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China's 'Significant Others'

China's rapid integration into what is still a Western-dominated international system has challenged official narratives about nations and states. One result of this challenge, argues Christian Wirth, is that historical education and the maps you create and use have become integral to 'higher-level' identity-politics.

By Christian Wirth for ISN

From 'East vs. West' to 'China and the West'

Whereas Cold War thinking once pitted the West against the Soviet bloc, the dominant theme shaping contemporary international relations and security discourse is the growing struggle between China and the West. Within this 'struggle' China is widely portrayed as a unitary actor and civilization challenging the dominance of the Western powers under the leadership of the United States. China is often viewed as a threat on the basis that if its rise measured in GDP growth rates were to proceed in linear fashion - as is implicitly assumed - it would mean the return of a non-Western hegemonic global power led by a communist party. Therefore, it comes to no surprise that these binary views are mirrored on the Chinese side where the talk is about 'China and the West'.

However, conceptual frameworks that divide the world into status quo and revisionist powers or peaceful democracies are too simple to provide suitable guidelines for addressing the whole gamut of emerging trends and developments. This is particularly true of how China's emergence as a global power is viewed by its near-neighbors and, indeed, its citizens.

Moreover, the concerns of the fourteen countries bordering China transcend stronger economic interdependence to include surging trans-boundary flows of people alongside traditional security politics. Particularly in societies like Japan, Korea and Vietnam that share considerable cultural and historical roots such as language and Confucian and Buddhist traditions, the 'rise of China' is more than about making adjustments to foreign and economic policies. It is a question of how to redefine national and political identities in a rapidly changing order of civilizations, states, regions, social classes and individuals.

Security: a Question of Identity

If insecurity is a result of the uncertainty of the future, security is usefully understood as the stability of social order, that is, the perceived predictability and ability to manage human interaction. Thus, ontological security requires confidence in the ability to participate as respected subject rather than stigmatized object of politics. In other words, security is closely related to membership in a defined

community, that is, a question of collective identity. Political communities are constituted by their relations to other communities and how they define themselves as being different. Apart from drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders, this requires a clear purpose that enables powerful actors to generate meaning and define the community's norms. The ability to define a common purpose and produce meaning underpins the legitimation of government.

Applied to China and its neighbors this means that, in order to keep nations (that is imagined communities) coherent in the face of numerous challenges it is the task of elites to sustain narratives about what it means to be Chinese, American, or Japanese. This is closely related to security politics because these narratives provide the basis for political entrepreneurs define friends and enemies, and threats to national interests.

The modern Chinese state was borne out of violent struggles against European and Japanese imperialism, the latter of which only ended 67 years ago. The civil war that had raged since the demise of the Qing Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, however, continued until the communists led by Mao Zedong drove out the nationalist Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-Shek to Taiwan in 1949. At that time, the Cold War confrontation had already emerged and prompted the United States as the leader of the Western camp to draw a line between enemies and friends in East Asia. On the Western side of this boundary, called the Acheson line, the task was to prevent leftists from gaining power. On the Eastern side, Taiwan and South Korea became the frontline of containment. The result of this geopolitics was that the 1951 peace settlement of San Francisco excluded China and Korea and led to the solidification of their division through the Taiwan Strait and along the 38th parallel.

That is why in Chinese collective memory national unity became the paramount imperative. Only a China united under strong leadership would be able to overcome the 'century of humiliation' at the hand of Western and Japanese imperialism. Against this background, it is no surprise that the *de jure* independence of Taiwan is a core national security issue. An independent state of Taiwan, if it were to renounce the basing of foreign troops would, in material terms, clearly reinforce Chinese national security because it would lessen the role of the US military in the region. Nevertheless, an independent Taiwan is completely unacceptable to Beijing because it poses an existential threat to the imagination of what the Chinese nation-state is.

The Love-Hate Relationship with Significant Others

After the defeat of imperialist powers and its nationalist rival it was the Soviet Union that became the significant other for Mao's Communist Party. The struggle over the right path to socialist development led to outright war in 1969. Even the nuclear option was on the table. Apart from major confrontation with the Soviet Union, China has also fought wars with Vietnam (1979) and India (1962). In view of these conflicts, it is somewhat astonishing that Beijing was able to completely settle border disputes on land not only in Central Asia but also with its most recent enemies, Russia and Vietnam. While the border conflict with India continues to fuel tensions, it is also surprising that neither 'rising' India nor nuclear superpower Russia represent major concerns to Chinese strategists and hardly influence public opinion. What matters most - and therefore represents China's most significant other against which the nation defines itself - is the United States and Japan, with the former representing 'the West' and the latter perceived as the worst of former imperial powers with inherent militaristic tendencies and, as close ally and host to US bases, acting as semi-sovereign state at the behest of Western interests.

The Identity Politics of Maritime Territorial Disputes

When the Cold War turned hot on the Korean Peninsula, geostrategic calculations produced ambiguous border demarcations along the Acheson line and subsequently created disputes between

Japan and all its Asian neighbors over the Southern Kuriles/Northern Territories, Dokdo/Takeshima and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and between China and its neighbors (and among Southeast Asian states) in the South China Sea. However, even after the Cold War ended, all of these disputes have intensified, with new rows emerging this year.

With the exception of the South China Sea, scientific studies refute the mantra that disputed territories are particularly 'rich' in natural resources. In other words, maritime disputes are about identity politics. The clearest example is the Chinese claim of almost the entire South China Sea delineated by the so-called u-shaped or nine-dotted line. Although this line, drawn on a map by a lower-ranking Kuomintang officer in the 1940s does not conform to the principles of the law of the sea and invites the United States to reinforce its role as balancer in the region, Beijing is unable to implement pragmatic policies.

This is due to the re-emergence of Chinese nationalism since the 1990s, which is often attributed to enhanced efforts at patriotic education aimed at compensating for the weakening of communist ideology and the legitimation crisis of the Chinese Communist Party that ensued from hardships caused by economic liberalization. Indeed, the main message of historical narratives that put the 'West' and Japan in a negative light is: Chinese people must unite and work hard under the leadership of the Communist Party in order to rejuvenate the Chinese nation and to regain its rightful place in the international society.

China and the International Society of States: Xi Jinping's Dilemma

Xi Jinping, who is likely to become the next President of China in late 2012, explained to a visiting Japanese politician that he is facing a major dilemma. On the one hand, he needs to continue to modernize the country bringing it closer to what the current standards of the international society of states prescribes (economic growth and development lifting people out of poverty and political reform leading towards democracy). On the other hand, if China were to follow a path similar to Japan in the postwar period, this would result in it consuming a large share of the world's natural resources and causing immense pollution. Moreover, political reform may produce a completely dysfunctional political system with deteriorating living conditions in China and growing anxieties abroad.

In this situation of political and identity crises, people look to the past for simple solutions for contemporary problems. Populist rhetoric by political entrepreneurs - whether they are 'netizens', 'angry youth' or established politicians - fall on fertile ground. However, as the rows over the Southern Kuriles/Northern Territories between Russia and Japan and the Dokdo/Takeshima islands between South Korea and Japan as much as the American concern with maintaining primacy in the Asia-Pacific demonstrate, historical revisionism and nationalistic populism are not unique to a particular state. Thus, for China as much as for its East Asian neighbors, the conundrum is how to nurture socially and ecologically sustainable societies while at the same time overcoming status inconsistency in a world dominated by Western neo-liberal norms. As the latter norms are inevitably challenged in this dialectic process of absorbing new members, 'Western' governments are well advised to work with rather than against China.

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