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Nationalism in the People's Republic of China: A Consequential Chameleon

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Abstract. This article describes how nationalism among political leaders in the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be the linchpin of divergent views on the desirability of the PRC's future in a globalized economy.

The United States (US) President, Bill Clinton, often has stated that the PRC must become a well-integrated player in the global economy. To this end, he has strongly pushed both for the PRC's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and for the US enacting permanent normal trading relations (PNTR) with the PRC. A common rationale underlying his advocacy directly involved the anti-US nationalism of some PRC political leaders. Specifically, if the PRC were not provided PNTR, the anti-US nationalists would be offended and enraged. They would argue that the PRC was being treated with disrespect and disdain. They would viciously attack supporters of closer engagement with the US--including those supporters who were working towards freer markets, some Western sense of rule of law, and less political control of daily life and life styles. These supporters would, then, have their own power and positions significantly threatened. In conclusion, PRC entry into the WTO and its being provided PNTR were necessary because their opposites would generate negative consequences at the hands of the anti-US nationalists.

However, entry into the WTO and provision of PNTR could even more greatly offend and enrage the anti-US nationalists. The WTO would--by this rationale--represent a vehicle controlled by and for developed nation-states to the detriment of others. The WTO would entail a complex lattice of constraining policies, rules, and regulations limiting the degrees of freedom of PRC leaders entrusted with tending PRC economic and other security interests as well as their own political interests. What could be more noxious for anti-US nationalists than to be constrained by a system functionally led by the US and its allies?

The same type of analysis would apply to PNTR. A significant functional result of PNTR is the loss of the option of differential treatment towards the US in contrast to other potential trading partners. For if PNTR had been denied by the US Congress, the PRC would have been able to provide the aspects of freer trade mandated by the WTO to US competitors and to simultaneously withhold them from the US. Moreover, the specter of flooding the PRC with foreign goods and services is certainly anathema to tried-and-true-dyed-in-the-wool nationalists of many different stripes.

The contentions of having to sate or even ignore the needs of anti-US nationalists may be rhetorically convenient for US politicians. But as often is the case in US policy deliberations towards the PRC, the logic and analysis represented by rhetoric may be but facades fronting more visceral and primitive functioning. (See Burris, C. T., & Jackson, L. M. (2000). Social identity and the true believer: Responses to threatened self-stereotypes among the intrinsically religious. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 257-278; Clinton, W.J. (September 24, 2000). China's opportunities, and ours. *The New York Times*, p. 15; Domke, D. (2000). Strategic elites, the press, and race relations. *Journal of Communication*, 50, 115-140; Mele, A. R. (1999). Twisted self-deception. *Philosophical Psychology*, 12, 117-137; Scobie, G.E.W. (1999). Belief positive and negative: When believing is not believing. *Journal of Psychology* and

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Christianity, 18, 28-42.) (Keywords: People's Republic of China, Permanent Normal Trade Relations, Trade, WTO.)