Chinese nationalism and its foreign policy implications

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On 1 April 2001, a US spy plane and a Chinese jet fighter collided in mid-air about 60 miles off the coast of China's Hainan Island. The collision killed the Chinese pilot and forced the US plane to undertake an emergency landing at a nearby Chinese military airbase. Largely unexpected, the incident immediately triggered nationwide public outrage in China against the perceived hegemonic behaviour of the United States. The Chinese government, partly under intense public pressure, detained the 24-member crew of the US plane for 11 days and demanded a formal apology from Washington. The event caused a diplomatic crisis between the two countries. It also heightened a widely held concern by many China observers in recent years: whether Beijing's foreign policy is becoming aggressive, increasingly driven by a rising anti-US popular nationalism (*Economist* 2001, 23).

Chinese public anger expressed after the incident added to anti-US sentiments apparent since the early 1990s. Unlike in the 1980s when the west, especially the US, was widely perceived by many Chinese as a model to be emulated, the 1990s witnessed a growing sense of disenchantment with America. For much of the 1990s nationalist voices in China's intellectual circles dominated the discourse on the position China should adopt in its international relations. In the wider population, admiration and a friendly attitude towards the US gave way to antagonistic feelings. Events such as the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 spy-plane incident stimulated strong physical and verbal expressions of anti-US views, taking the outside world by surprise.

Many observers believe that Chinese nationalism has an explicit expansionist and chauvinistic character, making Chinese foreign policy more aggressive (Chang 1998; Bernstein and Munro 1997; Friedman 1999; Sautman 1997). In particular, this school of thought argues that the current 'visceral nationalism' in China is deliberately promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to legitimize its continued rule when communist ideology has lost its credibility worldwide. For example, Chanda and Huus (1995, 20) wrote 'The Chinese regime, left ideologically bereft by the global collapse of communism, has taken refuge in

nationalism to shore up its power'. Conversely, there is a widely held belief that because 'nationalism is the sole ideological glue that holds the People's Republic together and keeps the CCP government in power' (Christensen 1996, 46), the current Chinese regime cannot afford to resist public pressure centred on nationalistic sentiments when handling international affairs. This school argues that China is therefore likely to adopt an increasingly confrontational stance when its sovereignty, national interests and status are threatened.

This chapter presents an analysis of the upsurge of anti-US sentiments among ordinary Chinese since the early 1990s and its ramifications for China's foreign policy. Contrary to the aforementioned assumption that Chinese nationalism is state-led and instrumental, the chapter argues first, that the recent rise of popular nationalistic sentiments in China is both domestically driven and externally invoked. In this regard, I join those who argue that popular nationalism in China is more a reaction to external pressure than a product of state propaganda (Zheng 2000; Gries 1999, 2001; Zhang 1997). The rising anti-US feeling of the Chinese people essentially reflects a reactive frustration at the perceived denial of China's acceptance into international society and anger about the perceived or real US policy of 'containing China'. Therefore, rather than a state-crafted, xenophobic 'racial nationalism' (Sautman 1997), anti-US sentiment has its roots, however ironically, in a strong desire of the Chinese people to be accepted into international society.

Second, the chapter argues that the aforementioned assumption overestimates the significance of nationalism as an ideological basis for the government's legitimacy, as well as its influence upon Chinese foreign policy-making. It shows that despite growing nationalistic sentiments, Chinese foreign policy is shaped by pragmatism based on economic and political considerations. Nonetheless, rapid changes within and outside China induce uncertainty about the influence of popular nationalism upon China's future relationship with other countries.

The chapter begins by reviewing shifts in nationalistic sentiments among the Chinese public since the early 1990s. This is followed by an analysis of the causes of the upsurge in nationalistic sentiments during the same period. Then the impacts of these sentiments on Beijing's foreign policy are explored, focusing on the spy-plane incident. Finally, a brief discussion of policy implications concludes the chapter.

The rise of popular nationalistic sentiments in China

Despite attracting increasing academic and media attention outside China,¹ the development of popular nationalism in China since the early 1990s is not a coherent socio-political discourse. Many Chinese people—even some of those advocating an explicitly xenophobic anti-US viewpoint—do not identify themselves as nationalists. Moreover, throughout the last decade, the themes, intensity and forms of expression of popular nationalistic currents in China varied significantly over time and among different social groups. Roughly speaking, three

stages can be identified in the development of popular nationalism in China since the early 1990s. The first stage featured the emergence of an anti-westernization conservative, nationalistic discourse among sections of the Chinese intelligentsia after 1992. The second stage was in 1996–97 when a more emotional and xenophobic nationalistic view emerged and gained prominence in public moods in China. The third stage started in mid-1999, and was marked by emotional and sometimes even violent mass actions against the United States.

Nationalistic voices began to appear among the Chinese intelligentsia in the early 1990s as part of an emerging neo-conservative discourse that signified a sharp turn in Chinese intellectuals' attitudes towards the west (Zhao 1997; Chen 1997; Fewsmith 1995; Rosen 1997). Throughout the 1980s, western style democracy was a goal anxiously pursued by many Chinese scholars. This was largely because of an ideological crisis in Chinese society brought about by the post-Mao reforms that started in the late 1970s. The failure of Maoist socialist radicalism in the previous three decades, the realization of the gap between China's backward economy and the western industrial world, and the reintroduction of the capitalist mode of production, all eroded Chinese people's belief in communism. Many intellectuals thus turned to the west to seek new models for China's development. In the 1980s, calls for modernization through an 'all-out westernization' gained wide currency among many Chinese intellectuals and students.²

In a somewhat puzzling development, however, in the early 1990s many Chinese scholars began to question the merits and feasibility of adopting a political system modelled on the west. They argued that because of China's different social, economic and political conditions, thoughtless introduction of western-style institutions would only lead to social and political disaster (Zheng 1999, 51–4). For various reasons, these scholars began to emphasize the important role that nationalism could play in China's modernization process. A majority of the scholars were concerned mainly with the many domestic problems perplexing China in the 1990s. These problems included rampant corruption, a perceived loosening of morals and, above all, the declining governing capacity of the state. Fearful of a potential regime collapse and national disintegration, they began to advocate a Confucianism-based nationalism as a new state ideology to rebuild regime legitimacy, enhance national identity, and maintain social order (Xiao 1994a). Some other scholars were more concerned about China's position in an uncertain post-Cold War international environment, believing that conflicts over national interests rather than ideology would be the major challenges to China's modernization program (Fang, Wang and Song 1999). There were yet others who feared that the inflow of western ideology and culture was endangering Chinese cultural identity, and they therefore became increasingly critical of western culture and called for a 'renaissance' of Chinese tradition (He 1996).

This intellectual discourse was most discernable in a number of new periodicals that appeared after 1992 to provide fora for cultural and nationalistic debate. Some

of the most influential journals included *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), *Dongfang* (Orient), *Xiandai yu chuantong* (Modernity and Tradition), and *Dongxifan wenhua pinglun* (Eastern and Western Cultural Review). Most of these journals were privately funded and represented non-official opinions (Chen 1997, 596). It should be noted, however, that this nationalistic discourse in the early 1990s was largely confined to this intellectual circle. Due to their theoretical orientation and scholarly style of writing, most of the nationalistic writings published in this period had little audience outside this circle.

Towards the mid-1990s, however, a more radical and even xenophobic nationalistic view started to emerge not only among Chinese intellectuals but also in the broader context of Chinese society. Frustrated by the turbulent Sino-US relations in the first half of the 1990s, many Chinese people believed that the US was making efforts to contain China and that China should fight back. This view was most clearly expressed in a book titled *Zhongguo keyi shuobu* (*China Can Say No*) published in May 1996. Written by five young intellectuals, the book vociferously attacked the United States, in particular its policy toward China. The authors asserted that 'containing China' has become a long-term US strategy in the post-Cold War era. Among other things, they wrote that the United States was trying to encircle China by organizing an anti-China club among its allies; that it was blocking China's entry into the World Trade Organization; that it was culturally invading China via Hollywood films; and that the CIA was conducting subversive activities in China (Song et al. 1996a). In all, the authors claimed that the United States was determined to contain China from rising as a great power, and had bullied China for too long. They argued that China should develop a counter-containment strategy against the United States.

While incurring as much criticism as support in China, the book became an instant best-seller with around 2 million copies reported sold. Within a few months, the authors published a more xenophobic sequel, entitled *Zhongguo heshi neng shuobu* (*China Can Still Say No*) to respond to the many domestic and foreign criticisms made of the previous book (Song et al. 1996b). The books also sparked a 'Say No' fever in the publishing industry in China with a large number of books on the same subject appearing between 1996 and 1997. From various angles, all these books expressed a strong sense of frustration, anger and assertiveness towards the United States.

To a certain extent, the unusual popularity of books such as *China Can Say No* reflected growing public frustration and anger towards the United States. A few national polls conducted in the 1990s gave further evidence of the public mood. For example, a widely cited national opinion poll conducted by the *China Youth Daily* in May 1995 found that 87 per cent of respondents regarded the US as the unfriendliest country to China, and 57.2 per cent regarded it as the most disliked foreign country. The poll was conducted among factory workers, technical professionals, educators, office staff and college students in five Chinese provinces, and received more than 100,000 responses (Zhang 1999, 142; Fewsmith

and Rosen 2001, 161; Fang, Wang and Song 1999, 107–18). Such sentiments were consistent throughout the 1990s. For example, in a 1999 survey conducted among 1,820 urban residents in six Chinese cities, it was found that 76 per cent of respondents saw the US as the greatest threat to China's international status (Tang, W 2001, 902). Another recent poll conducted in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin also reported that more than 60 per cent of Chinese people saw the US as the biggest threat to China's development (Tang, H 2001, 9).

If such anti-US feelings in China only manifested themselves in nationalistic publications, it would not be so troubling. However, towards the end of the 1990s, popular nationalism in China began to take the form of street politics; and at least on one occasion, strong popular nationalistic feelings turned into unexpected violent mass action against the US. On May 7 1999, the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was bombed by the United States. The bombing killed three Chinese journalists and injured about 20 other Chinese. The bombing, explained by the US as an accident, immediately sparked nationwide anti-US public outrage in China. In Beijing, hundreds of thousands of angry people—mainly university students—convinced that the US bombing was intentional, protested outside the US embassy for several days, demanding 'blood for blood!' revenge. Some emotional protestors threw bricks at the US embassy building. Similar protests occurred in around 20 Chinese cities. In Chengdu, the capital city of the South-western province of Sichuan, angry protestors set fire to the American Consulate building. Chinese students in the US also launched strong protests (Gries 2001; Miles 2000–01; Zheng 2000). The emotional anti-US protests indeed shocked many people outside China. As Miles (2000–01, 6) noted, the event was 'a defining moment in China's relations with the west, in that it demonstrated clearly to the outside world the violent manner in which nationalist feelings might express itself in China and the fact that, *in extremis*, the government might tolerate such violence to the public to let off steam'.

In April 2001, the outside world witnessed another wave of anti-US public outrage in China over the mid-air collision of a US spy plane and a Chinese jet fighter over the South China Sea. While mass demonstrations were not permitted this time, Chinese people expressed their anger in other ways. In the week after the collisions, an organization called 'Honker (Red Hacker) Union of China' emerged on the Internet and called for Chinese net-surfers to launch a 'cyber-war' against the US. It also released a so-called 'Manifesto of *Honker*' to declare that its missions included: 'Maintain the reunification of the motherland! Guard the national sovereignty! Outside consistent resistance shame! [sic] Attack anti-Chinese arrogance!' (Harden 2001, 13). Over the next couple of weeks, a few thousand Chinese hackers made massive attacks on the official websites of the US government. The homepage of the White House's website was defaced and replaced by the photograph of the Chinese pilot who lost his life during the collision. The angry public responses displayed in this incident as well as in the embassy bombing in 1999 not only demonstrated the intensity of nationalistic

sentiments among the Chinese public, but also signified a trend that such sentiments have increasingly manifested themselves in the form of violent mass action.

Taking the development of popular nationalism in China as a whole, a clear change in the focus of popular nationalistic sentiments is discernible. Popular nationalism in the early 1990s represented a rational, albeit controversial, subject of academic discourse focused upon China's internal crisis. Since the mid-1990s, and especially after the 1999 embassy bombing, however, nationalism became a rallying point among a much broader cross-section of the population who were increasingly concerned with China's external relations, in particular with the United States. This enlargement of the 'nationalistic community' in China, and the unpredictable and often radical ways in which it manifested itself, brought great uncertainty into China's relationship with the outside world. Ironically, fearful of the disruptive effect of strong populist anti-US sentiment in the late 1990s, some prominent advocates of nationalism began to voice a more considered view. For example, since 1999 Xiao Gongqin, one of the best-known advocates of nationalism in the early 1990s in China, increasingly criticized what he perceived as the radicalization (*jijin hua*) of the new Chinese nationalism after the 1999 embassy bombing. He warned that if not checked, such nationalistic radicalism and extremism could lead China to retreat into a new 'self-imposed isolation', ruining the achievements of the post-Mao reform (Xiao 2001; Xiao 1999).

The causes of rising popular nationalism in China

Why did the Chinese public become increasingly nationalistic in the 1990s? Why has anti-US sentiment risen significantly? A conventional explanation is that the current nationalistic sentiments in China have been purposely stirred up and 'orchestrated' by the Chinese state to bolster its legitimacy for holding onto power. To be sure, nationalism has always been an important means for the Chinese Communist Party to enlist mass support ever since it came into being. After the Party came to power in 1949, it promoted patriotism, officially defined as love of the socialist country led by the CCP, which required the Chinese to be loyal to the Chinese state. This was more so during the post-Cold War era when the dissolution of the Soviet Union and collapse of other communist regimes in Eastern Europe dealt a major ideological blow to the Chinese regime. In response to the crisis of legitimacy brought about by the demise of official communist ideology, nationalist appeals have been further exploited by the Party to legitimize its continuing monopoly of power. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese government has carried out an extensive campaign of patriotic education, in particular among the country's youth (Zhao 1998).

While these efforts have undoubtedly been conducive to the growth of nationalism in China, the rising anti-US nationalistic sentiments in the 1990s cannot be attributed solely to such state-led propaganda drives. Some external factors were also responsible. In particular, three important developments in

China's external environment in the 1990s led many Chinese, including leading intellectuals, to become more nationalistic and conservative in their views of the future of China and its relationship with the outside world. The first was the dissolution of the Soviet Union and regime changes in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. The second was the rise of the 'China threat' theory in the west in the mid-1990s. The third was the ever-fluctuating Sino-US relations over the last decade.

Many scholars noted the unexpected impact of the end of the Cold War upon Chinese perceptions of the west (Barmé 1996; Zhao 1997; Chen 1997; Zheng 1999). While regime changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe led to the bankruptcy of communist ideology, it did not spark greater interest in western-style democracy in Chinese society. Rather, a broad disillusionment with the west quickly emerged in the early 1990s. Shortly after the end of the Cold War, many Chinese intellectuals discovered that radical democratization and economic privatization in these countries did not lead to cheerful economic and political outcomes. Instead, post-communist countries were struggling with considerable social dislocation, political instability, ethnic wars and economic stagnation. The dismal outcomes of 'big bang' reform in these countries led them to suspect the validity of western-style democracy as a realistic solution for China, at least in the short term.

Not surprisingly, many intellectuals in the early 1990s became more conservative, nationalistic and supportive of the political status quo in light of their new perceptions about the merits of western-style democracy. For them a strong authoritarian state that could maintain order and stability and national integration was more desirable than a more democratic but less stable political system. Moreover, the economic success of the East Asian countries that share a similar culture with China also attracted a great deal of attention from many Chinese scholars in the early 1990s. Their conclusion was that an authoritarian political structure, an ideology of nationalism and collectivism, and free market economics played indispensable roles in the 'East Asian Miracle' (Xiao 1994b, 31; Yi 1994). The experience of the East Asian countries convinced many Chinese scholars that the west was neither the only, nor a viable, model for China in its pursuit of modernization. They believed that a rational nationalism derived from Chinese traditional values rather than western liberal ideas should be promoted as a new state ideology to enhance regime authority and facilitate economic development.

Yet, despite the fact that such nationalistic and conservative thinking overlapped and significantly supported the official discourse of nationalism, there is a critical difference between the two. One primary feature of China's 'official nationalism', i.e. state-centred patriotism, is its lack of distinction between state and nation, and consequently, between the state's interest and national interest, and loyalty to the regime versus loyalty to the country. Chinese intellectual discourse, however, has had a much more sophisticated understanding of nationalism. One of the first two articles on nationalism published in the nationalistic journal *Zhanyue yu guanli* made an explicit distinction between the state's and the national interest

(Wang 1994). Though the author claimed that national interest was a driving factor in international politics, he warned that the term 'national interest' has often been deliberately conflated with that of the state's interests to serve the regime's purpose (Wang 1994, 11). Indeed throughout the 1990s, the intellectual discourse of nationalism has featured intense debates on the merits, nature and directions of the Chinese nationalism.³

The intellectuals' view of the Chinese regime and nationalism was also widely shared by the Chinese general public as indicated by various polls. For example, in a survey conducted by a group of American and Chinese scholars in Beijing in 1995, when asked to choose what was the most important value to them, 56 per cent of the respondents chose national peace and prosperity, with only 5.8 per cent and 6.3 per cent choosing political democracy and individual freedom respectively (Dowd, Carlson and Shen 1999, 371). In another survey conducted in December 1995, 93 per cent of the respondents chose to live in 'an orderly society' rather than 'a freer society which is prone to disruption' (Chen J. et al. 1997, 561). Such a widely shared view on stability and economic growth also made many Chinese people not only become less interested in, but also resentful of, the efforts of the west to push China on issues of political democracy and human rights.

If post-Cold War developments in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe led to a widely shared disillusionment with western-style political systems, another external factor, namely the emergence of the 'China threat' argument in the west (and especially the United States) in the early 1990s, was more responsible for the upsurge of anti-US sentiments among the Chinese public. With the end of the Cold War, warnings about the potential threat that an increasingly strong China might pose began to appear in the western media, strategic think-tanks and in the US Congress. Many in the west have worried about the potential destabilizing impact of China's growing economic and military strength upon the security of the Asia-Pacific region and advocated a policy of containment toward China. While many of these concerns were not groundless, some were characterized by exaggeration and misperceptions. Moreover, many of the 'containing-China' arguments were based on realpolitik thinking such as great power rivalry or 'the clash of civilizations'.⁴ This caused many Chinese to believe that the US perceived China as an enemy in the post-Cold War era, and was determined to prevent China from emerging as a great power. Consequently, many Chinese tended to see that the rhetoric or perceived actions about containing China were not so much 'anti-communism' or 'anti-Chinese government', but in essence, anti-China and anti-Chinese people (Song et al. 1996b, 45).

The third factor contributing to the growing anti-US sentiments was the vicissitudinous Sino-US relations in the 1990s. US policy toward China changed sharply after the Chinese government's crackdown of the 1989 democratic movement, when the United States became increasingly critical of the Chinese government. When Bill Clinton won the US presidential election in 1992, promoting more democratic and humane governance around the world became one

of the central goals of US foreign policy. This unfortunately came at a time when public interest in such issues were at an all-time low in China, in light of the social chaos and instability in the former communist countries. In 1993, President Clinton decided to make the improvement of China's human rights record a condition for the renewal of China's Most Favourite Nation Status (MFN). However many Chinese saw the policy as little more than an excuse for promoting America's own economic interests. It incurred strong public resentment among the Chinese. As one prominent American China watcher commented succinctly on the consequence of post-1989 US sanctions upon China: 'Americans thought they were striking a blow for the Chinese people against a repressive elite, whereas Chinese (intellectuals and the working class alike, not to mention leaders) quickly concluded that the US sanctions simply were one more attempt to slow China's economic development—another try at keeping China down' (Lampton 2001, 254).

Several events in the 1990s reinforced growing negative public opinion towards the United States. When the Chinese public found out that the US opposed Beijing's bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games, imposed unreasonably high conditions in relation to its entry into the World Trade Organization, and tactically supported independence forces in Taiwan, they believed that America was bent on practicing a policy of containment. In particular, in 1995 the United States issued a visa to allow Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui to visit his alma mater, Cornell University. This sparked a strong response from the Chinese government, which launched a series of provocative missile exercises in the Taiwan Strait between September 1995 and March 1996. When the United States responded by sending two aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait in March 1996 to show its willingness to defend Taiwan, anti-US nationalistic sentiments in China escalated to new heights. While the Sino-US relationship improved significantly during the period 1997–98 when the two countries expressed their intentions to build 'a constructive, strategic partnership', the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 7 May 1999 led to an explosive outburst of nationalistic anger against the US. Few Chinese people accepted the US explanation of the bombing as an 'accident'; rather they saw it as deliberately bullying the Chinese people.

For many Chinese, the perception that the United States sought to prevent the rise of China was reinforced in the unfriendly, if not hostile, rhetoric and actions of the new Bush administration, which came into office in January 2001. During the presidential election campaign in 2000, George W. Bush downgraded the Sino-US relationship from 'strategic partner' to 'strategic competitor'. In its first few months in office, the Bush administration initiated a series of provocative actions, including efforts to strengthen its alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia; planning a package of arms sales to Taiwan; sponsoring a resolution in the March 2001 UNCHR meeting in Geneva condemning China's human rights record; and confirming the development of national and theatre missile defence systems, with the latter being possibly made available to Taiwan in future. All these policies

reinforced perceptions among the Chinese public that America was treating China as a potential rival in the 21st century. In this context, it came as no surprise that the public reacted angrily to the spy-plane collision. Indeed, what particularly angered many Chinese was not the collision itself, but the realization that US spy planes routinely flew along China's coastline: a fact which only further convinced them of the hostility of US intentions toward China.

Given these circumstances, the perception that the rising nationalism in China is purely a product of government propaganda misses the important impact of external actions and factors. But while rising nationalism among Chinese intellectuals was driven by a number of dramatic changes in China's external environments, an essential feature of popular nationalism is that it is largely a reaction against US policies on particular issues, not an opposition to the United States as such. The angry responses of the Chinese public to perceived 'containing-China' actions is ironically deeply rooted in their strong desire to be integrated into the international community, reflected in the 'love-hate' feelings held by many Chinese towards the United States. One journalist reported recently that while many Chinese students (seen as the most nationalistic group in China) are resentful of the perceived or real US hegemonic behaviour toward China, they had a high opinion of the US political system (Pomfret 2001). In the above-mentioned 1999 survey in urban China, although the United States was ranked as the most unfriendly country among 11 foreign countries, the majority of respondents still regarded United States as having the best economic and second best (after China) political models respectively for China (Tang W 2001, 900). Indeed, whenever the Sino-US relationship improved, there were widespread good feelings towards the US in China and nationalistic sentiments generally subsided (Metzger and Myers 1998, 34–35; Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, 171; Zheng 2000, 100).

Nationalism, public opinion and Chinese foreign policy

How has the recent rise of the nationalistic sentiments of the Chinese public impacted upon China's foreign policy? What has been the attitude of the Chinese government to the rise of popular nationalism? A widely accepted view is that because the Chinese government so desperately relies on nationalism to stay in power, it would be unwilling—and more importantly unable—to resist popular nationalistic pressures in handling international affairs. Conversely, such a view suggests an increasingly confrontational Chinese foreign policy.

Such a view, however, overestimates the extent of the Party's reliance on nationalistic appeals for holding onto power, and therefore the impact of popular nationalistic feelings upon foreign policy-making in China. More specifically, it overlooks some other more important sources of legitimacy for the Chinese government, in particular the government's performance in delivering economic growth and maintaining political stability. Actually, since the early 1990s economic development with stability has become the central tenet of the government's legitimization efforts (Yang 1994, Downs and Philips 1998–99).

Given the fact that there is a widely shared fear among Chinese people of any potential domestic chaos in the aftermath of the regime changes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the performance of the government in these two areas has been crucial for the government to justify its continued rule (Chen, Yang and Hillard 1997). Thus, the Chinese leadership's willingness to appeal to popular nationalistic sentiments remains subordinate to its overriding goal of promoting economic development and maintaining political stability (Downs and Philips 1998–99; Zhao 2000; Zheng 2000).

Accordingly, the primary principle of Chinese foreign policy has been to maintain, as much as possible, a peaceful and cooperative international environment that is conducive to China's economic modernization and political integrity (Sutter 2000, 2; Wang 1994, 29). In particular, the Chinese leadership has given top priority to developing cooperative relationships with foreign countries, especially the United States whose technologies, capital, market and global influence are all critically important to China's economic development in the era of globalization. There is general consensus among Chinese leaders that only by effective participation in the international economic system can China become a strong and wealthy country (Zheng 1999). Therefore, nationalistic appeals, though important, have to be exercised without damaging the overriding goal of economic development and stability that are critically important for the regime's very survival.

This pragmatic approach has been most apparent in China's handling of its relations with the United States. Despite the turbulent ups and downs of the Sino-US relationship over the last decades, the Chinese leadership has in general sought to maintain a conciliatory approach. This was summarized in 1993 by Jiang Zemin as 'enhancing confidence, reducing troubles, expanding cooperation, and avoiding confrontation' (Zhao 2000, 31). No matter whether such a policy reflected a temporary tactic because China felt that it was too weak to afford to confront the United States, or a long-term strategy because of its genuine desire to integrate into the international community, the Chinese leadership proved to be willing to incur damage to its nationalistic credentials by adopting conciliatory policies towards the United States. For example, during 1992–94 a series of provocative American actions generated strong public anger within China. Despite being criticized for adopting a policy of 'tolerance, forbearance and compromise' toward Washington, pragmatic leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin insisted on maintaining a 'not seeking confrontation' approach to the United States (Whiting 1994, 307–16). Some observers found that even in the wake of the 1999 embassy bombing, the Chinese government remained arguably restrained in its response to the emotional anti-US sentiments that cut across almost all sections of Chinese society. While the government approved of and even supported the emotional mass demonstrations outside US diplomatic missions, it made strong efforts to prevent such nationalistic emotions from diverting the government's domestic and foreign policy goals (Miles 2000–01; Zheng 2000).

Such pragmatism was also apparent in Beijing's handling of the 2001 spy-plane incident. Commentary in the western media tended to see the invisible hand of the Chinese government behind public expressions of anti-US anger during the crisis. The argument was that the government wanted to use the incident to divert people's attention from the daunting domestic problems faced by the country, and partly to enhance the regime's nationalist credentials (Leggett 2001; Stratfor 2001). A closer examination of a few actions of the Chinese government at the time indicates that this argument is, at best, partial and, at worst, misleading.

First, the Chinese government's actions in the days following the collision clearly indicated that it intended, at least initially, to downplay the incident rather than to manipulate it into an anti-US campaign. The incident occurred at around 9:15am on 1 April 2001. Initially, the Chinese government did not make it public, partly because it was worried about the likely angry public response in light of the May 1999 embassy bombing incident. However, when the incident was publicized first by the US Pacific Command in a press release around 3:00pm in the afternoon, news and speculation spread quickly over Chinese websites and chat rooms. In response to many inquiries from the public and media, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a brief statement on China Central TV's (CCTV) 10.00pm news program. Though the statement blamed the misbehaviour of the US pilot for causing the incident, the overall wording was quite mild and descriptive. It did not make any accusation about the intentions of US behaviour in this incident. Indeed it was reported that Beijing was annoyed that the US made the incident public before contacting the Chinese authorities. Moreover, despite strong public anger and thousands of anti-US messages posted on the station's website after 1 April 2000, CCTV only began to report the angry public responses on 4 April. The government also reportedly instructed all universities not to allow any anti-US demonstrations. A request authorizing a demonstration made by university students in Hainan, where the US plane had landed and the crew were held, was declined. On 5 April two students intending to protest in front of the US Embassy in Beijing were quickly asked to leave.

Second, while anti-US rhetoric in the official media became increasingly strong in the days after 4 April, largely driven by a much stronger public mood, the government made clear efforts to try to dampen the anti-US sentiments as quickly as possible. For instance, on 10 April, one day before releasing the US crew—amid widespread public anger and demands for tough action, such as charging the US crew with murder—the government reportedly briefed all officials at bureau level and above to explain the deliberations of the central leadership in handling the matter. On April 12 China's leading official newspaper, *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), published an editorial that called for the general public to turn their attention to economic development and to entrust the current leadership headed by Jiang Zemin with handling the spy-plane incident. The editorial was clearly intended to restrain the emotional anti-US public sentiment (*People's Daily* 2001). Highlighting the importance of the Sino-US relationship, the article stressed the

need to maintain and strengthen it. The article also specifically mentioned that the majority of the American people were truly friendly toward China. Moreover, from 11 April, the media were reportedly instructed not to run excessive anti-American articles.

Subsequent developments in the following months gave further evidence of the conciliatory approach of China toward the US. Shortly after the spy-plane incident, the Bush administration made a series of provocative moves to challenge China: on 24 April it announced the United States' biggest arms sale (US\$4 billion) to Taiwan since 1992; on 25 April President Bush made a unprecedented statement during a television interview that the United States 'will do whatever it takes' to defend Taiwan from potential attack from mainland China; on 7 May the US resumed intelligence-gathering surveillance flights along the Chinese coast; and on 21 May it approved a high profile 'stopover' visit to New York by Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian. It also pushed ahead with developing a missile defence system that potentially includes Taiwan. Despite the high sensitivity of these issues to China's national interests and nationalistic feelings, even a long-time critic of the Chinese government acknowledged that the responses of the Chinese government were relatively mild (Lam 2001).

However, it should be noted that, while thus far Beijing has displayed considerable willingness and capacity to restrain the impact of popular nationalistic feelings upon its foreign policy, how long it can and will be willing to do so is uncertain. This is firstly because the economic and political changes over the past two decades have given rise to greater pluralism in Chinese society. The commercialization of the publishing industry, relative loosening of state control of the media, and increasing Internet use all make it easier than ever before for the public to express its opinions. Indeed, a few recent studies found that anti-foreign nationalistic sentiments were particularly high among Chinese Internet users (Strategic Comment 2001; Hughes 1998). This has placed increasing pressures upon the government's policy-making. The government clearly understands that when nationalistic public opinion is not satisfactorily attended to, it can easily be turned into anti-government sentiments, as happened many times in China's recent history. Conversely, the Chinese government has had to be increasingly responsive to the public sentiments of Chinese citizens.

There are already signs that significant consideration has been given to public opinion by the Chinese government. For example, during the spy-plane incident, while the government released the US crew shortly afterward, it refused America's proposal that American staff fly the damaged spy plane back after repairing it, and insisted the plane be disassembled and carried away by cargo plane. The Chinese deputy-foreign minister, Li Zhaoxing explained 'if we allow such a military plane, which had a mission of spying on China, to be flown back from a Chinese military airfield, that would further hurt the dignity and sentiments of the Chinese people.' It would be 'the cause of strong indignation and opposition from the Chinese people' (Yang 2001, 7).

The intensity of popular nationalistic feeling and its manifestations has been contingent upon the nature and intensity of foreign pressures, rather than on the intentions of the Chinese government. In some crises such as the embassy bombing and the spy-plane incident, the sudden, emotional and somewhat violent public expressions of anger have compelled China's leaders to echo these reactions, even if this risked serious damage to their foreign policy goals. Therefore, the Chinese government will find it particularly difficult to follow its conciliatory policy when it faces strong foreign challenges from the outside and strong public reaction from within. Given these facts, the future of the impact of popular nationalism upon Chinese foreign policy is uncertain and is dependent upon changes both inside and outside China.

Conclusion

The assumption that growing Chinese nationalism is a product of the Chinese government's propaganda misreads the nature of the public nationalistic feelings in the 1990s. External factors also matter significantly. To a large extent, the recent episodes of rising public anger toward the United States in China is a response to the containment of China, rather than thoughtless public acceptance of official rhetoric. Many Chinese people have changed their opinions toward the United States in the 1990s because they started to believe that it has been determined to block China's modernization drive. Whether such public perceptions are ill-founded or not, anti-US sentiments in China are popular and sometimes very strong.

It is also wrong to assume that because nationalism is important for the post-Mao Chinese regime as a justification for its monopoly on power, the Chinese government will be willing to take a more assertive, and even aggressive, international stance to enhance its domestic nationalistic credentials. Thus far, the current Chinese regime has actually generated public support not just from its nationalistic rhetoric, but more from its success in developing China's economy and maintaining political stability. Whereas nationalistic feelings have been rising, pragmatic Chinese leaders have continued to give top priority to promoting economic development and have tried not to allow emotional public anger or foreign pressure to disrupt its economic modernization program. Consequently, conciliation and responsiveness rather than confrontation and rigidity have characterized China's foreign policy, especially in its relations with the United States since the early 1990s.

However, how Chinese nationalism will evolve as well as its impact upon Chinese foreign policy is largely uncertain, and dependent upon both China's domestic politics as well as foreign policies toward China (Zheng 2000). The rising nationalism and public sentiments against the United States indicate that criticism and interventionist policy has been counterproductive in that it has generated strong angry reactions rather than support from the Chinese public. An effective China policy can only be formulated upon a thorough understanding of the real

needs and interests of the Chinese people, not on assumptions made by the United States. The commonly held assumption that the current Chinese state is a dictatorial regime that suppresses 'the Chinese people's yearning for freedom and democracy' (Kaiser and Mufsen 2001, cited from Gries 2001, 42) fails to capture the complicated reality of contemporary Chinese society. Policies based on such an assumption are likely to be ineffective and futile. This is not to say that human rights and democracy should not be promoted in China; these should always play an important part in western countries' policies toward China. However, a policy solely focused on these issues without genuine consideration of other, equally basic, needs of the Chinese will be at best inadequate and at worst counterproductive. Ironically, it seems that the Chinese government, often charged with being unpopular, repressive and illegitimate, has exhibited a much better understanding of the current needs and interests of its people and responded more effectively to domestic sentiment than its foreign critics.

Notes

- ¹ On the rise of Chinese nationalism in the 1990s, see Unger (1996), Zhao (1997, 2000) and Zheng (1999). For two more recent studies on the current anti-US nationalistic sentiments in China, see Gries (2001) and Miles (2000–01).
- ² The most explicit call for an 'all-out westernisation' in China was expressed in Su et al. (1988).
- ³ Most of the articles debating nationalism published in the 1990s was later collected in an edited book, see Li (2000). The author wishes to thank Dr. Feng Chongyi for providing the book.
- ⁴ For a summary of the China threat arguments in the first half of 1990s, see Roy (1996), Shambaugh (1996), and Betts and Christensen (2000–01).

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