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The China Debate and the Civilization Debate

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This paper examines the relationship between Chinese economic reform and foreign policy orientations. The emphasis is on the nature of Chinese nationalism and its modern transformation. The author contends that China's economic reform policy is based on economic nationalism. Its success so far has not resulted in a stronger state. On the contrary, the state power over politics, economy, foreign policy, and society has been greatly diminished.

It would be a mistake to assess Chinese foreign policy based on the assumption that a stronger economy in China will necessarily lead to an aggressive foreign policy. Completely wrong would be to suggest China will follow the example of early great powers, Imperial Germany in particular, in seeking regional or global hegemony. China is much weaker internally and its overriding concern during reform is domestic stability.

Keywords: China; nationalism; reform; foreign policy

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In the great debate on U.S. China policy, the "China threat" theme has captured the imagination of op-ed writers, think tanks, and politicians alike. Much fanfare accompanied Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*. Their thesis is a simple one, but the facts they have presented are highly questionable. According to Bernstein and Mun-

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ro, China is a "rising Asian hegemon." Because the United States has, since the Open Door Doctrine, been pursuing a policy of preventing the rise of any Asian hegemon, the long-term geostrategic conflict between the two powers is therefore inevitable.

While Bernstein and Munro based their argument on many dubious sources, such as the Hong Kong Chinese tabloids which provided, among other things, an unreliable source for "actual" Chinese military spending, their intention is a serious one. The book apparently hopes to ride the waves stirred up by Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations." While Huntington has made a real effort to discuss the differences between civilizations, unfortunately, Bernstein and Munro have not. It is more fruitful, therefore, to enter the China Debate from Huntington's perspective.

Not too long ago, the predominant thesis on China was "Sino-pessimism." The Tiananmen tragedy of 1989 had prompted numerous comments that the traditional U.S. "China card" strategy was flawed. Many believed today's China was synonymous with the China that the West encountered at the last *fin de siècle*: a crisis-ridden empire under the feeble leadership of an aging leader. Post-Tiananmen China was, according to one leading China scholar, an "erratic state" and a "frustrated society,"[1] or, according to another, a paradigm for an "anatomy of collapse."[2] The Beijing regime, like the last Manchu court, was supposedly making a last-ditch stand to preserve the *raison d'état*—Confucianism then, but communism now. However, recent developments in China have proven the views of these doomsayers to be incorrect. The pendulum has suddenly swung in the opposite direction, with China now replacing the erstwhile Soviet Union as the new international bogeyman.

Two interconnected issues must be addressed in order to ascertain how China's real intentions will develop as its economy continues its breathtaking growth. First is the nature of Chinese nationalism and second is Chinese foreign policy outlook.

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[1] Lucian W. Pye, "China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 56-74.

[2] Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Anatomy of Collapse," *The New York Review of Books*, September 26, 1991.

Nationalism

The main problem for scholars in the United States lays in their mindset. The predominant sentiment is that China, as, in Lucian W. Pye's words, a civilization pretending to be a state, has no more natural ties to bind the society together than had the Roman Empire. The prolonged existence of a centralized Chinese state is therefore beyond comprehension. This view neglects the role of Chinese ethnic nationalism. Such neglect is a result of the Western habit of treating nationalism in China as nothing more than a spin-off of the European Enlightenment, an epiphenomenon rather than phenomenon.

Nationalism is a difficult subject that often eludes the "scientific" instinct of scholars. While nationalism is a historical and dynamic force, political scientists have a penchant for stable and constant "variables." Thus the study of formal political structures is far more attractive than the study of such a dynamic phenomenon as nationalism. Historians and sociologists are able to put nationalism into perspective, but they too find the task of defining it no less trying. It is worth noting that most observers of postwar German affairs had mistakenly thought that German nationalism was on the wane, only to be confounded in November 1989.

In the case of China, nationalism is doubly neglected. First is because Chinese nationalism does not fit well with the standard Western pattern of nationalism. According to Ernest Gellner, a leading authority on the subject, "Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit must be congruent" and this congruency cannot take place until the "modernization" and "industrialization" process begins.[3] Hence the continued existence of a Chinese state based on a homogeneous Confucian "high culture" does not correspond to the European experience, where the dissolution of the Ottoman and Napoleonic empires lay the preconditions for the eventual rise of nationalism.

The second reason for the neglect of Western study of Chinese nationalism is because modern Chinese nationalism has taken a different path

[3]Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

from that of Europe. Modern Chinese states have successfully mobilized a kind of political nationalism as *raison d'état*. In the history of Communist China, political nationalism is perhaps the single most important factor allowing the party to seize and consolidate power. Economic nationalism, however, has played a relatively insignificant role. To the thinkers in the West, the distinction between "political" and "economic" nationalism makes little sense as nationalism by definition is political. Eric Hobsbawn, a distinguished British historian, has put it bluntly, "Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round."[4] Gellner pointed out further that "nationalism is," in fact, "a theory of political legitimacy." Thus the term "political nationalism" is nothing but a tautology.

In China, such a distinction makes sense. Since China had extensive and unpleasant experience with foreign domination after 1840, anti-foreign political nationalism has always been regarded as a crucial part of political legitimacy. The lack of international economic competitiveness does not necessarily undermine political legitimacy—as long as the blame can be placed at the door of foreign powers.

From 1840 onwards, Chinese nationalism has expressed itself in three faces. "Zhang Binglinism," "Sun Yat-senism," and "Deng Xiaopingism." Zhang Binglinism advocates nationalism with the preservation of Chinese tradition, or "national essence" (*guocui*). Sun Yat-senism is a Westernized ideology to which tradition is of little value. Deng Xiaopingism is an economic nationalism very similar to the theory proposed by the German political economist Friedrich List.

Zhang, a radical anti-Manchu revolutionary and a classic scholar, was influenced by the Western theories of evolution, believing in the survival of the fittest. He considered history the soul of a nation and disagreed with the *fin de siécle* reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, criticizing their rationale for reform as being ahistorical. Kang went so far as to suggest that Confucius was an ancient sage who had many centuries ago set a grand scheme for the present reforms. Since the reforms were sponsored

[4]Eric Hobsbawn, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.

by the Manchu court, it was impossible to invoke Chinese ethnic nationalism and thus failure was inevitable. Zhang was particularly opposed to the May Fourth "New Cultural Movement" of 1919. He vehemently defended the Chinese classics but was largely ignored by the intellectual elite at the time. "Power comes from the barrel of the gun" had become the motto followed by both the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party of China) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Sun Yat-sen was a radical revolutionary with an insignificant education background. Born in China, but educated in Hawaii and British Hong Kong, Sun had neither an in-depth understanding of China nor the West. This turned out to be his strength, however. He built a "tough leader" image through typical Western methods, including the use of media publicity. Throughout his life Sun was more an opportunist political player than a deep thinker. To Sun "the principle of nationalism is equivalent to the 'doctrine of the state'." Confusing nationalism with "*etatisme*," Sun nevertheless formulated a set of "The Three Principles of the People" following the fashionable Western trend. He argued that the only way to mobilize the masses for participatory democracy was through nationalism. Moreover, he justified a strong state based on state-promoted political nationalism conditioned by alleged or real foreign threat. Hence he argued for the necessity of three stages of democratic development: the stage of military government, the stage of tutelary government, and the stage of constitutional government. The problem with Sun's articulation is that nothing can guarantee the first stage will ever turn into the second and thus third. While Sun Yat-senism is essentially a syncretism and tautology, it is still politically convenient. It must be pointed out that both the KMT and the CCP continued to develop within the framework of Sun Yat-senism—political nationalism had been a cornerstone for the government of China until Deng Xiaoping made a stunning breakthrough.

Perhaps due to his long stay in Europe as a youth, Deng had developed a keen sense of the different levels of economic development throughout the world. When the CCP took power in 1949, the leadership found the job of managing a successful economy no less a trying task. Mao Zedong refused to accept this reality and continued to rely on old revolutionary methods such as political campaigns and mass mobilization. China had

since been punished severely by the "invisible hand" of the market. Deng was among the very few top leaders who dared to discuss the topic of the market. Deng once advocated a nonideological approach to economic development, stating that "no matter whether the cat is black or white, it is a good cat if it can catch mice." Suffering two brutal purges, Deng stuck to his views and was finally able to put them into practice after his last rehabilitation. Deng's argument was simple: If the Chinese failed to develop their economy, their country would be "deprived of its global citizenship" (*kaichu qiuji*).

Deng's approach was to consciously downgrade the importance of political nationalism and to give top priority to economic nationalism, which, as was practiced by Japan after World War II, was meant to pursue national prestige through economic development. Hence the Chinese Communist version of political nationalism, which was deeply embedded in Marxist-Leninist ideology, was all but abandoned. This nonideological approach to development happened to fit well into the post-Cold War world where ideological conflict has become subordinate to economic competition.

When the Chinese leaders began to search for a working development model in the late 1970s, they were faced with a strange world. Technology, they knew, was moving rapidly into the twenty-first century, yet China lagged considerably behind. Moreover, the dominant economic philosophy in the world remained laissez faire but the most dynamic model—the East Asian NIC (newly industrialized countries) model of state-led growth—seemed counterintuitive, as the economies did not rely on natural endowments. Important, however, was that this model did not initially call for political loosening up. Indeed, as Friedrich List argued a long time ago: "Political power not merely secures to the nation the increase of its prosperity by foreign commerce and colonies abroad, it also secures to it the possession of internal prosperity, and secures to it its own existence, which is far more important to it than mere material wealth."[5] The Chinese were naturally impressed by this model and Deng was thus able to begin radical economic reforms.

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[5]Friedrich List, *The National System of Political Economy* (London: Longmans, 1928), 150.

The dilemma of China's recent economic success is that while economic nationalism has taken deep roots in Chinese society, it also places enormous constraint on the political system. To the population at large, Deng's "black cat, white cat" philosophy can easily be reversed. As long as economy does well, the leadership can continue to take credit; economic troubles, however, can threaten the party's claim to power. Hence some sort of political plurality and reform is inevitable. Deng himself realized this fact in his last years. Thus, a comprehensive grass-roots democracy, known as village democracy, is now well under way, affecting the majority of the population.

A comparison with the Soviet case is illuminating. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms emphasized both *perestroika* and *glasnost* at the same time. In practice, however, the Russian leaders began *glasnost* without a solid economic foundation. When economic chaos came, the central government had no choice but to accept responsibility for all the failings. Hence the benefit of having a centralized government was put into question. John Locke once made a distinction between the dissolution of a government and of a society. Locke believed that the dissolution of a society had to be prompted by foreign invasion. Since the "Soviet society" is as artificial as the Soviet state, its dissolution after *glasnost*, even without a foreign invasion, seemed inevitable. In Chinese history, the dissolution of a government is nothing new, but the society always survives as a relatively unified whole. Thus the problem is whether political reform can keep pace with economic momentum. The perennial problem for the Chinese has always been how to manage central-local relations.

Marxism-Leninism is in effect moribund in China. The wholesale transplant of Western value, as implied by Michael Mandelbaum,[6] is both impractical and destabilizing. Confucian tradition is by far considered by the Chinese leadership to be too reactionary. This is no surprise because the Communist movement came from the cradle of the anti-tradition May Fourth Movement of 1919. Economic nationalism has replaced political

[6]Michael Mandelbaum, "Westernizing China and Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (May/June 1997): 80-95.

nationalism as the tool for the regime to maintain unity. The problem is, while political nationalism can be justified by Communist ideology, economic nationalism cannot. Thus one must raise the question of whether a marriage of Zhang Binglinism and Deng Xiaopingism is the only solution. Japan has certainly done a good job by maintaining a balance between preserving national essence and a market economy. Why is it that China cannot do the same?

By and large, modern Chinese nationalism (political or economic) has primarily functioned as a guaranteed *raison d'état*. It is a major part of the ongoing process whereby China has sought modern identity after the myth of "Middle Kingdom" was crushed in 1840. The overwhelming objective to preserve the nation-state—territorial expansion—has rarely been on the agenda.

Irredentist claims on Taiwan and some Pacific islands aside, Chinese nationalism is much less harmful compared with the nationalist movements in Europe that have taken place since the nineteenth century. Western commentators tend to belittle the Chinese concept of "stability and unity" (*anding tuanjie*) that has been part of recent reforms, seeing it as a desperate move for political survival. This criticism overlooks the fact that "stability and unity" have been the number one concern of the state since the beginning of reform and is moreover an integral part of the East Asian model of development. Is "stability and unity" an empty slogan designed to protect the position of Beijing elites or does it also correspond to China's national interest after the Cold War? Ironically, the collapse and chaos of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia seem to suggest it is both.

Without stability and unity, Chinese nationalism may indeed become a dangerous force. Thus, when Huntington warns of the coming clash between Confucian and Christian civilizations, he seems to neglect the fact that the People's Republic of China is far from being a Confucian state and, for the moment, is reluctant to become one.

Foreign Policy Outlook

The Civilization Debate and the China Threat Debate have inevitably

focused on the "new outlook" of Chinese foreign policy, which is considered corresponding to its desire to become an Asian hegemon. Two assumptions underline the prevailing fear of China in the United States. First, China is seen as a Germany of the late nineteenth century: an aspiring and late-coming Great Power embarking on a dangerous road of *Weltpolitik* intent on destabilizing the existing international system.[7] China's newly acquired economic might will surely prompt the state to follow in the footsteps of the other Great Powers in history: to expand and to seek a place under the sun. Second, China, like all the preceding Great Powers, has a clear objective in foreign policy and possesses a foreign policy apparatus to pursue that goal. Not being a Western democracy, China's policy orientation must be hostile to the Western world.

However, these two assumptions could not be more wrong. To begin with, the two assumptions are more a reflection of *fin de siécle* anxieties than of China's reality. They flatly contradict each other. The first assumption implies that China has somehow been "Westernized," and, similar to other Great Powers in history, Chinese foreign policy will follow the same logic developed after the establishment of the Westphalia system in 1648. China's foreign policy behavior is seen to be deeply embedded in some universal law of international relations. The second assumption seems to complain that China is not at all "Westernized" as far as its political system goes. The Chinese handling of issues such as ethnic minorities, human rights, and political opposition appears a far cry from the Western norms and values. Thus, following this reasoning, there must be a remarkable incongruence between China's domestic and international policies.

This contradictory assessment of Chinese foreign policy reflects a longstanding intellectual habit in the United States to study "modern China" through an "impact-response" paradigm. Best represented by John King Fairbank, this paradigm asserts that "modern China" after 1840 can only be understood through a framework of foreign impact and Chinese response. The former is an active partner in this interaction, and therefore a decisive factor. The inner dynamics of China thus becomes, implicitly at

[7]A typical view was expressed by Paul Wolferwitz, *The National Interest*, July 1997.

least, irrelevant. As a result, studies of modern China tend to be a study of scholars' own perceptions instead of the realities of China, often underscored by a dying desire to promote Western impact on China.

The irony is that the rapid economic growth in China has not resulted in a stronger state. On the contrary, the state monopoly of power over politics, economy, foreign policy, and society as a whole has diminished considerably. Thus, the question that needs to be answered is how relevant is Chinese foreign policy to domestic policies. Upon closer look, Chinese foreign policy today remains by and large conditioned by domestic concerns. To a great extent, China is facing an international environment much similar to that during Empress Dowager's time. The economic self-strengthening movement has encountered threats to its political stability. A hostile Western world seems to be embarking on another round of misreading Chinese intentions.

This governmental mentality strongly recalls the Empress Dowager's reform movement in the late nineteenth century, characterized by a general apathy toward foreign or "barbarian" affairs. The ideal situation was then understood to be a fine balance between Western-style industrialization and preservation of national essence. The former was the means, the latter the end. However, the tension between the two objectives, known as the "*ti-yong*" contradiction, intensified. The Manchus could not resolve this tension by invoking popular Chinese nationalism because the Qing Dynasty itself was a minority ruling house.

In theory the Communist regime could have solved the problem, for the Communist movement in China represented nothing if not Chinese nationalism. But that nationalism was a distorted one, deriving from the half-baked and Westernized intellectual movement of 1919. This movement was aimed at destroying tradition, hence the communists could not fall back on tradition to enhance legitimacy. Thanks mainly to the Japanese invasion, the communists were able to mobilize the masses and thus succeeded in gaining power. The key to the CCP's success was political nationalism. Mao could handle the "*ti-yong*" problem as long as he refused to link the Chinese economy to that of the capitalist world.

The recent modernization experiment has, however, revived a similar tension: how to modernize the country without shaking its political founda-

tion? The political result of the economic reforms has been the loss of political nationalism as the most important instrument for government. Making money from abroad requires a peaceful foreign policy, but economic nationalism has brought about internal political instability. This instability is further encouraged by the Western powers, and hence Beijing adopts a hostile attitude toward the West. Thus the CCP has inherited a virile version of the *ti-yong* contradiction. This tension reached a high point in 1989.

For the past decades, the second generation of the Communist elite has quietly but decisively manned the state, the party, and the military machines. It is the outlook of this new elite that will determine China's foreign policy orientations for years to come. From all available evidence, this new elite is primarily interested in power and money—defined broadly. Foreign policy has so far been of secondary importance. Among all government organs, the foreign office has failed to attract the best and brightest of the elite.[8] For the new elite, a foreign policy career is neither lucrative nor rewarding politically—but seems rather a thankless job. Western alarmists are raising the specter of a "China threat" and the U.S. administration is toying with the concept of "containment." The main task of foreign policy is reduced, in the eyes of the new elite, to an all but hopeless effort to assuage these foreign fears, and these fears are expected to rise in conjunction with China's enormous trade surplus.

Here we see another sign of the parallel between the two *fin de siècles*. The later generations of the bannermen elite were lethargic and uninspiring in comparison with their forefathers. The current new elite has mostly swarmed into sectors that control various business-related activities. In the short run, this lack of interest in foreign affairs may prove to be dangerous, since the policy initiative is left to professionals who do not exercise real power in decision-making. Hence an erratic and accident-prone foreign policy might become the typical state of affairs. In the long run, the remarkable instinct for commercial activity of the new elite may

[8]For a detailed chart depicting who is doing what among this elite, see Michael Swaine, *Domestic Policy and Foreign Policy* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1995), appendix.

prove to be a quantum leap in the traditional mentality, as the Chinese Mandarins have throughout history always looked down upon commercial wheeling and dealing. Such a change of the mentality could have a soothing impact on China's foreign behavior.

However, the new elite for the moment has to be preoccupied with Deng Xiaoping's controversial legacies. It is misleading to call Deng the ex-paramount leader of China a great Westernizer of China. Mao once said he had left two legacies in his life: the Chinese revolution and the Cultural Revolution. The former was undoubtedly a great success, the latter a disaster. Deng himself arguably has two legacies: economic reforms and the Tiananmen Incident. Again the former was a success, the latter a catastrophe. How does one square these two seemingly contradictory achievements? Mao at least had a theory: the Cultural Revolution was a "Continued Revolution"; its rationale and practice carried over many distinctive features of the previous one: violence and class struggle. Deng was not able to link his two legacies together, because the Tiananmen decision of 1989 was not a well-thought-through one. It was a panic reaction, and a colossal mistake.

But below the surface, there is a close link between the two legacies. The reform was based on a rather archaic model—the Listian Model. The suppression at Tiananmen was through an archaic method—the typical communist method of violent suppression. The elite in 1989 panicked and could not find a better way to maintain domestic stability, hence such an outdated method was used. It is doubtful if the reformers would have been equally impressed by the Western economic model without the existence of the conduit of the so-called East Asian model.

Yet the Tiananmen Incident has destroyed political consensus underlining the East Asian model. For the generation who cannot remember the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen is the only painful event that will stay in their minds forever. For the older generation, they can only recall similar occurrences in the days of the Nationalist regime or even during the Japanese invasion. With two to three generations disapproving of this archaic method of control, it is impossible for the event to be buried. This will be the hardest nut for the post-Deng leadership to swallow and digest.

Moreover, Tiananmen will stay with the current leadership as many

were directly implicated in the affair. Among the ruling elite, the worst victim in this regard is the military. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) reluctantly performed their duty when called upon in 1989. Several prestigious generals openly declared disapproval of the party leadership at the time, an unprecedented occurrence which underlined the deep split within the party. Moreover, before 1989, the PLA's reputation had never been so tarnished. Even during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, the military emerged as both political and moral winners. Above all, the military did not use violent means to pacify the Red Guards who were often armed and dangerous. The military, in fact, was the only stabilizing factor. The PLA has been king-maker and king-unmaker over the past decades and it is thus difficult to assume its voice will not be heard this time. Given popular disapproval and the split within the elite over this notorious affair, it is the military that will probably call into question the issue of legitimacy during the Tiananmen Incident. This affair will haunt the leadership for sometime to come; the current political setup in China can by no means be considered stable. If a split among the current leaders should ever occur, the Tiananmen question may become a powerful issue around which factions can rally support. Li Peng's reputation has long faded, yet Jiang Zemin may find himself in an awkward position as the Tiananmen question may prove to be his Achilles heel for years to come.

Will the PLA help turn back the clock of economic reform? It seems unlikely. Not only because the military has benefitted enormously from the reform, but also because the PLA has never been truly an entity separate from the civilian society. Unlike the Bolsheviks who built a Red Army after the seizure of power, the PLA brought the CCP to power and manned the state machine after 1949. No country in the world has seen such a symbiotic relationship between the military and the rest of society. The PLA is deeply concerned with the rehabilitation of its reputation. It did not have an issue to fight for during the Cultural Revolution. The military thus successfully assumed a neutral position as mediator between various political factions. The PLA now does have an issue in mind—the reassessment of the Tiananmen affair. There seems no reason for the PLA to dismantle reforms, however, which are both popular and rewarding.

To summarize, Chinese ruling elite is primarily worried about foreign

policy's domestic economic and political impact—not the other way round. Thus it will be significantly constrained by the country's ability to maintain sustained economic growth. The domestic market is far from fully developed; the international market will continue to provide the supplies needed for economic growth. The dependency on both markets will ensure a need for a peaceful environment at home and abroad. A long-term inward-looking and relatively peaceful foreign policy is on the horizon.