National self-assertion as a core value of Chinese political elites provides the ideological underpinning of the People's Republic. Two strands of nationalism emerged as a response to imperialism and modernity; the conservative nationalism of the urban bourgeoisie inspired by Western liberal democratic ideas, and the radical nationalism of the peasants and working classes, inspired by the Marxian tradition. These clashed in the Chinese Civil War. Subsequently, Chinese nationalism in the Leninist PRC remained dominated by state objectives; only in the 1990s did growing economic, political and military capabilities enable China to exert sustained influence on regional and global politics.

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to mobilise nationalism to secure its legitimacy, the emergence of its popular variant is increasingly a constraint on, and a threat to, the CCP. It has led to a reduction of state autonomy in a range of areas, including policy towards Taiwan, the United States and Japan. For the CCP, Chinese self-assertion is less problematic when it challenges international financial institutions and the universal aspirations of the human rights regime. What has emerged in recent years is a tension between the state nationalist project and the aspirations of popular nationalism; the key question is whether the ‘Fourth Generation’ of leaders under President Hu Jintao will act as a moderating influence on growing popular demands for China to assert itself.

Nationalism and legitimacy in the PRC

Since the founding of the PRC, the CCP has derived much of its legitimacy from its nationalist credentials; this has necessitated its policy of self-assertion to defend the realm of rhetoric. While the CCP’s legitimacy was based on the charisma of its revolutionary leadership and its social and economic reforms, these, too, were part of the broader nationalist project. Mistakes made during the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and visible realignments of ideologically imbedded foreign policy by the late 1970s, however, undermined CCP authority. Deng Xiaoping thus launched a series of reforms to bolster the Party’s economic credentials.

The CCP leadership has continued to appeal to Chinese nationalism to legitimise its role, using media and education to promote a particular vision of China and its future. Disagreements within the leadership over emphasis, and how to deal with nationalist aspirations in the Chinese periphery, most notably in Taiwan and Tibet, led to a shift towards a more inclusive patriotism (aiguo zhuyi). Economic and political reforms since 1978 saw the CCP transform itself into a conservative nationalist party.

Significantly, nationalism has become the rallying cry of those who challenge the CCP on a range of issues. The student-led reform movement of 1989 is perhaps the key turning point in the emergence of a new, popular nationalist discourse existing outside CCP control. The mid-1990s saw the growing expression of popular nationalism through the publication of books such as The China that Can Say ‘No’ and the use of the Internet as a forum by Chinese nationalists. While the CCP continues to mount patriotic campaigns, popular nationalist discourses are increasingly challenging the Party, witnessed in popular reactions to the dispute over the South China Sea, the Diaoyu-Tai/Senkaku islands, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the death of a Chinese pilot in a collision with an American spy plane.

Self-assertion versus economic growth

A neat fit between the economic goals of the reform programme and national self-assertion is far from guaranteed. The conflict between narrowly defined nationalist objectives and the priorities of economic reform are visible in a number of policy areas, including foreign policy. Conflicts exist in the Chinese leadership over prioritising national self-assertion or economic growth, and these tensions, combined with growing popular nationalist aspirations, may hinder the autonomy of the Chinese state to pursue rational and coherent strategies.

The CCP, however, is leveraged on more than improving living standards; promoting the Chinese nationalist project remains crucial. Increasingly, the leadership is under pressure from elements within Chinese society not only to deliver the economic goods, but to satisfy growing nationalist aspirations. At times these objectives may be complementary, at others there will be significant contradiction, and popular pressure may reduce state autonomy. As such, self-assertion may be a sign of weakness rather than strength. Self-assertion is more likely to be dynamic in the ideological realm, in criticising Western universal pretensions or American unilateralism. While recent years have witnessed Chinese engagement with multilateral institutions, the leadership is likely to pursue international cooperation only when this will not antagonise popular nationalist sentiment. The issue of sovereignty is so enmeshed within the nationalist agenda that any change will be cautious. This has implications for non-regional powers such as the United States and Europe. The Chinese nationalist project is likely to respond negatively to outside involvement or intervention. Outside powers are therefore advised to await invitation rather than threaten intervention.

Implications

The Chinese leadership remains focused on creating an environment favourable for economic growth and development. The legitimacy of the leader of the third world. Its entry into the World Trade Organisation notwithstanding, the Chinese leadership routinely criticises the liberal assumptions underpinning the ideology of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While this has not led to significant changes of policy within the Bank or the IMF, it has won support for China among developing countries.

Ideological self-assertion is also evident in Chinese criticism of the international human rights regime. Since the early 1990s, this criticism has become more sophisticated; the PRC has mobilised support from other Asian countries to include economic and cultural particularities in any discussion of rights. Finally, the PRC has been a staunch advocate of state sovereignty in international society, at a time when globalisation and the Bush Administration’s unilateralist foreign policy have challenged the principle. The PRC can thus be seen as a conservative rather than a revisionist power in international society.

The Chinese leadership remains focused on creating an environment favourable for economic growth and development. The legitimacy of the CCP, however, is leveraged on more than improving living standards; promoting the Chinese nationalist project remains crucial. Increasingly, the leadership is under pressure from elements within Chinese society not only to deliver the economic goods, but to satisfy growing nationalist aspirations. At times these objectives may be complementary, at others there will be significant contradiction, and popular pressure may reduce state autonomy. As such, self-assertion may be a sign of weakness rather than strength. Self-assertion is more likely to be dynamic in the ideological realm, in criticising Western universal pretensions or American unilateralism. While recent years have witnessed Chinese engagement with multilateral institutions, the leadership is likely to pursue international cooperation only when this will not antagonise popular nationalist sentiment. The issue of sovereignty is so enmeshed within the nationalist agenda that any change will be cautious. This has implications for non-regional powers such as the United States and Europe. The Chinese nationalist project is likely to respond negatively to outside involvement or intervention. Outside powers are therefore advised to await invitation rather than threaten intervention.

Implications

The Chinese leadership remains focused on creating an environment favourable for economic growth and development. The legitimacy of the China and its future. Disagreements within the leadership over emphasis, and how to deal with nationalist aspirations in the Chinese periphery, most notably in Taiwan and Tibet, led to a shift towards a more inclusive patriotism (aiguo zhuyi). Economic and political reforms since 1978 saw the CCP transform itself into a conservative nationalist party.