

## Chinese Nationalism and U.S.-China Relations

An Interview with Jessica Chen Weiss

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Fueled by education and state propaganda, nationalism plays a dual role as both a tool and a liability in Chinese foreign policy. In this interview, Dr. Jessica Chen Weiss, Associate Professor of Government at Cornell University, discusses the dynamic role of nationalism in China's foreign policy as well as its potential impact on U.S.-China relations during the first term of U.S. President Donald Trump.

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**Journal:** As you point out in your book *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, in the past China has selectively cracked down on nationalist protests depending on the circumstances, exhibiting a pendulum dynamic between repression and tolerance. Could you please explain to our readers when and under what circumstances these select protests are generally allowed to emerge?

**Weiss:** The Chinese government tends to allow protests when it wants to demonstrate to foreign observers that it is quite serious about standing firm on a particular issue, and often tries to use the voice of the public to convey its resolve. In contrast, when the government wants to maintain diplomatic flexibility or reassure foreign audiences that China might be willing to compromise, they are more likely to tamp down nationalist demonstrations that might put pressure on them to act tough.

**Journal:** Is there a point at which fanning nationalist sentiment online risks spillover into uncontrollable protests in the streets?

**Weiss:** This is more of a latent risk than one that the government has allowed to materialize. We have often seen the initial signs of protests beginning to get out of control, such as in the 2012 demonstrations against Japan over the dispute in the East China Sea. In one case, protesters gathered outside the Communist Party headquarters in the

southern city of Shenzhen. Rather than getting angry at Japan, they turned their anger against the Chinese government. In other cases, initially peaceful protests or marches became violent, overturning private cars (primarily Japanese brands such as Honda and Toyota) and damaging businesses that appeared to be Japanese even if they were Chinese-owned and run. These kinds of escalating protests have never gotten totally out of control. The government, in most cases, was successful in putting the genie back in the bottle, often with somewhat costly measures that came with accusations by the people that the government was being hypocritical by suppressing patriotic protests and not acting tough enough on Japan. I think the real danger is that these protests could provide an opportunity for a larger challenge to the Communist Party to emerge, one that Chinese leaders feel they might not be able to rein in.

**Journal:** Do you predict that this dynamic will continue as China becomes increasingly assertive in territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea?

**Weiss:** It is very difficult to predict the future, especially as the Chinese leadership's objectives evolve. We have not yet seen any nationalist protests under the leadership of Xi Jinping, and that may reflect worries about what happened the last time protests were allowed against Japan. It could also reflect changing views of the appropriate role that public opinion plays in Chinese foreign policy. I should note that during crises with Vietnam and the Philippines over disputes in the South China Sea, the Chinese government went to some length to prevent demonstrations from breaking out. Recently, Party officials have stressed the importance of anticipating and controlling any further demonstrations as the South China Sea disputes may heat up.

**Journal:** China has been notably measured in response to Trump's consistent lambasting via Twitter, including his reference to military installations in the South China Sea. Does such bluster on the part of Trump have the potential to spur the Chinese government to whip up nationalist sentiment, or will the Chinese government take a wait-and-see approach until words are met with action?

**Weiss:** By and large, the Chinese government has taken a wait-and-see approach toward new leaders who have been somewhat inconsistent in their previous statements, as Beijing tries to determine what direction the new administration will take with its China policy. If Trump continues to say very radical things about the way he might challenge the status quo, including the extension of more diplomatic recognition to Taiwan, I do not think that the Chinese government will have to whip up nationalism. That kind of response will take place organically. Chinese netizens increasingly do not need and are not waiting for the government's encouragement. Many of them are on Twitter, jumping the Great Firewall to find out what is going on. So the question is how the Chinese government will respond.

**Weiss:** So far Chinese state media has downplayed the remarks by Trump and some of his appointees as they wait to see what follows his inauguration. But the Chinese government may lose patience quite quickly if the signs of looming confrontation over issues that are core to China's interests keep piling up. I think we can expect a harsh response if Trump seeks to test China's resolve on some of these issues that are very important to Chinese nationalists, such as sovereignty over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Actions tend to matter more than words, but with a lot of these issues, words matter in signaling potential changes in U.S. policy. It is not like domestic policy, which is often made through laws and executive orders. A lot of foreign policy does depend on what the president says the United States will do. So words can take on real significance.

**Journal:** How important will the role of nationalism be in Chinese foreign policy vis-à-vis the new U.S. administration? Given indications that Trump's administration may exhibit a break from longstanding U.S. policy on Taiwan, will nationalism in China play a role in fueling tensions between the two nations on this issue?

**Weiss:** I do not think that nationalism will be driving Chinese foreign policy. I think that the Chinese leadership is likely to keep its strategic priorities in mind as they determine how to deal with the new administration. But nationalism does make it really difficult for the Chinese government to compromise on certain issues, including Taiwan and the principle of "One China." So I do not think that it will necessarily play an independent role in fueling tensions. Given this delicate time in China's own political transition, however, the Chinese government is unlikely to show any signs of weakness on these critical issues.

**Journal:** Do you have any opinion on Trump's recent statements that the One-China policy is up for negotiation? Could he approach such a negotiation in a reasonable way, or would any attempt to renegotiate the One-China policy necessarily lead to a deterioration in U.S.-China relations?

**Weiss:** What is radical here is the idea that the United States would link "One China" to progress on other issues like trade and currency. How we uphold the One-China policy has always varied slightly, and there have been shifts around the margins. But when a president-elect or soon-to-be president states that the whole policy is up for negotiation, that indicates that there is a real potential for dramatically altering the status quo in ways that increase uncertainty about the future of the relationship. That agreement was the basis of U.S.-China diplomatic normalization back in the seventies. So if everything is up in the air, things could go downhill very quickly.

*Jessica Chen Weiss is Associate Professor of Government at Cornell University. She is the author of **Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations** (Oxford University Press, 2014). The dissertation on which the book is based won the 2009 American Political Science Association Award for best dissertation in international relations, law, and politics. Her work appears in *International Organization*, *China Quarterly*, *the Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Security Studies*. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego in 2008. Before joining the Cornell faculty, she was an assistant professor at Yale University. Dr. Weiss is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.*

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