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(Tribune Columnist)

Time to rein in the Tiger of Chinese Nationalism

It is a known fact that Chinese nationalism gets hysterical every once in a while. In the last 12 years, for example, the United States has had at least three serious confrontations with the Chinese nationalism:



- In March 1996, Chinese conducted major live fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait and fired missiles off the coasts of Taiwan in "response" to what China considered Taiwan's provocations and U.S. violation of Chinese national sovereignty. The U.S. sent in two carrier battle groups and the crisis wound down.
- In May 1999, the U.S. accidentally bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, resulting in massive anti-American and nationalistic demonstrations in Beijing and all other major Chinese cities as well as violent attacks on American embassy and consulates there.
- In April 2001, an American reconnaissance plane collided with a Chinese fighter, 60 miles off China's southern coast. Chinese propaganda machines were once again replete with "anti-hegemonic" and nationalistic outcries.

Most recently, Chinese nationalism went off once again, this time over the issues of Tibet and Beijing Olympics. Feeling their country's sovereignty being violated and Western media has "demonized" their "beloved homeland," demonstrators took to the streets in Beijing, Xi'an in Northeast China, Jinan, Qingdao and Hefei in East China, Wuhan in Central China, Harbin and Dalian in Northeast China, and Kunming in Southwest China, chanting "Oppose Tibet independence," "Go, Go Beijing Olympics," and "CNN: The world's leader of liars."

Outside China, thousands of overseas Chinese have turned out for rallies to support the passage of the Olympic Torch during its painful and humiliating relay around the globe. Some Chinese students even launched a website called "Anti-CNN.com" to expose what they see as Western media's biased coverage against China and an open letter posted on the website asked all Chinese people to "rise up against the Western Goebbels' Nazi media."

As another round of nationalistic tide is rising in China, it is important to ask the question: What is the cause of this surge of Chinese nationalism?

Many regard nationalism in China as nothing but a brainchild of Chinese communist leadership. As Paul Lin of Taipei Times puts it, "The timing of when nationalism vents is entirely decided by the Chinese Communist Party because in China any parades or assemblies must first receive its approval. The online tirades of the country's angry youth are also controlled by the party."

Moreover, analysts believe with the demise of communist ideology in China, there is a deep insecurity within Chinese leadership. China's leaders face a disturbing paradox: the more developed and prosperous the country becomes, the more insecure and threatened they feel. As a result, leaders in Beijing are willing to let the tiger of nationalist xenophobia out of its cage.

While there is no doubt that Beijing does link its legitimacy to its role in promoting and defending Chinese nationalism, this time around things are different. With the Summer Olympics only less than 100 days away, it could not come at a worse time for the Chinese leaders to fan the nationalist flames and the last thing Beijing wants to see is to turn their Olympic slogan-"One World, One Dream"-into something like "One World, One Nightmare."

In truth, this new round of anger and outcries in China reflects not a Chinese leadership manipulation, but an increasingly assertive, grassroots nationalism amongst ordinary Chinese, especially among China's youth.

Consider Grace Wang's case. Wang is a Chinese freshman studying at Duke University. During a recent demonstration attended by Tibetan and pro-China groups, she tried to persuade Chinese students to learn more about Tibet. For this she was castigated as a traitor and viciously attacked. "Salted with ugly rumors and manipulated photographs," Shaila Dewan of New York Times reports, "the story of the young woman who was said to have taken sides with Tibet spread through China's most popular Web sites, at each stop generating hundreds or thousands of raging, derogatory posts, some even suggesting that Ms. Wang be burned in oil."

James Lilley, former U.S. ambassador to China and to Korea, once warned, "The Chinese have an old saying: When you ride a tiger, it is hard to dismount. China is now riding the tiger of nationalism, and unless it soon realizes how damaging its actions are to its own interests, it may be too late to get off." If Chinese leaders can't get off, they may have to rein the tiger in.

China is becoming the big man of Asia. Before the world will welcome it as a rising superpower, however, the Chinese have to realize the dangers of a strident and angry nationalism to its international image.

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