
In Susan L Shirk’s *China: Fragile Superpower*, she utilizes her expertise on China and its leaders to anticipate the threat of China to the world from a very fresh perspective. Her book’s central argument (or thesis) is that in order to secure the support of the people in the context of the growing nationalist movement, Chinese leaders will have to change their attitudes when it comes to issues related to China’s relationship with Taiwan and Japan. For example, the current communist regime in China faces various domestic problems and challenges, including what the author perceives to be weak legitimacy.

However, in the eyes of Chinese political leaders, nationalism could be a platform on which all the discontent in the society merge into a national movement against their regime. For the sake of political survival, it is clearly demonstrated that these leaders will certainly choose to play a nationalist super-hero and tough in international politics. Predictably, a war with China could happen out of this situation.

According to Professor Shirk’s conclusions in her book, it is however the internal weakness of the Chinese communist regime, but not its growing strength, that constitutes the greatest danger to America and the world at large. The last two decades, for example, have witnessed rapid economic growth of China, which has become an economic giant and a major super-power on the world stage. As explained by the author, for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the country’s obvious success has been accompanied with numerous problems, including bank insolvency, income inequality, and bureaucratic corruption.

Meanwhile, more serious threats come from two other sources of China. First, there is a great possibility of public leadership splits as seen before Tiananmen event of 1989. Upon explosive economic change, it is becoming increasingly difficult for CCP to keep the leadership competition under effective control. Second, there are literally hundreds of mass protests reported every year in China. Ethnic unrests, labor unrests, rural unrests and student unrests pose formidable challenges for CCP leaders. It is a headache task to prevent those protests from undermining the political “stability” or becoming a national movement against the regime. Therefore, as the author asserts, although China is fragile internally and politically, it looks strong internationally and economically.

It has been pointed out that among all the social unrests, nationalism presents the greatest challenge for policy makers in China. Furthermore, the author has shown that the new nationalism has arisen for two reasons: First, patriotic passion works as the spiritual resort for Chinese people, who have lost the faith in communism and as idealistic alternative to the commercialism in current China. Second, more importantly, the nationalist emotion has largely been inspired by news media including Internet. Although the state agencies like propaganda department still monitor and control media content, CCP began to lose its monopoly over the provision of information of public affairs as the economy and technology develop rapidly. Interactive media like cell phones and Internet discussion boards provides decentralized and fast access to information. In their competition for readership, these newly unleashed media stoke issues about Sino-US relationship, Sino-Japan relationship, and Mainland-Taiwan relationship and take nationalist stands on those issues. They tend to do so because, for one thing, issues about foreign affairs are selling topics that are able to attract a large audience. For another, nationalist slants avoid political censorship or punishment due to its political correctness.
Although nationalism could still be used to mobilize support as before, the newly growing nationalist fervor presents a dilemma for CCP leaders. On one hand, they need to make friends with the United States, Taiwan, Japan and other countries to secure a peaceful external environment for economic development. Rapid economic growth is the key solution to social problems like poverty and unemployment in China that could potentially undermine political stability. To ensure consistent growth, over the last two decades, the Chinese leaders have made enormous efforts to establish friendly diplomatic relationships with other countries during which many compromises are made. However, on the other hand, CCP leaders learned a lesson from Chinese history that the perceived weakness in foreign policies leads to the loss of support from the public. Two previous governments, Qing dynasty and the Republic of China, were overthrown by their people largely due to their incapability of defending the national interest. Therefore, the author of the book thinks that Chinese leaders are particularly fearful of a scenario that all the discontented groups may unite into a mass movement to become an opposition to the regime under the flag of nationalism, especially if they cannot live up to expected nationalistic expectations.

As explained in Professor Shirk’s book, they cannot afford to further lose support by standing against the popular nationalist movement, especially given the fact that their regime is already fragile. For that reason, the author believes that, when it comes to international crises, the domestic concern about the survival of the regime will overwhelm the international concern about peaceful relationships with other countries in the calculation of political leaders. According to Fragile Superpower, international conflicts or wars with China are hence highly possible in the future.

However, Professor Shirk’s argument is contradicting the popular instrumentalist view of China’s nationalism, as instrumentalists would argue that the new nationalism has been inspired by the authoritarian state for political purposes. For them, the public is manipulated by the state in the nationalist movement. On the contrary, Dr. Shirk believes that it is the people, as the masses, who can first act and then force the state to behave otherwise. Throughout the book, the author reports the genuine mass basis of Chinese nationalism. Subsequently, she lists examples whereby the state tries to calm down the nationalist sentiment to save the friendly relationship with foreign countries.

Nationalism is seen as the sole answer to the central question raised in the book: “How can China’s internal politics could derail its peaceful rise?” The author is, therefore, very sure about the potential harmful effect of nationalism. What has not been clearly underscored or articulated is the connection between various domestic problems and the nationalist fervor.

Also, the author underestimates the capacity of the Chinese state although it is clear that China is not the only country that experiences the various domestic problems mentioned in Dr. Shirk’s book. What is clear, however, is the fact that many regimes – dictatorship or democratic – can manage to cope with those problems without allowing them to jeopardize their international relationships.

Indeed, Fragile Superpower is a book definitely worth reading, especially as it provides a meaningful overview of China’s internal and foreign affairs. It is also a very good source for readers to update a reader’s knowledge of current China. Hopefully, future editions of the people will correct some of the minor shortcomings that I have noticed as an expert on China and its people.

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