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Chinese assertiveness and the rise of Xi Jinping: ideational mobilization, elite contestation, and the struggle over regional order

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Chinese Assertiveness and the Rise of Xi Jinping

*Ideational Mobilization, Elite Contestation,
and the Struggle over Regional Order*

Friso M.S. Stevens

Propositions

1. The strongly felt desire to restore China's deemed rightful place in the regional system—"national rejuvenation"—is not just part and parcel of today's CCP sloganeering but can be traced back all the way to the early Self-strengtheners of the late Qing.
2. The relative material rise of China was the primary reason that led three consecutive American presidents to interpret China as a threat to US "liberal hegemony" in East Asia and to respond accordingly with confrontation.
3. That the conservative-nationalist governing ideology that Xi would adopt was already discernable in state propaganda before 2012 offers compelling evidence that there is much greater continuity between the Hu and Xi eras than is exhibited in the current literature.
4. Agency for China's assertive turn in the late 2000s and the selection of compromise candidate Xi can ultimately be attributed to the

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choices past leaders made, with some Party elders “ruling from behind the curtain.”

5. Including intervening ideas increases the explanatory power of neoclassical realist theory.
6. As for the transition of power in East Asia, different “units” transition differently, both socio-historically and with regard to political culture.
7. Adversarial nationalism and self-created “myths” are a dangerous constraining force in the East Asian security paradigm: the irrationality of domestic politics can steer decision-makers in a direction that makes the state less secure.
8. The direction of CCP policy cannot be fully understood without getting into the nitty-gritty of the Party’s lexicon and messaging. At the same time, Chinese citizens and cadres alike do not have to believe in the propaganda in order to reproduce it as valid.
9. With “politics”—ideology—back “in command,” visible in China turning away from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao’s rational, interest-based politico-economic decision-making, the old school Mao era theories that underpin CCP rule require more attention.
10. One can in fact peek inside the “black box” of the state, albeit indirectly and interpretively, without absolute certainty.
11. The enduring phenomenon of *guanxi*—a culturally-rooted association of mutual obligation—matters in comprehending how Party power is wielded in China toward which resultant policy.
12. Grit is an underappreciated quality in academia.