From Affirmative to Assertive Patriots: Nationalism in Xi Jinping’s China

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Chinese nationalism has been driven from two directions: by the state from top-down and by populist forces from the bottom-up. For many years, Chinese nationalism was driven more by the need to survive as a country (affirmative) than driven by big power ambition (assertive), because the communist state made effective efforts to control the expression of popular nationalism that was more emotional and hostile to Western powers. Making use of nationalism for regime legitimacy, the communist state took a pragmatic attitude to make sure that Chinese foreign policy was not dictated by the emotional rhetoric of popular nationalism, which would have damaged cooperative relations with Western powers and Asian neighbors that China’s economic success depended heavily upon after the Cold War.¹

The pragmatic control of popular nationalism began to loosen after the 2008 financial crisis.² Xi Jinping has intensified the patriotic education campaign and information control after he came to power in 2012 to inflame nationalist sentiments and rally support for China’s great rejuvenation. Xi’s campaign has produced a state-led popular nationalism characterized by intolerance to any criticism of the CCP regime and its policies, hostility toward Western powers

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and values, and assertiveness in pursuing expanded national interests. The emphasis of Chinese nationalism has thus shifted from affirming an exclusive but positive “us” to combating a distinctly negative “them.”

Historically, nationalism has inspired nations to gain independence from alien rule and contribute to modernization. But extreme ultra-nationalism has led to brutal wars and violence. The emergence of state-led popular Chinese nationalism has led to a roiling sense of anxiety in many countries about the possibility of belligerent Chinese nationalism fanning into wider geopolitical conflicts, making Beijing’s foreign policy inflexible. Seeking to understand whether this anxiety is warranted, this article explores how Chinese nationalism has been transformed from more affirmative to more assertive, and how Xi Jinping’s patriotic education campaign and information control has produced combative patriots who have stood firm behind Xi Jinping’s China dream of national rejuvenation. Joining the ranks of combative patriots, Chinese diplomats have become wolf warriors in order to win diplomatic battles and the Chinese military has accelerated modernization in readiness to take back Taiwan and safeguard China’s territorial integrity in territorial disputes with the neighbors, thereby pushing China into rampant expansionism and geopolitical conflicts.

State-led versus Popular Nationalism

Nationalism in the 1990s represented an aggregation of political forces to hold China together.

The CCP began wrapping itself in the banner of nationalism in the early 1990s to compensate for the collapse of communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and to rebuild broad national support. Nationalism remained a most reliable claim to the Chinese people’s loyalty and the bedrock of shared political value, including critics of the communist regime. The regime’s nationalist credentials were bolstered in the fight against Western sanctions after a succession of events: the Tiananmen crackdown on anti-government demonstrations in 1989, stopping Taiwan independence after Taiwan’s first popularly elected President Li Tenghui visited the US to openly advocate for Taiwan independence in 1996, and winning the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. State-led nationalism portrayed the communist state as the embodiment of the nation’s will and has identified the Chinese nation closely with the CCP.

Mobilizing the whole government apparatus, the CCP launched a patriotic education campaign to construct and propagate its own version of nationalism.
in the early 1990s. Young people, usually cynical about other creeds pushed out by the regime, were the primary target. The core of the campaign was “education in national conditions” (国情教育) which unambiguously held that China’s national conditions were unique and not ready to adopt Western-style liberal democracy. One-party rule was required to maintain political stability, a precondition for rapid economic development, even though the state continued to engage the outside world, particularly advanced Western countries, for the market, technology, and investments urgently needed for China’s economic growth.

Redefining the regime’s legitimacy on the basis of its provision of political stability and economic prosperity, the Communist state, which would otherwise be hardly acceptable to the Chinese people after the collapse of communism in other parts of the world, was justified by this unique national condition. As a result of a volatile mix of rising pride and lingering insecurity during these profound transformations, nationalism represented an aggregation of the various political forces of liberals and conservatives to hold China together.3 In response to perceived foreign pressure that was said to erode, corrode, or endanger the national interest of China, communist leaders were flexible in tactics, subtle in strategy, and avoided appearing unnecessarily confrontational, but were nonetheless uncompromising in the face of foreign demands that involved vital interests or triggered historical sensitivities such as Taiwan, Tibet, and human rights issues. In all these cases, the CCP strove to make sure that nationalist sentiments would not jeopardize the overarching objectives of political stability and economic modernization.4

Effectively controlling nationalist expression was not easy, however, because nationalism was not endogenously constructed by the state; populist sentiments were also part of the orchestra. Popular nationalism defines the nation as composed of citizens who have the duty to support the state in safeguarding national rights but also have the individual rights to politically participate in foreign policymaking.5 Holding the state accountable to fulfill its promise of safeguarding China’s national interests, popular nationalism often charged the state as being too soft to the provocations of the United States as well as Japan, and called for Beijing to stand firm in completing the historical mission of national unification with Taiwan.

The rise of popular nationalism was expressed powerfully in the instant best-selling “say no” books of the mid-1990s, such as China Can Say No, China Still Can Say No and How China Can Say No. Because most popular nationalists were young, they were also known as “angry youths” (愤青) and sometimes acted in ways that created difficulties for Beijing.6 For example, when in 1999 the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists, these angry youth quickly concluded that the US bombing was
deliberate and led demonstrations that damaged the US embassy buildings in Beijing. They also led the anti-American protest in 2001 after a mid-air collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a US Surveillance airplane (EP-3) along China’s coast. In 2005, they mobilized 20 million people’s internet signatures to oppose Japan’s bid to join the UNSC and led massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major Chinese cities to protest Japan’s approval of history textbooks, which they said whitewashed Japanese wartime atrocities, and to express opposition to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s visits to the war-tainted Yasukuni Shrine.

Although the outpouring of popular nationalism was a propaganda bonanza for the state’s desire to demonstrate its mass support and legitimacy, its emotional nature was often linked with anti-foreignism and thus posed a daunting challenge to Chinese leaders who prescribed extensive interactions with foreign countries to secure a wide range of inputs essential to economic development. Bottom-up popular nationalism was thus a double-edged sword: both a means to help confer legitimacy on the government and a means for the Chinese people to judge the performance of the state. Without constraints, nationalism could become a dangerous Pandora’s Box and release tremendous forces with unexpected consequences. If Chinese leaders could not deliver on their nationalist promises, they would become vulnerable to popular nationalistic criticism, which was particularly difficult to control in the emerging cyber-age when the state had not yet learned how to control social media activity. The regime therefore was constantly playing catch-up with popular nationalist emotions; the cost of overplaying nationalism could be disproportionately high.⁷

Balancing these positive and negative aspects, the state adopted a two-pronged strategy throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Tolerating and even encouraging the expression of popular sentiments to defend China’s vital national interest, Beijing’s strong nationalist rhetoric was often followed by prudential policy actions. Describing nationalism as a force that must be “guided” in its expression, the Chinese government took repeated actions to restrain anti-foreign expressions of popular nationalism, going so far as to ban some anti-foreign demonstrations. Talking tough but acting in a calculated manner, the state made every effort to monopolize the discourses of nationalism and their expression to harness its direction, content, and intensity, appealing to or dismissing nationalism whenever the state needed.⁸

The Geopolitical Turn

Chinese state nationalism made an assertive geopolitical turn after the global financial crisis in 2008. With the West in financial turmoil while China
maintained economic growth, many Chinese believed that the historic opportunity had emerged for China to resume its great power status, leading to the convergence of nationalist and geopolitical themes into a discourse of what London School of Economics professor Christopher Hughes has called a “Geopolitik nationalism ... shaped by many of the ideas that characterized geopolitical thinking in Germany and Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.” The advocates of geopolitik called for strong leaders to build a strong military and use force against separatists and enemies.9

White-knuckling its way through the final years before handing power over to Xi Jinping in 2012, the Hu Jintao administration was reluctant to constrain the expression of geopolitical nationalism. Hardline nationalist policies were popular because they could become springboards to power for ambitious and unscrupulous leaders during a tumultuous period. As a result, even active-duty military officers could openly urge the government to take tough positions on foreign policy issues. A group of bellicose military officers became media stars and online performers, catering to a vast domestic audience eager for news about China’s growing military power and instilling a sense of national pride that China had become strong and a force to be reckoned with. Colonel Dai Xu’s popular book C-Shape Encircle and provocative speeches called for Chinese leaders to light a fire in the United States’ backyard of Latin America because the United States put a fire in China’s backyard of the Asia-Pacific.10 Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu’s book, The China Dream, called for China to abandon low-profile foreign policy and build the world’s strongest military to deter the wary United States from challenging China’s rise while the West was still mired in an economic slowdown.11

Raising the stakes regarding the routine and predictable US sale of arms to Taiwan, Beijing for the first time in 2010 warned it may sanction US defense firms behind the sales in order to “reshape the policy choices of the US.”12 In response to US President Obama’s meeting with the Dalai Lama earlier that year, Beijing reminded the West of the tough statement that Deng Xiaoping once made: “no one should expect China to swallow the bitter fruit that hurts its interest.”13 Embarking on a new pattern of aggressively asserting its suzerainty and sovereignty over the disputed maritime territories in the South and East China Seas, China reacted strongly to a chain of incidents from 2009 to 2012, including repeated attempts to prevent Vietnamese and Philippine vessels from exploring oil and gas in disputed waters. China also sought punitive actions during the Sino-Japanese standoff over Japan’s detention of a Chinese trawler captain in 2010 and the Japanese government’s decision to nationalize the

Chinese state nationalism made an assertive turn after the global financial crisis
disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012. These incidents provoked diplomatic crises during which China displayed its punitive power of sanctions to support its sovereignty claims.

Hawkish voices and nationalistic commentators found an easy target during the 2012 standoff between Chinese surveillance ships and a Philippine warship near what is known as Scarborough Shoal to the Philippines and the Huangyan islands to the Chinese. The beat of war drums was unusually strong as the Chinese popular nationalists believed that the Philippines was weak and could not punch back. Major General Luo Yuan urged China to take “decisive actions,” including “war at all costs,” to reinforce Beijing's claim on the Scarborough Shoal. The Global Times, a state-run newspaper known for its popular nationalist editorials, warned the countries disputing China’s maritime claims to be prepared for “the sounds of cannons” if they did not change their ways in working with China.

The Patriotic Struggle in Xi's New Era

The CCP regime since the collapse of communism at the end of the Cold War has maintained legitimacy primarily based on two pillars: economic performance and nationalism. As economic growth has slowed down considerably since Xi Jinping came to office in 2012, he has intensified the patriotic education campaign and increased control of information throughout Chinese society to highlight the country’s rising national strength and promise the people to return China to the historical apogee of power.

Targeting Youth through Patriotic Education Campaigns

Never hesitating to tell the Chinese people how they should think, Xi’s campaign, like the earlier one in the 1990s, has inoculated youth through penetration into the curriculum of education systems. A 2016 directive from the Ministry of Education ordered across-the-board patriotic education to suffuse each stage and aspect of schooling through textbooks, student assessments, museum visits, and the internet. Patriotism was required to be integrated into university, secondary, and primary school exams and courses. Proselytizing beyond China’s borders, the directive demanded that Chinese students studying abroad be immersed in classes and textbooks that promoted loyalty to the Communist Party. The Outline on the Patriotic Education in the New Era,
adopted by the Politburo in September 2019, even insisted on starting patriotic education from infancy by “focusing on consolidating the roots and concentrating on the soul.”

Making a clear transition from affirmative to assertive nationalism, the campaign has adamantly targeted Western liberal values. A joint directive from the CCP Central Organization and Propaganda Departments called for “carrying forward the spirit of patriotic struggle,” a new term used by Xi Jinping to require the Chinese people to fight against any “unpatriotic” ideas and behaviors. While Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) emphasized “public opinion guidance” (舆论导向) and Hu Jintao (2003-12) talked about “public opinion channeling” (舆论引导), Xi has called for “public opinion struggle” (舆论斗争), making the stakes much higher. The terms of “guidance” and “channeling” in Chinese were primarily invocational or affirmative, seeking to help Chinese people follow the party line, while the word “struggle” calls on Chinese people to actively target external forces and is therefore assertive.

Xi’s “patriotic struggle” has primarily targeted liberal intellectuals in the education sector. Curricula and speech at universities have always been tightly controlled, but students and faculty pushed the limits from time to time and opened up space for freer expression. Xi Jinping has gone into overdrive to impose uniformity of thought among university teachers and students. The CCP Central Committee issued the infamous “Document No. 9” in April 2013. Ordering officials to combat the spread of subversive currents that could undermine the Party’s rule, the document instructed “Seven Don’t Speaks,” including Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, Western-inspired notions of media independence and civil society, ardently pro-market neo-liberalism, and nihilist criticisms of the Party’s traumatic past. Xi’s speech at a national propaganda work conference on August 9, 2013 warned that because the disintegration of a regime often started from the ideological sphere, the Party had to uphold leadership, management, and discursive power in ideological work to avoid “irreparable historical mistakes.”

This patriotic struggle gained momentum in November 2014 with the publication of a Liaoning Daily article that accused university teachers across China of being too “negative” about the country but over-complimentary of Western liberal ideas. The article was a dangerous encroachment on academic freedoms that were already under serious threat. But the attack was reinforced by Xi’s response at a National Higher Education party-building conference in December 2014 that demanded strengthening Party control and cleansing Western-inspired liberal ideas from universities. Following Xi’s guidance, universities cracked down on teaching Western concepts of individual rights, freedom of expression, representative government, and the rule of law. Faculty and students must now take lessons in Xi thought, the subject of the popular app that requires users to
sign in with their cellphone number and real name to earn study points by reading articles, writing comments, and taking multiple-choice tests.

While Xi’s immediate predecessors tolerated limited expression of liberal ideas, university teachers who dare to deviate from textbooks in Xi’s new era are reported by student informants who keep tabs on their professors’ ideological views. Professors are punished for making comments critical of the government. Numerous writers, rights lawyers, and activists, who once served as the conscience of the nation, have been silenced—in July 2015, the authorities rounded up and interrogated about 300 of them across the country. Some disappeared or were forced into exile. After openly criticizing Xi for his initial mismanagement of COVID-19, Professor Xu Zhangrun of Tsinghua University was detained on July 6, 2020, for a period of six days on bogus and laughable charges of “soliciting prostitution.” He was then fired from his university.

Enhancing Information Control
The regime’s overwhelming control of information has enhanced the effects of patriotic education in the new era. In 2000, China began to build the Great Firewall of censorship and surveillance, aimed at restricting content, identifying and locating individuals, and providing immediate access to personal records. The Firewall initially blocked only a handful of sensitive Chinese-language websites. While it was relatively easy to circumvent the blockage to discuss social and political issues and pass on information about unofficial versions of Chinese politics and history, Chinese internet users (known as netizens) still became irritated about the firewall.

But the Firewall has been built up tighter in Xi’s new era. Griping on the media, expanding surveillance efforts to control the thinking of the people, and ratcheting up the pressure for journalists to speak with one voice to support party policies, Xi waged unrelenting crackdowns on the internet and blocked channels through which people could gain perspectives different from official narratives. The government has established a huge internet army to advance its narratives and block “unhealthy content.” The most renowned element is the 50 Cent Party, internet-literate youths who are paid 50 Chinese cents for each post to trawl the web for negative news and opinions, then refute them with positive information. Blocking access to all sensitive websites...
and filtering keywords typed into search engines, the government has used AI-powered censors to scan images and find sensitive words and phrases. Use of unauthorized Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) is illegal and shuttered.

As a result, internet tools that people across the world use to stay connected, including Gmail, Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, have all fallen under the censor’s blade, replaced by heavily monitored Chinese counterparts such as Baidu, WeChat, Weibo, QQ, and Youku. The Chinese internet police has censored and filtered all news and commentary, producing a bizarre uniformity of discourse. Full of often sensational nationalist information about the CCP leadership in defense of China’s national interests, the internet has become a powerful instrument of Xi’s patriotic education, making youth even more nationalistic to the exclusion of liberal values.²⁵

The Firewall has thus created an information bubble. The internet, a technology many in the West thought would ultimately bring democracy to China, is no longer a channel for new thinking and alternative information. By ruthlessly censoring alternative versions of history, suppressing any dissenting voices, and closing alternative sources of information, government propaganda has become more believable and changed the public conversation. Having grown up without access to international platforms such as Twitter and Google, many believe the Firewall has protected them from false information and the country from social instability, even creating the necessary conditions for the rise of China’s own tech giants. Instead of creating a more open society, the internet has fostered state-led Chinese nationalists who have accepted and even preferred a strong and authoritarian state above the frightening possibilities of disorder. Young Chinese, once conduits for new ideas that challenged the authorities, are increasingly part of Beijing’s regime defense operation.²⁶

Converging State and Popular Nationalism
The themes of Xi’s patriotic education have echoed the emotional feelings of popular nationalists and thereby catalyzed the convergence of state nationalism and popular nationalism into a state-led popular nationalism. Like earlier popular nationalism, state-led popular nationalism is raw and conspicuous in calls for a more muscular foreign policy and public outrage in the wake of perceived foreign threats. Distinguishing from earlier strains of popular nationalism critical of the authoritarian government, state-led popular nationalists under Xi have become genuinely proud of the performance of the party-state and go out of their way to defend government policies.

State-led popular nationalism has been especially successful at getting its message across to millennials and Generation Z in China. Young people across the world are normally the most anti-establishment and open in their thinking,
but youth in Xi’s China are more fiercely patriotic and loyal to the party-state than older generations. Chinese youth have grown up witnessing a remarkable rise of living standards and rapid modernization with no memory of the Great Leap Forward, Tiananmen Square, or anything other than steady growth and increasing opportunity under the party-state. After decades of high economic growth that have helped the Party’s performance legitimacy, Xi Jinping has invested more in social policies and absolute poverty eradication even though the economy has slowed. One Harvard University survey published in 2020 confirmed that Chinese citizens’ satisfaction with the government had increased across the board since 2003, and that they rated the government as more capable and effective than ever before because of the real, measurable changes in individuals’ material well-being. One September 2020 survey found that over 90 percent of more than 580 college teenagers used terms such as “lucky and satisfied” to describe how they felt about growing up in China. Many people who had admired the United States earlier were now convinced that they lived in a country that others looked up to in admiration because of the advantages of the Chinese system in advancing the people’s welfare.

The performance legitimacy that has served the CCP since the 1990s is now reinforced by this patriotic education and information control. The new generation of Chinese nationalists started their secondary school and college in the 1990s with a heavy dose of patriotic education that taught a version of history that highlighted the century of humiliation and all the accomplishments of the CCP while omitting the Party-produced disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Protests. They have been exposed to propaganda that Western countries are hostile to China and foreign criticism of the Chinese government is reflexively backed by anti-China forces. Against the backdrop of China’s economic rise and growing influence around the world, the Party has promoted the idea that a diminishing West, especially the United States, is determined to thwart China’s rise.

**Youth in Xi’s China are more fiercely patriotic and loyal to the party-state than older generations**

**From Defending “Us” to Defeating “Them”**

Along with the geopolitical turn towards celebrating the victorious “us” in China, state-led nationalism in Xi Jinping’s era has often targeted a negative
them.” Making this point, Xi Jinping announced in 2013 the creation of a new national holiday: the Victory Day of the Anti-Japanese War on September 3, which celebrates the Japanese surrender in 1945. The first Victory Day in 2015 coincided with the 70th anniversary of Japan’s surrender and featured a military parade in Tiananmen Square. Viewing the parade from a “Red Flag” limousine, Xi Jinping celebrated a “great triumph” that had “crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China and put an end to China’s national humiliation.”

While the parade ended with a flock of 70,000 peace doves ascending into the skies, the DF-21D ballistic missiles built to destroy American aircraft carriers caught the most attention. The muscle-flexing was designed primarily to arouse a domestic audience, inspiring them with ceremonial cannon fire and giving them confidence with rockets pulled along on wheels.

For most of PRC history, China’s public discussion of the Anti-Japanese War focused on China’s experience of victimization. As China has grown more powerful, however, the meaning of the war has been expanded to one of victory. Public sites of memory, including museums, movies, and television shows, have emphasized the national cohesion and patriotic loyalty that contributed to the victory and greatness of the Chinese people. The shifting story has nurtured a new narrative that China was creator and protector of the international order that emerged from the war. China’s reassessment of its collective memory of the war has created a new foundation for Chinese people to shape the world and mount nationalism at home.

**Art Imitating, and Shaping, Life**

Enjoying an inflated sense of empowerment supported by China’s new quotient of wealth and military capacities, the patriotic education campaign has promoted the idea that China’s accomplishments under the firm leadership of Xi and the Party—such as lifting people out of poverty, maintaining peace, and avoiding the unrest that plagued much of the developing world—have earned China’s success to become a big power and surpass Western rivals. *Amazing China* (厉害了，我的国), a documentary produced by China’s state broadcaster CCTV in 2018, elevated China’s achievements in leading the world and Xi’s role in driving progress, becoming the highest-earning documentary ever shown in the country. It ended with a fervidly patriotic song performed by pop singer Sun Nan, with lyrics that include, “We are confident! We are going forward! Watching the Chinese sons and daughters walking towards a new universe!” Since then, “amazing China” has become a popular term in Chinese daily conversation, along with other sensationalist phrases such as “China number one,” “China scared globally first,” “the US scared,” “Japan scared stupid,” and “Europe regretted,” that highlight China’s achievements.
The success of the documentary came along with other similarly jingoistic blockbusters. Wolf Warrior II, a story of a Chinese special forces agent saving a war-torn African country from the hands of Western mercenaries, became the country’s top-grossing film of all time in 2018. A line from the film found popularity among Chinese audiences for promising that anyone who attacked China would be killed, no matter how far away the target was. In response to the Western criticism of it as a “nationalist action movie,” a Xinhua editorial stated that there was nothing wrong “with having faith in one’s country to carry out the quintessential job of protecting its own people.”\(^{31}\) Operation Red Sea, a film about the Chinese navy rescuing hostages from terrorists in a fictitious Arab nation, was as popular a year earlier. While Chinese nationalistic films of the past tended to tout communist ideals with some revolutionary elements, these films highlighted the rise of Chinese comprehensive power and used national pride to rally the population behind the state.

Its immersion in China’s information bubble surrounding the country’s power and popularity has also made the public overly sanguine and even complacent about the country’s global standing. Demonstrating China’s accomplishments in contrast to the failure of the United States, one Beijing artist in his early twenties depicted China as a high-tech superpower and the United States as a country humbled and communist in one digital illustration of the future world. Manhattan, draped with the hammer-and-sickle flags of the “People’s Union of America,” had become a quaint tourist precinct. A caption said that “To take in the changes of history and feel the afterglow of the imperialist era head to North America.” The depiction caught fire on Chinese social media because this triumphant vision resonated among Chinese who believe that China’s system has proven itself superior, while Western powers are in perhaps irreversible decline.\(^{32}\)

**Coercion and Force in State-Led Nationalism**

Treating the United States, Japan, India, Southeast Asian countries, and other Chinese neighbors with full disdain, state-led popular nationalists have supported the state taking coercive foreign policies, including using force, to safeguard state sovereignty and territorial integrity. One survey in 2017 revealed that a majority of Chinese urban residents were supportive of the government using force to take back the disputed Diaoyu islands from Japan, even though such an action risked a potential war with the United States.\(^{33}\) A survey in 2018 confirmed hawkish attitudes among the Chinese people, who endorsed greater reliance on military strength, supported greater spending on national defense, and approved of sending troops to reclaim disputed islands in the East and the South China Sea. Respondents who grew up under patriotic education (born after 1978)
were more hawkish than their elders. The post-1980s generation were more hawkish than those born in the 1970s, which were in turn more hawkish than those born before the 1970s.  

In a grand parade to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the PRC in 2019, a reprise of a similar scene five years earlier, Xi stood at the Tiananmen gate and declared in front of jubilant crowds cheering and waving Chinese flags that “No force can shake the status of our great country and no force can stop the Chinese people and nation from marching forward.” He then presided over a vibrant and colorful parade displaying the PRC’s socioeconomic achievements, advances in science and technology, and new state-of-the-art weapons. One highlight was the first public appearance of Dongfeng-41 intercontinental ballistic missiles, which can carry 10 nuclear warheads with a range of up to 9,300 miles to strike anywhere in the United States. The display sent a dramatic, carefully rehearsed message that China has emerged as a global military power and a formidable rival to the United States.

The dazzling parade drummed up fervent nationalism and showcased Xi’s power as military commander-in-chief. Re-energizing the Chinese people with deeper loyalty to the Party and the PLA’s ambitions to become a world-class military, the excitement around the anniversary unleashed a wave of fervent patriotism and mobilized the country emotionally. Blurring the line between love for country and for the Party, the PLA and the CCP flags appeared for the first time in the military parade and marched ahead of the national flag in 2019. Many Chinese people, particularly young people, displayed a strong nationalist spirit and rushed to add a national flag logo to their profile photos on WeChat.

**Assertive and Combative Patriots**

Administering a hefty dose of patriotism and depicting a competitive world filled with danger and national security threats from the United States and other Western powers that conspire to besiege China, state-led popular nationalism has instilled a combative mentality that any criticism of China is instigated by a foreign, anti-China “black hand.” Without recognition that China’s actions may prompt counteractions by others, the peril of real or contrived threats have sparked state-led popular nationalists to fight back against any unwarranted foreign criticism and actions. For them, the disloyalty of the Hong Kong people is both incomprehensible and a threat to China’s security; to them, US politicization of blame for the Covid-19 crisis betrayed an ulterior motive—to block
China’s accession to its rightful place in the world. Proud of the accomplishments of the party-state, many youths genuinely believe that they have a sense of duty to guard their country against unwelcome criticism.

**Patrolling Taiwan and Hong Kong**

A prime example of the power of this defensiveness occurred in early January 2016, when Chinese netizens flooded social media platforms after Chou Tzu-yu, a 16-year-old Taiwan-born pop singer, waved Taiwan’s national flag on a television show. Chinese netizens swarmed Chou’s Instagram account, accusing her of supporting Taiwan independence and forcing Chou to apologize. After Tsai Ing-wen won Taiwan’s presidential election on January 20, Chinese netizens bombarded Tsai’s Facebook page as well as the Facebook pages of Taiwan- and Hong Kong-based media organizations viewed as pro-independence. These young digital warriors were labeled “little pinks” (小粉红), replacing the term “angry youths” with an ideological connotation—the Communist Party is red, and the young “crusaders” are in lighter red, or pink, making them agents of the Party. Unlike angry youth throwing rocks at the US Embassy or overturning Japanese cars in an earlier era, the “little pinks” are well versed in the ways of modern-day digital dialectics and use the internet as a battleground while brushing off attacks with sangfroid and snark.  

Similarly, state-led popular nationalists took a militant position toward protesters in Hong Kong. Most Chinese people know little about what happened in Hong Kong in 2019–20, and to the extent they do know, most have accepted the official story that Hong Kong people who protested Beijing’s policies were unpatriotic, un-Chinese, ungrateful for Chinese support, and dupes of foreign meddling and incitement. A 2020 survey found that the majority of Chinese respondents thought most Hong Kong residents had positive views of the Beijing government, despite Hong Kong’s massive protests.

Supporting the Chinese government’s full-blown smear campaign to frame the protests as a secessionist conspiracy, China’s celebrity-obsessed young nationalists patrolled cyberspace, ready to pounce on perceived slights and defend their motherland. Nicknamed “fangirls” because they exhibit the same fervor most often reserved for pop-culture icons, they called out Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey for supporting Hong Kong protesters, prompting the state broadcaster to drop National Basketball Association (NBA) games. The
onslaught of vitriol directed at Hong Kong pop-star Joey Yung forced her to apologize for a single Facebook selfie of herself on a plane wearing a surgical mask, from which it was assumed by Chinese netizens that Joey was supporting the anti-Beijing protests in Hong Kong because a Hong Kong pro-democracy netizen had commented: “Wearing a mask to fly with you too”. But she still got canned from a high-profile gala. While many Westerners saw Chinese people as forced into supporting Beijing or muzzled from expressing their true feelings, these “fangirls” could have displayed earnest and resilient backing for their government against what they perceived as mistreatment and misrepresentation by outsiders.38

Such support by state-led nationalists is not limited to online commentary or actions in China. Outside the country, demonstrating how ardently Chinese nationals abroad defend the PRC government, a group of Chinese students in their Ferraris, McLarens, Porsches, and Aston Martins adorned with Chinese national flags ran their dragsters alongside a pro-Hong Kong rally in Toronto, calling the Hong Kong protesters “poor garbage.” A shouting match also erupted at a rally at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. Chinese students involved in these incidents pushed their nationalist narrative and were widely celebrated on China’s highly censored Weibo platform.39

State-led Nationalism and the COVID Crisis

Combative national pride surged amid COVID-19 as the CCP pushed the narrative that China had stamped out the coronavirus with a resolve beyond the reach of flailing Western democracies. China’s economy revived quickly, defying fears of a deep slump from the pandemic. Chinese people became confident and proud of the track record of superior resilience of the CCP one-party system in the face of global distress. The theme of China as triumphantly vindicated against critics has real public appeal, particularly among youth. While international public opinion polls showed China’s image as globally unfavorable amid COVID-19, many Chinese people responded to international criticism with scornful disdain. State media were filled with accounts of how amazingly China had successfully contained the spread of the pandemic and was praised by foreign governments for its assistance to other countries. The effervescent narrative provided a convenient and powerful tool for popular nationalists to join the state and frame criticisms of the Chinese government as antithetical to the interests of the Chinese nation.

Hitting back against Western critics, combative young patriots launched a large-scale personal attack on Fang Fang, a Chinese writer, after she published an online diary about the difficulties of life in Wuhan during the early days of quarantine. Attracting a large number of followers, she was accused of betraying
her country and empowering Western critics of China. She came under heavy fire from so-called cyber-indignation (网络民愤) after her decision to publish the English and German language versions of her diary was announced. Critics accused Fang of failing to highlight the government’s success in containing the outbreak, writing that “Fang’s diaries had done more harm than good to China” and “would give Western countries ‘justification’ for accusing China of mishandling the epidemic.” “The West smears us and wants to get together to demand sky-high compensation. Fang Fang passes the sword hilt to them to attack the nation.”

The trend worsened amid growing tensions between Washington and Beijing into 2021. With the anxiety of unsatisfied aspirations to be recognized as a big power, state-led popular nationalists were angry over the criticism of Chinese human rights and other issues by the United States and other Western powers as an uncomfortable reminder of historical humiliation when China was weak. They launched online calls in March 2021 for boycotts of Nike and other fashion brands after they found that these Western companies distanced themselves from Xinjiang cotton, a focal point of Western sanctions on human rights grounds. In July 2021, dozens of people confronted Western journalists in Zhengzhou, accusing them of biased reporting after hundreds died in that month’s deadly floods. Locals cornered a German video journalist over what they claimed were unfair accusations by BBC reporters about a lack of transparency by the Chinese government and delayed rescue efforts that left people dead.

State-led popular nationalists have not only fought back at any criticism over China, but they have also used disinformation to portray Western countries in extremely dark images. Australia drew China’s ire for urging an investigation into the origin of the pandemic, a touchy subject in Beijing. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman tweeted a Chinese artist’s fabricated cartoon image of an Australian soldier poised to slit the throat of an Afghan child. Australia’s prime minister, Scott Morrison, demanded an apology from China over the image, which was a reference to an inquiry by the Australian military that found its troops had unlawfully killed more than three dozen Afghan civilians during 2005-2016. The Chinese foreign ministry scoffed at Morrison’s demand. Fu Yu, who created the image under the name Wuhe Qilin, created another one mocking the Australian leader.

After Bloomberg published a survey ranking the United States first in COVID-19 resilience in June 2021, a report released by three Chinese think tanks in Chinese, English, Spanish, and French blasted the United States as instead deserving to be the world’s top anti-pandemic failure—“being the No.1 political blaming country, No.1 pandemic spreader country, No.1 political division country, No.1 currency abuse country, No.1 pandemic period turmoil country, No.1 disinformation country, and No.1 origins-tracing terrorism
country.” The report was clearly hastily put together and contained obvious errors and emotive language.42

Demonstrating their fighting spirit, Chinese diplomats have joined these combative patriots to become the now infamous “wolf warriors” (战狼), aggressively defending China and attacking its critics. China’s ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, expressed pride in being a wolf warrior diplomat standing in the way of the “mad dogs” that attacked China, stating that, faced with suppression by the United States and other Western countries, China must make the shift from “lamb diplomacy” (羔羊外交) to wolf warrior diplomacy and fight with strength and courage.43 This wolf warrior diplomacy made headlines around the world amid COVID-19. Deflecting blame for China’s initial missteps and countering Western accusations that the coronavirus originated in China, Zhao Lijian, a Foreign Ministry Spokesperson famous for his sharp and abusive language, publicly floated a conspiracy theory that the American military brought the virus to China during the Military World Games in Wuhan in October 2019.44 This unsubstantiated claim went viral in the tightly controlled official and social media across China. Waging an all-out discourse war to beat back critics of China as stigmatization, Chinese diplomats lashed out at any foreign leaders who criticized China’s pandemic responses.

Conclusion

These developments demonstrate the success of the CCP in winning over popular nationalists in Xi’s new era, especially among internet-savvy youth who had long been most open to different worldviews. As the state has become more willing to play to the popular nationalist gallery and take tougher approaches abroad—forcefully pursuing expanded national interests with China’s growing economic, diplomatic, and military muscle—China has reacted stridently to all perceived slights to its national pride and interests, fueling ever-sharper demands for deference to China’s wishes. Speaking at the 100th anniversary of the CCP in July 2021, Xi Jinping turned up the nationalist rhetoric and warned that foreign forces who try to “bully, coerce, and enslave” China will “break their heads on the steel Great Wall built with the blood and flesh of 1.4 billion Chinese people.”45 Xi’s barbed comments elicited the loudest cheers of the entire speech from the packed crowds on Tiananmen Square.

By producing xenophobia toward ruthless and exploitative foreign powers, this state-led nationalism could lead China to overestimate its strengths and misjudge
how far it can push other countries. In 1942, amid the devastation of WWII, US Secretary of State Cordell Hull looked backward at the path to ruin and said that “Nationalism, run riot between the last war and this war, defeated all attempts to carry out indispensable measures of international economic and political action, encouraged and facilitated the rise of dictators, and drove the world straight toward the present war.”46 The world is anxious to see how far China’s current state-led popular nationalism may push the nation toward violent conflicts with the world’s “them” today.

Notes


5. Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited."


10. 戴旭 [Dai Xu], C形包围——内忧外患下的中国突围 [C-Shape Encircle, China’s Breakthrough with the Internal uncertainties and External Dangers], (Beijing: Wenhui Press, 2009).


