

The Trend of Nationalism in COVID Era Might Intensify Sino-US Relations

Yu Han^{1,a,*}

¹*The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China*

a. U3553355@connect.hku.hk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This qualitative research aims at analysing Sino-US relations in the context of the COVID-19 era. And since based on several literatures, this research found that nationalism has emerged as a crucial concept as a corresponding result of the epidemic. Therefore, the analysis initiated in this study would mostly focus on how nationalism lend effects on the actual Sino-US relations. Through a rather comprehensive scrutiny, this research argues that nationalism does play a significant role in reshaping Sino-US relations and tends to aggravate conflicts between the states. Traditional realism, liberalism, and constructivism theories would be leveraged, critiqued, or commented on to examine the topic.

Keywords: Sino-US relations, nationalism, COVID, qualitative research

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has unquestionably affected the world economy and politics. During the pandemic, some of the worst affected countries have taken unusual measures such as suspending transport links, blockading cities, canceling social events, and closing factories. Consequently, according to a UNDP report, problems such as growing food shortages, sluggish economic development, market downturns, and increased barriers to international trade are all on the horizon [1]. Thus, it is quite reasonable to argue that in an anarchic international circumstance, the promotion of a stable economic recovery, the strengthening of trade ties between countries, and the resumption of globalization have become rather crucial topics in rebuilding the international order; namely, whoever is the first to seize the economic lifeline in the international community is likely to gain a greater international voice in the post-epidemic era. And such a geographic and economic barrier existing among nation states inevitably gives rise to nationalism, which indicates a stronger internal bond in the domestic politics within a sovereign state while preserving a rather more hostile attitude towards the adversaries, which therefore alters the general relations among states and regions.

Nationalism is not a new term to explore, on the contrary, it has always been a crucial topic when examining Sino-US relations, especially during the pandemic era. Famously developed through 18th century American and French revolution, nationalism is a concept discussing the patriotic belongings to one shared ethnicity, culture, language etc. within a sovereign state [2]. China, notably has a history of leveraging social media as a tool to enhance nationalism, whilst, on the other hand, the US indulges in the notion of civil religion uniting its federal states to tie together as a nation. And more recently, former president Donald Trump enacting trade war building wall against Mexico witnesses the comeback of nationalism. During the covid era, both China and the US blame the policy of their rival,

with Chinese officials condemning US's irresponsible free-lanced policy actions towards the epidemic whilst the US government blaming Chinese government on over-controlling its citizens' personal individual freedom. Such conversation brings interest to this this paper, which is about digging out the potential correlation between the increasing domestic nationalism trend and the tension between China and the US in the COVID era.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Nationalism

Nationalism argues that the nation should be in correspondence with the state, viz., there should be no outer interference affecting the domestic politics of a given nation [3]. By creating a nation-state, nationalism seeks to affirm the sovereignty of a nation and maintains that the nation is the only rightful source of political power within the homeland [4].

In international relations, nationalism is often considered dangerous because, in a fluid sense, it encourages narrow, zero-sum security policies; the opposite of realism, it opposes compromise and consensus and undermines international trust and cooperation [2]. However, nationalism also guarantees the stability of a sovereign regime and, to a certain extent, maintains the uniqueness of its culture, which provides an aid in predicting the diplomatic or political behavior of the certain state. In short, we cannot ignore the role of nationalism in the academic system of international relations. In Sino-American relations, particularly, nationalism is likely to exacerbate the possibility of the two countries entering Thucydides' Pillar of Tranquility because of the differences between Chinese and American ideologies in politics, and thus intensify the relationship between the two countries.

2.2. Sino-US Relations in the COVID Era

Starting in 2018, a series of progressively escalating tariff rounds between the US and China wreaked havoc on what was then an estimated \$635 billion trade relationship [5]. This was an attempt to thwart China's economic behavior and boost the US economy. At the same time, the Trump administration referred to the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus", terms that were criticized as racist. Correspondingly, multiple US intelligence agencies were pressured by the Trump administration to find intelligence that supported conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus in China [6].

According to an April 2020 report in the New York Times, the US intelligence community claimed that China had deliberately underreported the number of coronavirus cases [6]. On September 22 2020, Donald Trump addressed the world body's General Assembly and called on the UN to "hold China accountable for its actions" [7]. President Trump blamed the Chinese government for the global spread of COVID-19, which by then had infected 31 million people worldwide and killed more than 965,000 [7].

3. Hypothesis & Methodology

The preliminary hypothesis of this research is that the rise of nationalism (in the COVID era) does affect Sino-US relations, and it tends to be a negative one. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study focuses on leveraging different literature resources to analyze how nationalism influences global relations.

4. Analysis

4.1. Nationalism and Realism

While nationalism is not a key component of any realist theory, most realists seem to believe that nationalism has been a particularly powerful force in international politics. Speaking of similarities, the state is of fundamental importance to both nationalism and realism. However, realists believe that international relations are largely a function of power politics, so the central unit of realist analysis is the state, which is the most powerful political institution in the world. Yet, quite on the contrary, the nation is the primary unit of analysis in nationalism. With wolf-warrior diplomacy on the way, during the COVID era, Xi's CCP seems to utilize nationalism to improve the Chinese voice in the global community. This has legitimized a more active role for China on the world stage, including an open ideological struggle with the Western world. And further, this policy strategy has a suspicion of transferring domestic negativity about the epidemic to international conflicts.

As for the United States, as mentioned, the Trump administration has used the term "China virus" to link the epidemic to China and externalize responsibility for transmission. This is also speculation that nationalism is being used to deflect domestic conflict. Moreover, inter-ethnic tensions are growing at home: racism and discrimination against people of Chinese descent have increased in the US and elsewhere since the spread of the Newcastle pneumonia epidemic [8]. This trend has been exacerbated by China's war wolf diplomacy and the growing economic and political rivalry between China, the EU, and the US. According to realism, under the premise of anarchism, states are only concerned with their own interests. In the context of COVID-19, the growing nationalism provides an excuse to divert pressure at home, shifting the attention of the masses to international conflicts, the intensification of which leads to the inevitable competition between states that realism advocates: the huge states strive for hegemony, while the weak states focus more on formulating alliances.

4.2. Liberalism and Nationalism

Yoram Hazony sees nationalism and liberalism as opposing political positions [9]. Nationalism is a principled position in favor of a world of nation states, where all nations "cultivate their own traditions and pursue their own interests without interference" [9]. Liberalism, by contrast, is an inherently imperialist political philosophy that justifies the global spread of its political principles by claiming to be the only legitimate form of government.

The United States, as the most influential contemporary liberal democracy, inherently wishes to spread the idea of liberal democracy. However, liberalism as a concept of universalism can in a sense dismantle the extremes of nationalism, such as the fascist acts of World War II, thus, liberalism can also fall into a different kind of extremity. For example, in order to achieve this goal of spreading democracy, the US waged many controversial wars, such as those in Iraq and Vietnam. While the growing trend of nationalism in the US seems to be largely in line with the philosophy of democracy, the exclusion of the Chinese and ethnic Chinese also seems to be the downside of liberalism: it ignores the interests of minority groups. The relationship between the US and China, which could be cooperative under a liberal framework, seems to have been complicated by the influence of nationalism. It seems that nationalism is pushing the international situation in the direction that structural realists would like to see.

4.3. Constructivism and Nationalism

Constructivist theory suggests that national identities are formed in social and historical contexts where nationalism is a way of finding alternatives for the loss of certain cultural concepts [10]. Nationalism, as a concept of nation over minority interests, may have reduced the diversity of cultural

and social activities of social groups to a certain extent. Thus, the rise of nationalism in the COVID period seems to have intensified international conflicts outside the states rather than initiating domestic inter-ethnic conflicts. According to constructivists, this more unified approach to the relocation of conflicts would seem to make international political behavior more predictable, as the maximization of interests sought by nationalism would diminish the influence of other socio-political factors. Particularly, in the context of US-China relations, the emergence of nationalism seems to indicate that perhaps the future trend in international relations is towards a potential war between different ideologies rather than the clash of civilization as Huntington suggested, and not necessarily simply a result of liberal domination as famously pointed out by Fukuyama [11] [12].

5. Conclusion

Through an analysis of nationalism in the context of liberalism, realism, and constructivism, this paper demonstrates that nationalism did have an impact on Sino-American relations during the COVID period. The contest between US and Chinese foreign policy during the COVID period reflects the impact of nationalism on foreign policy and international relations. Competition between major powers will become more intense, while developing countries are focusing more on taking sides. International cooperation is likely to become more flexible, due to the rise of nationalism. And in terms of international cooperation, a consensus is expected to be reached between countries on the resumption of trade, which will facilitate the revival of globalization and thus boost overall economic development. This research has certain limitations, most noticeably, that since it separately discusses the relationship between nationalism and the three classic schools in the field of international relations, it makes each of these sections somehow insufficient in itself, and therefore needs to be compensated for by future research.

At a time when the international situation was still uncertain, and with the continuation of the war in Europe, Sino-American relations were expected to escape the trap of Thucydides trap. But COVID has indeed become a pretext for mutual hostility between the two countries, and it remains to be seen whether relations between the US and China will stabilize and become peaceful in the post-epidemic era as trade barriers ease; therefore, relevant future research is particularly needed.

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