guided by power. Although Chinese nationalism may play a small role in bilateral diplomatic activities, Chinese foreign policy is interest-oriented. By comparison, checks and balances are a cornerstone of the power structure in America. Even with "uncertain Trump" as the leader of America, policy making in the US will not materially change a lot. Thus, we find that interests, China's party-state system, checks and balances in America make both sides prudent and rational, and nationalism cannot play a decisive role in China-US relations.

### Keywords

Nationalism, China-US Relations, Party-State System, Checks and Balances

## 1. Introduction

Due to China's assertive diplomacy in maritime space and the military, nationalism, described as an element of a "newly assertive China", has aroused con-

cern among Americans. The theoretical and case research of western scholars on Chinese nationalism has an important effect on the US domestic opinion about China's Peaceful Development. However, some Chinese analysts are anxious about nationalism in the United States. With Donald Trump, who caters to the far left and the far right, becoming the 45th US president, China-US relations have entered a period of historic uncertainty. Is nationalism crucial to China-US relations?

“Resurgent nationalism” is a frequently discussed topic that has been used by some scholars to analyze the making of state diplomacy. As the most important relationship of the 21st century, the China-US relationship has been a core concern of many scholars, especially with increasing nationalism casting a shadow over political processes in both China and the United States. Nationalism is a double-edged sword. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism caused enormous damage to human civilization, accompanying the rise of a new power. In recent years, with the development of China's economy and military, the “Chinese threat” has become a common theme in the western press, journal articles, and editorials. For example, Peter Gries observed that an emotional nationalism is beginning to influence the making of Chinese diplomacy (Gries, 1994). As neighboring countries' interests clash with China's core interests (such as territorial sovereignty), the people of these countries as well those of China exhibit emotional patriotism, creating nationalist tensions that tend to escalate conflict between China and its neighbors.

This article provides a framework for understanding how nationalism affects international relations and shows that sweeping claims that nationalism will change China-US relations are deeply misguided. There are four aspects to this paper.

First, the paper discusses the research paradigms of nationalism to provide a reasonable explanation for international relations. I summarize four research paradigms of nationalism: primordialism, modernism, ethnosymbolism and postmodernism. These nationalist research paradigms are useful in understanding the nationalism of both China and America.

Second, I focus on analyzing Chinese nationalism and its influence on diplomacy. I strongly believe that an understanding of international relations should not depart from the theory of international relations. In analyzing Chinese nationalism, I start with the analytical framework of realism and show that China's nationalism tends to be a political appeal from top leaders to the public, which can be guided by power. Although Chinese nationalism may play a small role in bilateral diplomatic activities, Chinese foreign policy is interest-oriented. Because from the perspective of realists, the state remains the core actor in the making of foreign policy, the interests and security are the core concern of a state not nationalism.

Third, populism in America is analyzed for comparison with China's nationalism. Employing the theoretical framework of institutionalism, I find that

checks and balances are a cornerstone of the power structure in America. Even with “uncertain Trump” as the leader of America, policy making in the US will not materially change a lot.

Finally, I summarize the main ideas of this essay. I believe that nationalism may occasion some troubles in China-US relations but that interdependence between the two countries makes both sides prudent and restrained. Applying the theory of institutionalism, I also believe that political system construction is necessary for China to avoid escalating conflict with its neighbors and the US.

## 2. Four Paradigms of Nationalism

Different perspectives on the nation and nationalism produce different attitudes toward China-US relations. These perspectives also impact the analysis of nationalism in both China and the US. Therefore, it is vital to clarify the different research paradigms of nationalism. Four broad paradigms have emerged in this field.

The first can be called primordialism. Rooted in notions of historical origin, this view holds that the nation is a historical product that is not constructed by artifice but by nature. Emphasizing the nation’s primordial nature, the school of primordialism insists that naturalness and antiquity are a nation’s most important features. Adherents of this view strongly believe that the nation and nationalism originated before the existence of modernity (Yan, 2008). Conor Cruise O’Brien stressed that nationalism is far less important as an ideology than as an ancient complex of emotions. Because nationalism is antique and primordial, it is “deeply rooted in human nature, [and] will not simply go away” (O’Brien, 1993).

In stark contrast to the first paradigm, the second paradigm, called modernism, claims that the nation is a product of modernity. Ernest Gellner, B. Anderson, and Eric J. Hobsbawm are the outstanding representatives of “modernism”. Gellner believed that the nation is not defined only by the wishes and culture of a people but rather by political principles defined by the interaction of desires, culture and politics. He noted that the nation is not a forge of nationalism but the opposite (Gellner, 1983). B. Anderson argued that the nation is an imagined community. He stressed that the invention of printing was essential to the transmission of nationalist ideology (Anderson, 1983). Hobsbawm espoused similar views about nations and nationalism. In his view, nationalism existed before nations, and nations were generated by imagined nationalism, with states and nationalism together forging nations (Hobsbawm, 1992). The common point of agreement in this paradigm is that nationalism is not a natural product but a concept constructed by states newly emerging in modern times.

In the 1980s, the third paradigm of nationalism, ethnosymbolism, became prevalent and was no less important to scholars than modernism. Ethnosymbolism is milder than pure primordialism. However, although it does not deny the modernity of nationalism, it emphasizes the importance of nationalism’s histo-

ricity and ethnicity. In short, the third paradigm is more like “the third road” of the last two paradigms. It argues that the historicity of the nation and its ethnicity play important roles in modern states, whereas modernism overemphasizes the elite’s effect on nationalism and ignores the interaction between the elite leadership and the populace. However, ethnosymbolism also recognizes that premodern states differ from modern states. It claims that as a cultural element, the function of subjective symbolism (such as values and tradition) is more important than the social elements of the economy, politics, and the region. As Anthony Smith observes, the same historical context and cultural heritage are essential to the creation of a national consciousness (Gong & Liang, 2004).

The fourth paradigm of nationalism is postmodernism. This paradigm arose in the late 1980s and has broadened the scope of research into nationalism. The methodologies of feminism and archeology have been incorporated into this paradigm, furthering the study of nationalism. Like modernism, postmodernism stresses the modernity of nationalism (Yan, 2008).

Undoubtedly, different paradigms of nationalism research engender different conclusions about nationalism in both China and the United States and give rise to different attitudes toward China-US relations.

With regard to Chinese nationalism, which is influenced by the “new nationalism”, international relations scholars have developed new viewpoints about China’s development. Liang Xuecun observed that the argument between primordialism and modernism fully reflects an understanding of Chinese nationalism. He believes that scholars who take a primordialist perspective may maintain that Chinese nationalism reflects popular demands by the masses of the top leaders based on a stable national identity. In contrast, scholars who take a modernist perspective may argue that Chinese nationalism is a political appeal by top leaders to the people. In Liang Xuecun’s view, China’s nationalism is a two-way interaction between top leaders and the public (Liang, 2015). As he notes in his essay, “the concept of nationalism is a ‘floating signifier’ or ‘empty signifier’”. He Yinan also combines the perspectives of primordialism and modernism, noting that “little evidence to date proves that Chinese nationalism is officially orchestrated. Nonetheless, Chinese popular nationalism still has deep roots in the state’s propaganda, which has implanted pernicious myths in the national popular collective memory” (He, 2007). Conceptually or expressively, nationalism is complex, particularly its national psychology.

My own view combines primordialism and modernism. However, although resurgent nationalism plays a role in international relations and the research paradigm of nationalism may be useful in the study of international relations, an analysis of states’ relationships solely from the perspective of nationalism is not convincing. I maintain that in analyzing the relationship between nationalism and international relations, we should combine the analytical approach of nationalism and the analytical framework of international relations. Thus, in the

analytical framework of international relations, states remain the main actors. Diplomacy, in particular, depends on state actors; individual citizens cannot play a core role in diplomatic processes. Returning to the realist approach to international politics, I argue that nationalism as a method of political mobilization is policy-oriented and serves China's interests. Because states are the main actors in international society, China's nationalism is used by top leaders to appeal politically to the public.

As for the United States, the "black swan" of Trump becoming the 45<sup>th</sup> US president was, like "Brexit", outside of people's expectations. Some scholars have adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward the development of China-US relations due to uncertainty about the US leader. They warn that constant vigilance is needed to prevent unexpected developments. Yuan Zheng has observed that Trump himself is a major point of uncertainty in bilateral China-US relations and that his slogan "America first" has highlighted American isolationism (Yuan, 2016). Other scholars, such as Wu Xinbo, maintain a positive attitude about China-US relations, insisting that "China-US relations will evolve on the existing basis rather than start all over again, and the existent structure and features will shape to a large extent its future orientation (Wu, 2017)." I also hold a positive views about China-US relations. I believe that institutionalist and realist perspectives on international relations provide good reason for these views.

In summary, nationalism, an interaction between top leaders and the public, has complex origins. Sometimes it is a political appeal by top leaders to the public, and sometimes it reflects the consciousness of the public. However, in most cases, both of the above scenarios occur simultaneously. From one hand, because policy is interest-oriented and states are the main actors in diplomacy, China's nationalism act as a political appeal from top leaders to the public, and will not be crucial in the making of foreign policy. On the other hand, the checks and balances of the American system will not change, rendering America's principal diplomacy almost unchangeable. Otherwise, interdependence between the two countries makes both sides prudent and restrained.

### **3. China: State-Society Interaction, Party-State System**

From a primordialist perspective, China's nationalism may appear to arise from a history of humiliation since World War II. China's power declined beginning in the late Ming dynasty, with imperialist invasions and exploitation causing massive Chinese suffering. Particularly with attacks by Japan, the Chinese aura of a grand cultural nation faded. Historically, Japan had been a dependency of China. Moreover, Japanese militarism brought misery to the Chinese people. These collective national humiliations have impelled the Chinese to make every effort to achieve the goal of a "Rejuvenation of China". Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro warn that "driven by nationalist sentiment, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international power, China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia" (Bernstein

& Munro, 1997). Therefore, it is not surprising that with the rapid development of China's comprehensive strength, some Chinese citizens exhibit an active nationalism that demands that the Chinese government "say no" to other states.

The modernist perspective suggests that Chinese nationalism is an ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Scholars who adopt this perspective believe that in the new peaceful era, the need to lead a people's revolution in fighting against imperialist invasion has passed, and the CPC now requires a new source of legitimacy. Construction of a better image of China based on nationalism can divert popular attention from mistakes in Chinese development and enlist the people's support in developing China. As Mirana Ardoniana shows, Chinese nationalism "may be a tool to legitimize Communist Party rule domestically, and a motive for creating a better image of China in the contemporary international society" (Mirana Ardoniana, 2009).

In any case, Chinese nationalism is a complex phenomenon. It is not only a political appeal by top leaders to the people but also reflects the consciousness of the public based on collective national memory. At the level of state-society interactions, the complex origins of nationalism reflect interactions between the top leaders and the population. However, we should not think of nationalism as the only element in international relations. I believe that when nationalism interacts with international relations, bilateral or multilateral relations must be considered in theories of international relations. Even if nationalism is a factor in international relations, it will never be a crucial factor. I will discuss this idea from the perspective of realism below.

Realism views interests as the core of international relations. Even if tensions between countries can increase a country's negotiating weight during bargaining, appropriateness is still necessary. In a highly interdependent world, adversarial conflicts are zero-sum games. Especially in relations between China and the United States, two highly interdependent states cannot bear a severe shock caused by conflict. Additionally, the two states both have nuclear weapons. Both sides understand that cooperation creates a positive-sum game. The Chinese government follows consistent policy principles of "Peaceful Development" and "Win-Win Cooperation" not only because China has a peaceful disposition but also because it recognizes that China-US relations are a win-win game. In China's view, only cooperation can benefit both sides and avoid a "Thucydides trap"<sup>1</sup>. Thus, an interest orientation can motivate both China and the US to exert rational control over popular nationalism.

Over time, China's diplomacy has matured, and popular nationalism has become better controlled through pragmatic political management skills. For example, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has set up a forum on its webpage enabling

<sup>1</sup>Thucydides trap, the ancient Greece historian Thucydides pointed that the reason why the war between Athens and Sparta was inevitable was the growing power of Athens, and Sparta's fear about this power. With the rapid development of China's economy and military power, some people believe that the central of world power is shifting to China, which makes the war between China and America inevitable.

top leaders to learn about people's thoughts about foreign affairs and respond to them. Through interaction, the top leaders can make their diplomatic decisions better understood by the public.

Realists also believe that the sovereign state is the main actor in the international system. The important difference between domestic politics and foreign politics is that there are multiple actors in domestic politics but only one unit that represents the country in diplomatic affairs. Nationalist influence may be important in the making of diplomacy, but the actual exercise of diplomatic policy is another matter. Most people believe that China's government is highly centralized. However, the true system that governs the relationship between the central and local governments is a Progressive Contract system. This is why local governments can bargain with the central government. To some extent, the relationship between the central and local governments in China also influences the making of foreign policy, particularly when a foreign matter is related to the interests of a local government. However, it cannot be forgotten that China has a party-state system. The gigantic CPC system only partially achieves a system of single command. I believe that when a foreign matter relates to a local government's core interests, the central government may weigh and consider the balance of interests between the local and central government, but the central government reserves final decision-making power regarding diplomacy. Looking back at China's diplomatic activities, we find that China's diplomacy tends to be pragmatic, peaceful and focused on the long term. The central government always considers situations in their totality. Therefore, nationalism as a method of political mobilization. Based on the above analysis, it is easy to see that the relationship between the local government and the central government may constrain the making of diplomacy, but the only representative of the country, the central government, has final decision-making power over such matters. Prudence and rationality must always be considered when conducting diplomacy, whereas emotional nationalism must always be guided by the central government, policy-oriented and serves China's interests. Therefore, in relation to diplomacy, Chinese nationalism is a tool of political mobilization of the public by top leaders.

Kenneth N. Waltz epitomizes the views of the school of neo-realism. His three images of human, state and international systems provide a method of analysis of international relations. At the human level, leaders' individual styles may influence the making of diplomacy. Max Weber generalized three sources of leadership legitimacy. The first is the traditional type, namely, leadership legitimacy through authority based on traditional habits. The second is the legal type, namely, authority based on universal legal recognition. The third arises from the personal appeal of leadership. Due to his role in the creation of the new China, Mao Zedong became the absolute authority for a period of time. Through the masses' absolute support of their leader, a sense of identity with the nation coalesced under the leader's personal glamour. Pride in their leader produced un-



precedented national cohesion. Under these circumstances, nationalism is extremely easy to elicit, particularly when a diplomatic confrontation occurs. The Chinese people are now so proud of Xi Jinping that some observers worry about Chinese nationalism. However, Xi is a pragmatic leader, and China's Peaceful Development Strategy will not change. Pragmatic management will effectively guide emotional nationalism.

Finally, I use an example to demonstrate that Chinese nationalism will not be a key factor in China-US relations. Scholars who have worried about China's "rising nationalism" have been proved wrong. Alastair Iain Johnston, "using an original time-series survey dataset from Beijing and a range of indicators of nationalism extending back to 1998", shows that "Chinese nationalism has not been rising continuously over the last decade and a half, and in some measures has declined. Moreover, it is clear that younger respondents are less nationalistic than older ones" (Johnston, 2016).

In summary, state-society interactions may produce two forms of nationalism. However, when we relate nationalism to international relations, we find that the state, not the public, is the main actor in the international system. The Chinese leadership may play a role in nationalism, but "pragmatic" and "peaceful" are key words in China's diplomacy. Chinese nationalism as a method of political mobilization is policy-oriented and serves China's interests.

#### 4. The United States: Institution Founding

In contrast to China's leader, the United States' president is elected by voters. Therefore, if an individual wants to be president, he or she must win a majority of votes. It was unexpected that Donald Trump would become the 45th president of the United States. His slogan, "Make America Great Again", illustrates that the farleft and the farright have been his followers. With no experience in politics, Trump is a businessman who has been successful in real estate and finance. Many observers worry about his "uncertain acting style". Because the China-US relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century, many international relations scholars are anxious about the diplomatic trends in China-US relations. In my view, China should maintain vigilance to uncertainty at every moment. However, we should not be overly concerned about "uncertainty" for the following reasons.

First, "Make America Great Again" is a normal sentiment of a normal state. It reflects the collective awareness of a public that belongs to a powerful nation. According to the primordialist perspective, this collective awareness has historical roots, providing some idea of why Donald Trump won the American presidential election and who his supporters are. Jonathan Rothwell, using detailed Gallup survey data, analyzes the sources of Trump's support and finds that economic distress motivated support for Trump. Trump voters are less educated and more likely to work in blue-collar occupations than other voters are, but they earn relatively high household incomes (Rothwell, 2016). Their views are



also not without reason. The “black swan event” of Trump’s election and Trump’s break with previous Republican Party policies on trade, immigration, and war reflect a resurgent isolationism. “America first” illustrates that anti-globalist sentiment has gathered momentum. All of these developments may be related to the 2008 financial crisis. The damage of globalization was reflected in the crisis, which is fresh in people’s memories. Western society has had an awareness of crisis since 2008. With China’s continuing development with each passing day, this concern has increased because the gap between America and China has decreased. This may also explain why some Americans worry about China’s development. Americans perceived themselves as God’s chosen people and felt the superiority of “a city upon a hill”. With the reduction in the gap between China and the US, nationalism became incarnated in the words “Make America Great Again”. Thus, American nationalism is interpreted as the consciousness of the public. However, this nationalism, which also falls under the heading “a great America”, requires a peaceful political environment. Prudent leaders know that to benefit America, China-US relations cannot change significantly. After all, Trump is a commercial American president and will understand that cooperation with China will bring greater benefits than conflict.

Second, checks and balances are a cornerstone of the power design in America. As Americans frequently say, “The United States will not be destroyed, even if an idiot runs the government”. The most important reason for this is that America is founded under a perfect institutional system. D. Doyle has observed that “where public trust in political institutions is low, voters will be attracted to candidates who portray themselves as radical ‘outsiders’, crusading against the established political order” (Doyle, 2011). Due to the sense of crisis since 2008, people with lower incomes or who have experienced negative consequences of globalization may feel dissatisfied with the current political system in America. Such people are Trump’s most important voter. To obtain the votes of these people, Trump must cater to them and issue certain administrative orders. However, separation of powers greatly limits the power of the strongest in the American political system. The power of the state is divided into legislative, judicial and executive branches, which are relatively independent and mutually balanced. According to the American Constitution, “all legislative power is vested in Congress. The president may veto bills Congress passes, but Congress may also override a veto by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Oversight of the executive branch is an important congressional check on the president’s power and a balance against his discretion in implementing laws and making regulations”. Comprehensively surveying American presidential history, we find that many presidents have followed administrative paths quite different from the slogans with which they campaigned when running for president. Trump has the right to use slogans in his campaign for president and the right as president to issue administrative orders, but such orders cannot be applied to the public without legal and judicial clearance. The

states also have rights to refuse to administer Trump's administrative orders. For example, on July 19, 2017, the Supreme Court of the United States confirmed a Hawaii judge's verdict approving receipt by American citizens' grandparents and other relatives of American visas. Trump's anti-immigrant policies have suffered setbacks.

Third, America's diplomacy is also oriented toward interests. Yan Xuetong believes that realism can better explain "black swan events" than institutionalism and constructivism. The hypothesis of realism is that states pursue their interests. "America first" reflects the anti-globalist sentiments of people who believe the economic crisis is a result of globalization (Yan, 2017). Though the international theory mainly used to analyze "black swan events" has turned from institutionalism and constructivism to realism, complex international relationships cannot be analyzed by a single theory. In addition, in America, where checks and balances constrain Trump's presidential power, institutionalism still has great explanatory power. With respect to external relations, states are mainly driven by interests. In a highly interdependent world, China-US relations will continue to grow closer, and because Trump is a transactional president, he may well believe that American interests would be best served by mutual cooperation. The most important reason for the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not Gorbachev's reforms but that the political system of the Soviet Union could not adapt to globalization. The Gorbachev reforms were a catalyst for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. America is the largest beneficiary of globalization. The process of participation in globalization will not change even if America's strategic focus returns to the continental US. Therefore, interdependence in globalization will cause China-US relations to remain largely on the same development path.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Although nationalism is a lively surface, international relations are about prudence. As a "floating signifier", nationalism is a complex concept. The analytical perspectives of primordialism and modernism reflect two aspects of nationalism. Nationalism heavily involves the national collective memory, such that nationalism exhibits the consciousness of the public. Nationalism is also a method of political mobilization used by top leaders to bolster a government's legitimacy among the masses. It is not necessary to worry that nationalism will have a negative influence on China-US relations because there are close links between domestic and international politics. The four research paradigms of nationalism provide a suitable framework with strong explanatory power for the study of nationalism. However, these paradigms have lower explanatory power with regard to international relations. Only by combining the nationalist paradigms with the framework of international theory can the role that nationalism plays in international relations be understood. The paradigms of nationalism can explain domestic nationalism, and the theory of international relations can explain external

politics.

Nationalism is found in every state in every time period. In China, nationalism has its historical origins in imperialist aggression and the disaster of Japanese militarism, which had a profound influence on the national memory. The Chinese people have not forgotten that humiliation, nor have they forgotten the glorious moments in China's history. With the rapid development of comprehensive national strength, nationalism has emerged in a modality that emphasizes hardline diplomacy. However, the top leaders are prudent and farsighted in their diplomatic activities. Due to China's party-state system, emotional nationalism is better guided by pragmatic management skills. In diplomacy, Chinese nationalism as a method of political mobilization by the top leaders is policy-oriented, which serves China's interests. The charisma of the leadership also plays a catalyzing role in popular nationalism, with individual attraction and achievements conferring legality. Attracting multitudinous followers, "the catalyst" can guide nationalism in the right direction or its opposite. Chinese diplomacy is oriented toward peace and win-win cooperation, and the leader's charisma has enabled rich experience in governing the country during his decades-long political career. Prudence is consistent, and emotional nationalism can be guided in the right direction. Nationalism, as a means of political mobilization, is policy oriented, which serves China's interests.

Trump appears to have more freedom to do as he pleases. He can break with the policies of previous Republican Party presidents on trade, immigration, and war in favor of a more nationalist platform to cater to his supporters. However, checks and balances are a cornerstone of the power design in America. Trump's administrative orders cannot be implemented without congressional and judicial approval. Even if an order is implemented, states can cancel it by judicial means if the order breaches the state's traditions or interests. In the United States, nationalism is interpreted as the consciousness of the public. If a presidential candidate wants to win a general election, he or she must obtain the support of the vast majority of voters. But checks and balances are a cornerstone of the power design in America. In fact, Trump's administrative orders cannot be applied to the public without legal and judicial agreement.

All in all, interests and security are core to the international system. Globalization closely links China and the United States so that prudence and foresight will always figure significantly in their interactions. Institutions also constrain nationalism, and interdependence between China and the U.S makes both sides prudent and restrained. Nationalism may occasion some difficulties in China-US relations, but the continuity of diplomacy will not change just because of a change in administrations. Nationalism may occasion some troubles in China-US relations, but interdependence between the two countries makes both sides prudent and restrained. Thus, nationalism cannot play a crucial role in China-US relations. The continuity of diplomacy will not change just because of a shift in administrations.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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