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PRESTIGE ABOVE ALL

Jyrki Kallio



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- Chinese external and internal politics have manifested increased ideologization in recent years, presumably laying the groundwork for the Communist Party's 100th anniversary this year. The trend is likely to continue at least until the completion of the 20th Party Congress in 2022.
- In China's foreign policy, this ideologization has taken the form of increased emphasis on the realization of China's "Grand Rejuvenation" and heightened sensitivity to anything that might stand in its way. This is in line with the Party's historical narrative emphasizing the "century of humiliation" and the ensuing efforts to curb China's rise.
- The resulting prestige-driven foreign policy has proved harmful to China's external image. An easing of Chinese politics may thus be conceivable once the Party has left the current sensitive times behind to its satisfaction.
- Countries with vital economic ties to China, and which depend at the same time on continued US support in security policies, have little choice but to continue tightropeing for a few more years at least.



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The Communist Party of China (CPC) is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. For some years now, the proximity of the celebrations has brought much ideological rhetoric to the surface, which provides a good opportunity for observers to glimpse the Party's self-image. It is clear that the celebrations are deemed important. The fate of the Soviet Union and its leading Party, dissolved before reaching its 75th anniversary, has loomed over the heads of the CPC leaders for almost three decades, and it is of great psychological significance that the Chinese Party can now boast of having outlived its mentor by reaching a full century.

This Briefing Paper digests the foreign policy priorities of the CPC in the Party's favoured historical narrative, the lessons learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China's core interests. The paper argues that the outcome may be characterized as prestige-driven foreign policy. For China, prestige is not only a means but also the end. In traditional Chinese thinking, prestige confers legitimacy on the ruler. This results in a certain irrationality when China's actions are observed from the outside. Indeed, China's prestige-driven foreign policy has proved harmful to the country's external image. We may, however, see an easing in Chinese politics once the Party has left the current sensitive times behind to its satisfaction. This is largely dependent on developments in Sino-US relations, as China considers the US the biggest obstacle when it comes to boosting its prestige.

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The foreign policy priorities and goals of the CPC are intricately linked with the historical narrative cherished by the Party and the ensuing core interests. The historical narrative is based on the "creed" of national unity. According to the traditional understanding of history in China originating from the imperial era, there would be chaos without unity, as was always the case during periods of disunity. Similarly, the ability to establish and maintain unity has always been considered the single most important criterion for measuring a ruler's success.

This age-old ideal translates into the assertion that China's borders reflect the historical extent of the areas that have "always" belonged to China. This makes areas such as Tibet or Xinjiang integral parts of China despite the fact – recognized even by critical Chinese historians – that both were integrated into the Chinese empire only some 200 years ago. The official historiography navigates around this reality by explaining how these border regions have always interacted with or depended on the Chinese heartland, with the former recognizing the cultural superiority of the latter.

In this regard, there are two factors at play. The first is the idea of a Chinese heartland, the China Proper, which is surrounded by "fortresses" necessary for its defence. This idea was epitomized by the leader of the Chinese Republic in the 1940s, Chiang Kai-shek. It was the Republic that demarcated China's borders in line with the claimed extent of the Qing Empire before its collapse in 1911. China Proper is seen as the area inhabited by the Han, forming the ethnic majority of the Chinese population, and the surrounding areas as those where the other, ethnically and linguistically different peoples live. In the official jargon, these other peoples are called minority nationalities by virtue of the fact that they live within the Chinese borders.

The second factor relates to another historical myth cherished by the Chinese leadership, namely that China has never been hegemonistic, and thus the minority areas have been drawn into China naturally, due to the heartland's cultural and economic strength, instead of having been forced into it by military power. Therefore, the minorities have always been part of the "Chinese Nation". While the concept of the Chinese Nation has been debated and reformulated many times since the fall of the empire, the underlying proposition remains that China is united both by means of its territory as well as its population.

CENTURY OF HUMILIATION

The immutability of China's borders and the Chinese population are closely related to the element in the historical narrative which, in turn, forms the basis of the legitimacy of the CPC. This is the mantra of the

“century of humiliation”. According to the narrative, China was plagued by colonial powers during the latter half of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century, firstly impoverished by the corrupt republican regime and then devastated by the Japanese invasion that was carried out against China due to the weakness of its regime, finally leading to civil war.

The worst humiliations were the attempts to carve up China, duly shattering its unity. There were colonies and concessions, special rights enjoyed by foreigners, and even a separate puppet state established by the Japanese on Chinese soil. It was only the Communist victory in the civil war that brought an end to the century of humiliation, because the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 brought stability and restored unity, it is claimed.

Remnants of the humiliation remained, and have been utilized by the CPC in their propaganda for decades. The most blatant of these were the British colony of Hong Kong, and the Portuguese colony of Macao. Both were returned to Chinese rule in the 1990s. China has also been accusing foreign powers of inciting separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang, and outside evidence of CIA operations in Tibet in the 1950s to 1970s or al-Qaeda declaring war on China in support of the Muslim population in Xinjiang in 2014¹ have served to bolster the credibility of these accusations. Furthermore, China considers the US “Freedom of Navigation Operations” (FONOP) in the South China Sea in the vicinity of the Chinese-controlled reefs as provocations, aiming to keep China in line with the “China Threat” rhetoric.

Hence, China considers itself at liberty to claim that its territorial integrity is under threat. There are ongoing territorial issues with India in the remote Himalayan mountains, and a dispute with Japan over the miniscule Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands in Japanese). Although the border regions with India are strategically important, and there are possible oil and gas reserves near the disputed islands, the core reason for the sensitivity of these issues is related to the historical narrative. China perceives the former as a legacy of the Great Game played by the colonial powers at the expense of weak Asian nations in the late 1800s, while the latter is interlinked with the Taiwan Issue. Due to complex historical reasons,² if China were to relinquish

its claim to these islands, it could be interpreted as giving up its claim to Taiwan.

In China, the Taiwan Issue is considered by far the most important concrete proof of the correctness of the CPC’s historical narrative. Through means of “patriotic education”, the Chinese have been taught to consider Taiwan an inalienable part of China since time immemorial. As historically false as this claim may be, there is strong popular support in China for the “reunification of the motherland”, which may be realized even by military means if all else fails. The CPC claims that the separation resulting from the civil war has been maintained through US interference, which includes military support and security guarantees for the Taiwanese regime.

EVADING THE DESTINY OF THE SOVIET UNION

Through its historical narrative, the CPC has tied its past legitimacy to the ability to save China’s existence and unity, and its future legitimacy to the ability to continue safeguarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, the Party has been fighting against “peaceful evolution”, “end of history” and other ideas based on the conviction that Communism will fall in China as it has almost everywhere else.

According to an analysis by the People’s Liberation Army National Defense University in 2013, the fall of the Soviet Union was a result of the Communist Party’s lack of self-confidence. This was manifested by the indecision of the Party’s central leadership and the weakness of the Party’s ideology.

The CPC’s recipe for escaping the fate of the Soviet Communist Party has been to unite the Party leadership by centring power at the core – in the person of Xi Jinping – and to give new impetus to the ideology in the form of China’s Dream, Xi’s principal slogan. According to the official interpretation, the realization of China’s Dream means the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The rejuvenation in turn calls for unshackling China from all remnants of past humiliations and removing obstacles to the rise of China. The object of the rejuvenation – the Chinese Nation – must also be redefined in an unambiguous and undisputed manner.

1 See e.g. Masko, John (2013) “CIA Operations in Tibet and the Intelligence-Policy Relationship”, *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2013), 127–132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26202084>. Keck, Jachary (2014) “Al-Qaeda Declares War on China, Too”, *The Diplomat*, 22 October 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/al-qaeda-declares-war-on-china-too/>.

2 The complexities regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute are briefly discussed by the author in *FIIA Briefing Paper 232/2018*, “Taiwan’s role in East Asian security: Overlooked actor in a pivotal position”, <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/taiwans-role-in-east-asian-security>.



President Xi Jinping has been serving as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China since 2012.
Source: APEC (CC BY 2.0)

PRIORITIES AND CORE INTERESTS OF THE CPC

The above-mentioned are the priorities of the CPC that impact all Chinese politics today. This is why we have over the past few years witnessed, inter alia, the scrapping of the “one country, two systems” principle in Hong Kong society, the efforts to Sinify both religions and ethnicities within China, and the rise of the “wolf warrior” diplomats – Chinese representatives abroad who have adopted an unabashedly aggressive style of presenting their views. They also reflect and are reflected in China’s core interests. According to the White Paper on Peaceful Development from 2011, China’s core interests include “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China’s political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development”. It is noteworthy that this set begins with sovereignty, links territorial integrity specifically with the Taiwan Issue (i.e. national reunification),³ and then places Party rule among the core values as well. According to Article 1 of the Constitution of the PRC, China is “a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship”,

3 Instead of “and” in the English translation, the Chinese original separates the two with a comma.

which is a way of declaring the Party’s leading position without actually mentioning it by name.

These priorities and core interests naturally guide China’s external relations as well. China’s foreign policy principles were encapsulated in a resolution by the CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission meeting in 2018, chaired by Xi Jinping – “Foreign Policy Thought Under Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”. The importance of this resolution was further highlighted in the summer of 2021 with the publication of the book entitled “Study Outline for Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy”. According to Xi’s speech in 2018,⁴ the resolution boils foreign policy thinking down to ten aspects. Safeguarding the Party leadership is the first among them.

The other nine aspects are: Great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aimed at the realization of the Grand Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation; upholding world peace through advancing the building of the Community of Common Destiny; upholding strategic self-confidence based on Socialism with Chinese characteristics; advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a mutually advantageous manner; upholding

4 “Xi Jinping zai Zhongyang Waishi gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao: Jianchi yi Xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi waijiao sixiang wei zhidao, nuli kaichuang Zhongguo tese Daguo waijiao xin jumian”, *Xinhua meiri dianxun*, 24 June 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2018-06/24/c_137276774.htm.

peaceful development with mutual respect and a win-win principle; deepening diplomatic efforts in creating global companionships; upholding principles of equality and justice in reforming global governance; safeguarding national sovereignty, security and the benefits of development by upholding the bottom line of the core interests; and creating a uniquely Chinese style of diplomacy.

Placing the safeguarding of the Party high on the lists of core interests and foreign policy priorities reflects perpetual insecurity amidst rising self-confidence. While China's rise is a fact, the fate of the Soviet Union still haunts the Chinese leaders. As renowned China expert David Shambaugh recently remarked: "On the one hand, China takes great pride in its accomplishments, its history, and sense of global importance. On the other hand, there remains a strong residual streak of aggrievement, and revanchism – which produces a sense of brittleness that is quick to react to any perceived slight and hit back against perceived 'foreign hostile forces'." ⁵

CHINA'S PRESTIGE-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY

All of this translates into foreign policy driven by prestige. Although the realist political theorist Hans Morgenthau maintained that prestige is usually only an instrument of foreign policy, ⁶ in the case of China, prestige can be regarded as an end in itself. The BRI, Xi Jinping's pet scheme, can arguably be regarded as a case in point. Its economic benefits are questionable, and there is no published strategy that would explicitly determine and fix the seemingly organic and even haphazard nature of the process. ⁷ Yet its status as China's most important foreign policy project was enshrined in the CPC constitution in 2018. In traditional Chinese thought, ⁸ prestige is an attribute of a ruler, and the sign that he is truly worthy of his position. According to realist thinker Xunzi (3rd century BCE), moral virtue turns into political might: "What is called Heavenly virtue is the [basis] of kingly government. (...) The state

is the most potent instrument for governing All Under Heaven, and the Lord of Men is [the embodiment of] the most potent might under Heaven. (...) The Son of Heaven is the grandest in might, the finest in form and the most perfect in heart, ... no one is more esteemed than he is, ... there is no land under Heaven that does not belong to [him]." ⁹

Furthermore, while Daniel Markey defines prestige as "a public recognition of eminence", ¹⁰ what matters most to the CPC leaders is what they see in the mirror themselves, and what image they can then show to the Chinese population. Indeed, Jonathan Mercer points out that prestige is always in the eye of the beholder and, as such, is an illusion. ¹¹ The CPC leaders want to see that they have outdone their Soviet peers, and they must show that their country is no longer humiliated.

What is dangerous about prestige-driven foreign politics is its apparent irrationality, at least in material terms. In the case of China, this is especially true with regard to the Taiwan Issue. There is a real risk that if their legitimacy is otherwise faltering, the CPC leadership may feel compelled to bring about their goal of "reunifying the motherland" through force, despite the high costs measured in terms of human lives, a destabilizing global economy, and complicated international relations, or even the risk of a great power conflict.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE: IS THE ECONOMY NEVERTHELESS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PRESTIGE?

As part of the CPC's efforts to evade the fate of the Soviet Union, and in order to gain prestige for their country's own cultural heritage, their rhetoric renounces the existence of "universal values". This has prompted the European Union (EU) to categorize China as a systemic rival, as well as an economic competitor. Hence, the era of innocence with regard to Chinese investments in Europe is over. The EU's foreign direct investment regulatory regime has been tightened, screening mechanisms have been put in place by the member states, and the ratification process of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, signed between the EU and China in 2020, has been frozen.

5 Shambaugh, David (2021) "Understanding China's conflicted nationalism", *Nikkei Asia (Opinion)*, 29 August 2021 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Understanding-China-s-conflicted-nationalism>.

6 Markey, Daniel (1999) "Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism's roots", *Security Studies*, 8:4, 126–172, DOI: 10.1080/09636419908429388: 128–129.

7 Stec, Grzegorz (2018) "China's Belt and Road Initiative is Neither a Strategy, Nor a Vision. It is a Process", *EU-Asia at a Glance*, February 2018, European Institute for Asian Studies, https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EU-Asia_at_a_Glance_Stec_BRI_2018-1.pdf.

8 In IR theory, it is customary to draw examples from the thoughts of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, or Rousseau. However, it may be argued (albeit not within the limits of this paper) that China has its own roots for prestige, and its own variant(s) of the concept.

9 Xunzi IX.1, XI.1, XXIV.1. Translation by the author.

10 Markey (1999), 158.

11 Mercer, Jonathan (2017) "The Illusion of International Prestige", *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), 133–168, DOI:10.1162/ISEC_a_00276: 134.

A Pew survey showed in 2020 that views on China have worsened significantly in many European countries, including Sweden.¹² Unlike its neighbouring country, Finland has thus far remained undisturbed by the bark of China’s “wolf warrior” diplomats. If China’s current “sense of brittleness”, to quote David Shambaugh, continues and intensifies, that may well change. Sino-European relations can deteriorate radically if China perceives that the EU is supporting the US in efforts to constrain China, for example by joining FONOPs in the South China Sea.

Due to the interdependencies of the global economy, China needs both the US and the EU for its own growth and prosperity. Therefore, it is clear that China’s recent foreign policy, arising from the Party’s simultaneous insecurity and self-confidence, is harmful to China’s own efforts to develop and gain global influence. However, the illusionary nature of prestige also means that optics matter. The propaganda machinery will ensure that the celebrations to mark the centennial year are a complete triumph. The Party will also

use all means at its disposal to make the proceedings of the 20th Party Congress in 2022, anticipated to cement Xi Jinping’s continuing tenure at the helm, appear smooth and unanimous. If the Party succeeds, and once these key events are safely behind them, the Party leaders may then find the image in the mirror admirable enough for them to ease off and put the emphasis back on the economy instead of politics.

Only the next two or three years will show whether the CPC’s easing off is just wishful thinking. It would certainly come as a relief to Europe, as relations with China might then revert to “business as usual”, with business being the operative word. Economic ties with China are important for many European nations, and also complicated enough without additional political stumbling blocks. Nevertheless, the direction of Europe’s future relations with China is not independent of China’s relations with the US. If the CPC has reason to regard the US as a continuous threat to its prestige, the glimmer of hope that China might put the emphasis back on cooperation and the economy after 2022 will fade away. /

12 Silver, Laura et al. (2020) “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries”, *Pew Research Center*, October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>. The survey did not cover views in Finland.