

> Nationalism, Domestic Politics, and China's Global Leadership Role

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The future U.S. role in the Asia-Pacific and the potential challenge of China's rise is hotly debated in both the policy and academic communities. Whether China is willing and able to take on a global leadership role in the economic, political and security realms is of particular interest. China's leadership role has become a proxy for evaluating Chinese intentions—is China a status quo power, willing to accept U.S. leadership or a revisionist power, trying to undermine, replace or compete with U.S. leadership? China's approach to global leadership has also served as an indicator of Chinese grand strategy—whether China will maintain narrow national interests that only extend into its region or contribute to the global order as a 'responsible stakeholder.'

How should we understand China's current global role and its ambitions? On the one hand, China's increased global activism—establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, or Chinese base in Djibouti to support counter-piracy operations to name a few examples—has caused some to worry China hopes to unseat the United States and supplant the current international order with one better suited to Beijing's needs.¹

On the other hand, prominent voices call for an even greater role for China on the global stage, implying that China is currently not taking on the mantle of global leadership.² If anything, commentators criticize China for shirking its leadership responsibility, in particular on North Korea and fighting ISIS.³ For its part Beijing has at times viewed the call for China to shoulder more international responsibilities "as part of an international conspiracy to thwart China's development."⁴

But neither argument gives adequate attention to how Chinese domestic public opinion may shape the degree and nature of China's leadership role. There are empirical and theoretical reasons to believe this may be an important factor to consider. First, Xi Jinping uses

nationalism to boost his legitimacy, and this has taken on a definitively global tone through his 'two guidances.' This refers to Xi's call for Beijing to "guide the international community to jointly build a more just and reasonably new world order," and "guide the international community to jointly maintain international security."⁵ Second, the Chinese government increasingly surveys the Chinese public on a wide array of topics in order to respond to (or manipulate) public concerns.⁶ Even authoritarian regimes have incentives to make policy concessions in accordance with public opinion because they can more efficiently govern when the people engage in "quasi-voluntary compliance."⁷ Lastly, research shows that domestic political factors, including nationalism, increasingly impact Chinese foreign policy decisions.⁸

Below, I briefly address some pathways through which the expectations and demands of China's domestic public may impact China's future approach to leadership in the economic and security realms. The bottom line is that nationalism supports a greater global role for the prestige and enhanced ability to protect Chinese interests, and also creates limitations on the nature and degree of China's global involvement.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC ROLE

China is arguably the most forward leaning in its global role in the economic realm. China has created its own institutions to lead, such as the AIIB.⁹ China has also invested \$40 billion to finance its OBOR initiative to create "the world's largest platform for economic cooperation," by improving transportation infrastructure along China's global land and maritime trade routes.¹⁰ Furthermore, while the U.S. has abandoned Trans Pacific Partnership negotiations, China has also spearheaded the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement that would include countries accounting for 12% of global trade and 29% of global

This paper reflects the individual views of the author.

GDP.¹¹ Foreign aid programs have been much slower to develop, however, because of domestic factors.¹² With 85 million people living in poverty in China, the view that China should be prioritizing the welfare of its people, not making aid commitments, is prominent.¹³ Because of this, foreign aid is categorized as a “state secret,” and China was slow to launch its program.

Now, even though China's foreign aid has surpassed that of the United Kingdom, domestic political factors continue to shape the nature of that aid.¹⁴ Specifically, while U.S. foreign aid and trade partnerships have arguably been strategically oriented—focused on combatting communism in the Cold War and counterterrorism today (Pakistan is a major beneficiary and foreign military financing was the third largest project in 2016)—China pursues projects that directly benefit China economically.¹⁵ For example, Africa receives about half of Chinese concessional aid, and the vast majority of it goes to infrastructure construction and for industrial development, specifically transport and storage; energy generation and supply; and industry, mining, and construction.¹⁶ In other words, the aid projects are focused on industries in which Chinese companies are deeply involved and stand to profit. Additionally, China is also known for bringing in its own labor for such projects in order to elevate unemployment pressures at home.¹⁷ While ‘global’ in nature, OBOR's focus is also at home—the rationale is to create markets for Chinese goods and facilitate their transportation across land and maritime routes.¹⁸ Propaganda posters around Beijing are clear —China pursue a larger global economic role insofar as it brings economic benefit to the Chinese people. China has no intention to take on burdens of development in ways that primarily benefit the target state.

CHINA'S SECURITY ROLE

Domestic public opinion also creates incentives for the Chinese military to play a global, albeit limited role. As I have written elsewhere in greater length, domestic public support for the development of expeditionary capabilities is coalescing as more Chinese nationals find themselves in dangerous situations due to a combination of misfortune and political instability in the host nation. In 2016, Chinese nationals recorded 122 million overseas trips and spent a total \$109.8 billion on travel/

tourism abroad.¹⁹ By 2020, approximately 150 million Chinese citizens will be traveling and living abroad.²⁰ These overseas Chinese, referred to as *haiwai gongmin*, (海外公民) expect their government to provide certain guarantees for their protection, known as *haiwai gongmin baohu* (海外公民保护).²¹ Netizens often complain that the government relies too heavily on enhancing citizen awareness of dangers and diplomatic mechanisms for citizen protection, rather than using military force.²² One of the reasons *Wolf Warrior 2* has been such a box office success is because it depicts a situation in which a former special forces soldier puts himself at risk to save Chinese medical personnel and factory workers trapped in an unspecified war-torn country.²³

China's role in international interventions is likely to be limited, even once it has more capacity to do so, because of domestic sensitivities to ‘hegemonic’ behaviors. Because of its one hundred years of humiliation at the hands of hegemonic foreign powers, China needs to believe that it would be a different type of great power than those which came before it.²⁴ A popular domestic narrative is that China in a unique position to understand the priorities and needs of developing countries and create a new international order that does not infringe on countries' ability to govern domestically as they see fit.²⁵ Western nations, on the other hand, are “fundamentally rapacious, greedy, and aggressive” that “pillage to expand their territories [and] plunder wealth [to] expand their sphere of influence.”²⁶

The CCP and the Chinese people have consequently been ideologically averse to alliances and overseas bases that tend to accompany a more global military strategy.²⁷ However, in recent conversations in Beijing, it was conveyed to the author through authoritative sources that China may pursue overseas ‘access points,’ but that they would be distinct from U.S. bases in that they would house only logistical and defensive equipment and personnel, and therefore not be used for hegemonic purposes of coercion, attack, and interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. This is in line with domestic public opinion on the issue. In a March 2010 newspaper poll, 80% of Chinese respondents responded positively to the question “Do you think China should strive to be the world's strongest country militarily?” However, less than half of respondents approved of a policy to publicly announce such an objective.²⁸



With the election of Donald Trump, whose America First policies often have an isolationist and anti-globalization tone, the issue of Chinese global leadership has been pushed center stage—as one Chinese official remarked in January, while China “doesn’t want” to become a world leader, it could be “forced” to assume that role if others step back from that position.²⁹ How China plans to approach leadership—where it competes, undermines, follows or leaves unchallenged the U.S. leadership position—has serious implications for the future of U.S. global leadership. If U.S. policymakers understand how expectations of the Chinese public constrain or push the CCP, they can better forecast what kind of global power China will become. Specifically, China seems poised to choose a global role that still caters to narrow domestic interests and will likely be economic, not security, focused. In other words, China is unlikely to mimic U.S. strategy in this regard, and therefore Chinese ambitions cannot be accurately calibrated against the U.S. model. Moreover, China is unlikely to attempt to overthrow the U.S.-led order, but its failure to participate fully in parts of it coupled with establishing some alternative structures that better fit its domestic economic needs may erode U.S. power and influence over time.

ENDNOTES

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