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Antagonistic symbiosis: The social construction of China's foreign policy

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Abstract: *China is often considered as motivated by a desire to challenge the international status quo, a challenge the West is trying to mitigate. Social constructivists account for this challenge via a norm of nationalistic assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy; a norm constructed in the synergetic relationship between China's Communist Party and its nationalist movement. However, this work argues that Chinese foreign policy is motivated, in part, by nationalist pressure arising from an antagonistically symbiotic relationship between the Communist Party and China's nationalist movement. This understanding is significant as it indicates that western policies are paradoxically factoring in the emergence of a challenger China. © 2023 Victoria University of Wellington and John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd.*

Keywords: *China, foreign policy, nationalism, security paradox, social constructivism*

1. Introduction

China's foreign policy is often presented as a challenge the international status quo, motivated by the egoistic pursuit of power and surpassing the United States as the dominant international actors (Taffer, 2020). This perspective informs western policies toward China. For example, the United States has described China as posing a 'sustained challenge' (The White House, 2021: 8). Meanwhile, the UK is developing its 'China-facing capabilities' (HM Government, 2021: 22), and Australia has purchased nuclear submarines to offset China's increasing naval strength (Masterson, 2021).

Social constructivism posits that norms of behaviour are constructed through an actor's social interactions (Wendt, 1992). Applying this understanding to Chinese foreign policy, scholars have written about how a rising China is changing the international status quo by reshaping norms of international politics in its relationships with other global actors (Turner and Nymalm, 2019; Wang, 2019; Smith, 2021). Additionally, social constructivism has been used to understand norms of assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour as a product of socio-political relationships within China, predominately the relationship

between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China's nationalist movement (Zhao, 2004; Sullivan and Wang, 2023). Sullivan and Wang (2023) argue that a synergetic relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement results in a norm of nationalistically assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour. The same behaviour which the West considers a challenge to the international status quo.

This work builds upon the existing literature on the domestic social construction of China's foreign policy, accepting that nationalistic assertiveness is a norm of Chinese foreign policy derived from the relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement. However, it focusses on the mechanics of CCP-nationalist relations to present an alternative understanding to Sullivan and Wang's (2023) notion of the norm being derived from a synergetic relationship.

This work argues that China's foreign policy is motivated, in part, by nationalist pressure arising from the antagonistically symbiotic relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement. While there is mutual benefit in the relationship, the relationship is detrimental to one or both parties in the long-term. First, the symbiosis in the relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement is outlined. The antagonistic

nature of this symbiotic relationship is then discussed, considering how nationalist pressure shapes China's actions as an international actor. With the benefit of this alternative understanding of the relationship underpinning the social construction of Chinese foreign policy, it is argued that the West's assumption of a challenger China risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. A symbiotic relationship

This section establishes the relationship presented by the existing literature, albeit presenting it as symbiotic rather than synergetic. Symbiosis refers to a mutually beneficial relationship between two organisms, for example, in the association between various fungi and plant species which share metabolic functions (Matveeva *et al.*, 2018). The relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement is similarly mutually beneficial, with the CCP increasingly drawing regime legitimacy from nationalism while the nationalist movement is promoted and sustained by the CCP. This phenomenon is outlined below.

After Mao's death in 1976, the CCP could no longer draw upon Mao's cult of personality for regime legitimacy (Coble, 2007). Hence, since the early-1980s, the CCP has premised its regime's legitimacy on the twin pillars of economics and nationalism (Coble, 2007). Economically, the CCP presented itself as a steward of economic success, enacting economic reforms which have raised over 800 million Chinese people out of poverty (Denmark, 2018). Meanwhile, the CCP began retelling Chinese history to construct contemporary Chinese nationalism. Under Mao, China's history was told through an ideological lens, culminating with the CCP's liberation of China from its bourgeois oppressors (Coble, 2007). This was replaced by the CCP's nationalist narrative, promoting stories of China's victimisation by foreign imperialists, which only ended with the CCP's establishment of the People's Republic of China (Reilly, 2004). For example, the Second Sino-Japanese War (the Chinese theatre of the Second World War) was previously considered a tale of the shared exploitation of the Chinese and Japanese proletariat by militaristic bourgeois elites (Coble, 2007). Now, it is considered an epic of Chinese national resistance, including both prole and

bourgeois, against a belligerent foreign power (Mitter, 2013).

The twin pillar model is faltering as China struggles with major economic challenges. These include low per-capita productivity, a shrinking labour force, and an over-reliance on the manufacturing sector (World Bank, *n.d.*). Resultantly, economic prosperity is harder for the CCP to guarantee, with China's 2018 growth rate dropping to 6.6%, standing in stark contrast with rates of 10%+ in the 2000s (World Bank, *n.d.*). The CCP is aware that this undermines the economic pillar; numerous CCP officials have expressed concern that stagnating growth and increasing unemployment could trigger social unrest (Kuo, 2019). Given these economic challenges, the CCP is left to increasingly rely upon the nationalist pillar to maintain its regime legitimacy. This phenomenon can be observed in the increasingly nationalistic rhetoric of the CCP. For example, President Xi (cited in BBC News, 2021) portrayed the CCP as China's protector and vanguard in his speech at the CCP's 100th anniversary celebration in 2021, promising that the CCP will 'never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China.'

Meanwhile, China's nationalist movement benefits from the CCP's promotion of nationalism. As stated, contemporary Chinese nationalism was constructed by the CCP through nationalist narratives of Chinese history. The CCP propagated, and continues to propagate, this narrative through school curricula, public events and memorials, and nationalistic television shows and media (Coble, 2007). In the early 2010s, the CCP sanctioned hundreds of films and television shows set during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Many of these were obvious in their message of national unity around the CCP being the best means to resist foreign victimisation (Steinfeld, 2015). Together, the television shows and films achieved a 70% share of China's television and film market in 2012 (Steinfeld, 2015). Evidently, the CCP's efforts offer China's nationalist movement a large support base among the Chinese people due to their nationalistic education and conditioning.

Chinese nationalists are encouraged to further spread the CCP's nationalist narrative, often doing so at a grass-roots level without direct oversight from the CCP. This was demonstrated when a local history group fundraised to convert a wartime watchtower into a 'patriotic

education centre' (Reilly, 2004: 288). Another example is found in the actions of online nationalist activists, such as the Little Pink group, a predominately female group of thousands of activists who actively promote the narrative on Chinese social media (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). These efforts benefit China's nationalist movement by consolidating its support base and self-sustain the CCP's efforts to maintain their regime legitimacy through the nationalist narrative.

Clearly, there is mutually beneficial symbiosis in this relationship. The CCP relies increasingly upon nationalism to maintain its regime legitimacy in the face of stagnating prosperity. Meanwhile, China's nationalist movement benefits from the CCP's promotion of nationalism while its grass-roots activism further propagates the nationalist narrative which underpins the CCP's legitimacy.

3. Antagonistic symbiosis

Antagonistic symbiosis is, in the longer-term, detrimental to one or both of the symbiotic partners, as when a symbiotic fungus outgrows its host plant and damages the plant's root structures (Tikhonovich and Provorov, 2008). Similarly, China's nationalist movement is outgrowing the CCP's societal controls, constraining the CCP's autonomy in its management of China's foreign affairs.

China's nationalist movement is diverse, but its various groups and organisations are particularly sensitive to what they consider affronts to the Chinese nation (Coble, 2007). Some organisations have formal links with the CCP, such as the Communist Youth League. Others operate more independently, for example online activists among China's diaspora population (Modongal, 2016). These groups subscribe to a broad nationalist agenda concerning Chinese foreign policy, expecting the CCP to use economic and military strength to pursue China's national interests (Abbott, 2016). More specifically, they desire justice for historical victimisation, recognition of China as a world power, mobilisation against threats to Chinese sovereignty, and respect for China's sphere of influence (Boylan *et al.*, 2020). This was observed in their reaction to the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, as nationalist groups were vocal online in

condemning what they believed to be Japanese efforts to undermine China's regional hegemony during Abe's premiership (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2022). Their condemnation often referenced historical Japanese victimisation of China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (Liu and Kine, 2022).

The CCP's increasing reliance on nationalism confers political influence upon China's nationalist movement. This is evident as the CCP has been increasingly reluctant to constrain popular expressions of nationalism as China's economy has stagnated. In 2005, when China's growth rate was 11.9% (World Bank, n.d.), tens-of-thousands of Chinese nationalists participated in protests against the perceived downplay of wartime atrocities in Japanese school textbooks (Watts, 2005). The CCP responded by shutting down public transport in protesting cities and deploying riot police to protect Japanese nationals, while the Minister for Public Security declared the protests to be illegal (Yardley, 2005). In contrast, in 2012, when China's growth rate had dropped to 7.86%, the CCP was notably silent during similarly large anti-Japanese protests following Japan's nationalisation of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Gries *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, the CCP initially responded to Japan's nationalisation of the islands diplomatically by lodging formal complaints against Japan and submitting evidence of its territorial claim for UN arbitration (Green *et al.*, 2017). However, this changed after the start of the anti-Japanese protests. The nationalistic protesters were highly critical of the CCP's initial response to the islands dispute. One protester demonstrating outside of the Japanese embassy explained that:

We think that the government is too soft ... China should make its own demands as a great power. (Buckley, 2012)

A protester in Shanghai was less diplomatic about the nationalist movement's opinion of the CCP's handling of the dispute:

[President] Hu Jintao and those people are useless and impotent before Japan's provocations. (Buckley, 2012)

Clearly, China's nationalist movement was critical of the CCP for not responding to Japan in line with the nationalist agenda. This posed a risk to the CCP's nationalist credentials which, if left

unchecked, could undermine the nationalist pillar of CCP legitimacy. The CCP acquiesced to nationalist pressure, pivoting away from a diplomatic response to a more nationalistic one overnight. The day after the height of the anti-Japanese protests, then Vice-President Xi Jinping gave a speech condemning Japan (Branigan, 2012). Concurrently, regional CCP branches began actively engaging with the protests, muting criticism of the CCP by emphasising anti-Japanese sentiment (Wallace and Weiss, 2015).

The CCP's growing reliance on China's nationalist movement confers the latter with significant influence in their relationship. This is apparent in the CCP's increased reluctance to constrain popular expressions of nationalism and the nationalist movement's ability to shape foreign policy to align with its agenda. Alternatively, Reilly (2011) believes that the CCP has effective social control over China's nationalist movement via its propaganda infrastructure. This interpretation posits that there is no nationalist pressure on the CCP's foreign policy decision-making, with the CCP able to leverage its societal controls to alleviate criticism without acquiescence to Chinese nationalists.

However, the CCP repeatedly fails to restrain nationalist activism against foreign actors. For example, despite calls to desist from the CCP, nationalist activists undertook an anti-foreign smear campaign on social media following international criticism of the 2020 crackdown on Hong Kong (Lo, 2020). The Communist Youth League, a nationalist organisation affiliated with the CCP, joined the campaign (Kecheng, 2020), demonstrating that the CCP struggles to exercise control over formally linked nationalist organisations (Eves, 2022). Notably, nationalist hacktivists hijacked the Twitter account of the Chinese embassy in Paris, posting a picture of the United States as a personification of death visiting Hong Kong (Lo, 2020). The embassy immediately deleted the image and issued apologies to both the United States and France (Keyser, 2020).

This example is significant as quickly apologising is consistent with the CCP struggling to constrain the excesses of Chinese nationalism. It shows that Chinese nationalists are evading the CCP's societal controls, being able and willing to hijack state propaganda infrastructure to pursue their agenda when they perceive the CCP as failing to fulfil its

nationalist credentials. Evidently, the CCP's ability to leverage its propaganda infrastructure is more limited than Reilly (2011) suggests. This indicates that the CCP is unable to mitigate nationalist pressure to pursue a nationalistically assertive foreign policy.

This constitutes an antagonistically symbiotic relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement. There is mutual benefit in the relationship as the CCP draws legitimacy from the nationalist movement, while the nationalist movement is sustained by the CCP's nationalist narrative of Chinese history. However, as the nationalist movement continues to grow while also evading the CCP's societal controls, the CCP is increasingly obliged to adhere to the nationalist movement's foreign policy agenda. This undermines the CCP's foreign policy autonomy, predisposing Chinese foreign policy to be nationalistically assertive in nature, even when the CCP favours a diplomatic path. Like a plant that is threatened by its fungal symbiotic partner outgrowing said plant's root system, the CCP is constrained by a nationalist movement which it has overcultured and is over-reliant upon. To this end, China's nationalistically assertive foreign policy is motivated, at least in part, by the antagonistically symbiotic relationship that exists between the CCP and China's nationalist movement.

4. Why it matters

As stated in the introduction, this work does not challenge the nationalistically assertive norm of Chinese foreign policy behaviour presented by Sullivan and Wang (2023). It emphasises that the domestic political relationship underpinning this socially constructed norm is not born of nationalistic synergy between the CCP and China's nationalist movement. Rather, the relationship between these two groups is antagonistically symbiotic. To some observers, this nuance of the relationship between the CCP and China's nationalist movement will be semantical. The result is still a nationalistically assertive foreign policy despite the exact nature of the relationship.

However, understanding antagonistic symbiosis to define the relationship from which the norm of nationalistic assertiveness derives is significant. A synergetic understanding suggests that China is

inherently motivated by a desire to challenge the status quo as an aim of both the CCP and Chinese nationalists. This validates western assumptions of a challenger China. Meanwhile, an antagonistically symbiotic understanding acknowledges that the CCP is not inherently motivated by a desire to challenge the status quo, contradicting notions of a challenger China.

Moreover, it indicates that western policies risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies by provoking China. This argument is presented in accordance with Booth and Wheeler's (2007) security paradox concept. A cyclical phenomenon of growing tensions in which actor A, feeling insecure due to actor B's behaviour, takes measures to address their insecurity. However, these measures trigger insecurity for actor B, whose measures to address their own insecurity triggers further insecurity for actor A, and so on. If left unchecked, this cycle of growing tensions can escalate into conflict, even if there was no initial ill-will between the parties involved (Booth and Wheeler, 2007). Western policy could trigger Chinese nationalists to pressure the CCP to enact assertive foreign policies that compound western insecurities, in the manner of a cyclical security paradox.

An example in which cyclical security paradox mechanics can be observed concerns Taiwan. China considers Taiwan part of its sovereign territory and regaining control of Taiwan is a prominent cause of Chinese nationalism (Wallace and Weiss, 2015). The Taiwanese president visited the United States, which supports Taiwan militarily, in March 2023. This caused nationalist outrage in China, shortly followed by Chinese military exercises simulating attacks on Taiwanese strategic assets (Lee and Blanchard, 2023). In line with the security paradox concept, these exercises caused further insecurity in the West, leading the United States to provide Taiwan with 29 surface-to-air missile launcher systems (Tang, 2023). This action further outraged Chinese nationalists and was followed by threats from Chinese President Xi Jinping to US President Joe Biden that the will of the Chinese people 'cannot be defied' (Xi Jinping cited in The Economist, 2023). This, in turn, risked further antagonising western observers who may continue to act in a way that antagonises China.

By failing to appreciate the antagonistically symbiotic basis of the socially constructed norm

of a nationalistically assertive Chinese foreign policy, western policies risk a self-fulfilling prophecy. In provoking Chinese nationalists who will pressure the CCP to respond in adherence with norms of nationalistic assertiveness, western policies intended to ease anxieties over a challenger China may factor in the emergence of a Chinese challenge to the status quo.

5. Conclusion

This work has contributed an alternative understanding of the relationship underpinning the nationalistically assertive norm of Chinese foreign policy. It has presented Chinese foreign policy as motivated, in part, by nationalist pressure arising from the CCP's antagonistically symbiotic relationship with China's nationalist movement. The symbiosis of this relationship is found in the mutually beneficial arrangement in which the CCP draws regime legitimacy from nationalism, while the nationalist movement is sustained by the CCP's nationalist narratives of Chinese history. However, this symbiotic relationship is antagonistic in nature. The nationalist movement is conferred with significant political influence and is outgrowing the CCP's societal controls. Nationalists can constrain the CCP's foreign policy autonomy by pressuring it to enact nationalistic policies in response to what they consider affronts to the Chinese nation. Understanding Chinese foreign policy in this way is significant as it provides the basis for seeing the flaws of western policies toward China. Namely, that western efforts to mitigate a challenger China risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy by triggering Chinese nationalists who might pressure the CCP to pose the challenge the West seeks to avert.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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