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CHINA'S CRISIS
BEHAVIOR
POLITICAL SURVIVAL AND
FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE
COLD WAR
KAI HE



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In *China's Crisis Behavior: Political Survival and Foreign Policy after the Cold War*, Kai He introduces a novel and analytically useful methodology to explain the decision-making process of Chinese leaders during international crises following the Cold War. In his “political survival-prospect” model, He draws on both neoclassical realism and prospect theory—a well-established behavioral psychology and economics theory pioneered by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. [1]

He argues that Chinese leaders are above all concerned with their individual political survival amid competing intra-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) factional competition and that the policy preferences of Chinese leaders during international crises aim at shoring up their domestic political positions. Furthermore, He uses prospect theory to argue that during international crises, Chinese leaders are more likely, on the one hand, to act conservatively (implement “accommodative” policies) when they feel their political survival is secure, and on the other hand, to escalate

crises (implement “risk-acceptant” policies) when they feel their political survival is insecure. A good analogy is that of a gambler—playing conservatively to protect one’s winnings when the chips are up, but taking risks to regain one’s losses when the chips are down.

He further delineates Chinese leadership decision making by pointing to three factors that contribute to a given leader’s assessments of their own political survival: the severity of a given crisis, where more severe crises negatively affect political survival and lead to greater risk-taking; leadership authority, where leaders who feel more secure vice their potential factional competitors are more likely to take an accommodative stance; and international pressure, where diplomatic or military coercion on the part of the United States or other East Asian countries make Chinese leaders feel less secure in their political survival and more likely to take risks. In addition, He identifies four major policy choices Chinese leaders can make during international crises, depending on their level of perceived political survival:

full accommodation, conditional accommodation, diplomatic coercion, and military coercion.

Finally, He chooses ten case studies: the 1993 *Yinhe* incident, 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis, the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, the 2001 EP-3 midair collision incident, the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, the 2010 China-Japan boat collision crisis, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis with the Philippines, the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands nationalization crisis with Japan, and briefly, the 2014 China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) oil rig crisis with Vietnam and the 2014 P-8 interception incident. He then conducts a congruence test for each case study, analyzing the levels of crisis severity, leadership authority, and international pressure in a given case, predicting Chinese leadership behavior according to the “political survival-prospect” model, and matching the predicted behavior against actual behavior.

He’s book excels in articulating a compelling methodological approach. It seems intuitively true that Chinese leaders are obsessed with their own political survival. This is especially the case because, compared with leaders of liberal democracies who only have to worry about electoral failures and public embarrassment, the leaders of the CCP must worry about loss of wealth and perquisites, imprisonment, or even execution if they lose out in intra-party factional infighting (as we have seen recently in the cases of such figures as Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, and many others). Thus, as He points out, a leader’s individual interests must be disassociated from the party’s interests, and even China’s national interests (which, on reflection, should be cause for alarm). He is also correct in drawing attention to the danger of “near-crises” as opposed to full-fledged militarized crises, of which there are scant, if any, examples involving China in the post-Cold War era. Near-crises also pose serious potential escalatory consequences. Finally, although He is careful to qualify his argument by saying that he seeks to supplement, and not supplant, rational or cultural

approaches to explain Chinese crisis behavior, He correctly points out that purely rational models fail to take into account the incomplete information, cognitive biases, and lack of time that characterize crises, and that purely cultural approaches are both indeterminate (how culture influences Chinese behavior is hotly contested) and overly deterministic (not taking into account variations in Chinese behavior over time).

Unfortunately, He’s methodology breaks down when applied to specific cases. The first major problem is that the level of crisis severity is almost always defined subjectively by Chinese leaders themselves and not by external, objective factors. He briefly addresses this problem—that of endogeneity—acknowledging that China is apt to escalate a crisis with its own actions, thus negatively affecting Chinese leaders’ assessments of their own political survival. He points out as an example the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis, where China’s strategic and premeditated decision to launch missile tests and military exercises ahead of Taiwan’s first-ever democratic elections escalated what had been a diplomatic dispute over Lee Teng-hui’s 1995 visit to the United States. Despite acknowledging the problem of endogeneity, He gives it short shrift. The larger problem is that Chinese leaders are both the product of and flag-bearers for an intellectual environment sharply defined by propaganda, education, and party indoctrination systems intentionally created by the CCP in order to bolster regime legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people.[2] To revisit the gambling analogy, a gambler can’t change the cards dealt no matter how much he might wish to; whereas Chinese leaders often subjectively interpret the crises dealt to them so that they are more severe and thus more escalatory.

He’s analysis of the severity of each crisis is defined predominantly by ideational factors—individual and collective perceptions based overwhelmingly on this party-constructed ideological complex. Just a few examples include: when He

claims China felt “threatened” by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) humanitarian intervention in the former Yugoslavia because of China and Yugoslavia’s “common anti-fascist history” and fears that China could face a similar humanitarian intervention in Tibet, Xinjiang, or Taiwan (p. 70); when He describes China’s propaganda campaign portraying the United States as a “hegemonic bully” during the *Impeccable* incident (p. 95); when an unnamed Chinese scholar says that during the 2012 China-Japan boat collision crisis, Hu Jintao was “riding a tiger” and had been “hijacked” by nationalist pressures (p. 106); when He claims that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is for China an “unforgettable scar from China’s ‘century of humiliation’: a constant reminder of the invasions and bullies of both Western countries and Japan toward China” (pp. 123-124); when an unnamed Chinese scholar says the Philippines “robbed” China during the Scarborough Shoal crisis while Japan “raped” China during the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands crisis (p. 124); and when He states that the “CCP’s legitimacy is also set on the belief that only the CCP can save the Chinese people from Western invasions and bullies” (p. 124). All of these examples indicate that despite He’s rejection of cultural approaches to understanding Chinese crisis behavior, He pervasively draws on factors that are inherently cultural to explain Chinese leadership decision making during crises. This suggests that while He’s theory is not wrong on a superficial level, there are deeper, more compelling causal mechanisms at play.

Second, He claims that international pressure has the most “stable and predictable impact” on Chinese crisis behavior—that in all cases, international pressure inevitably weakens the leadership authority of Chinese leaders and leads to China escalating crises (p. 151). In making this claim, He completely denies the role of deterrence in reducing escalation in crises. Isn’t it probable that President Bill Clinton’s decision to send two carrier strike groups to the Taiwan Strait in March 1996 influenced Chinese leaders to deescalate the Third

Taiwan Strait Crisis, as they did by ending military exercises in the Taiwan Strait later that month? Similarly, couldn’t the United States’ decision to send an escort for the USNS *Impeccable* have dissuaded China from further interference in the *Impeccable*’s operations? Conversely, did the Philippines’ lack of deterrent contribute to its loss of effective control over Scarborough Shoal in 2012?[3] All of these hypotheticals are rejected by He’s theory. Furthermore, He implicitly rules out the role of deterrence in restraining conflict generally. He exhorts the United States and other countries to “treat Chinese leaders as a friend” (p. 151). To rephrase in slightly different terms, is it really an imperative for the United States to make China safe from the world? If the United States withdrew its military from the Western Pacific, would China actually reduce its coercive behavior? I am somewhat skeptical.

There are a number of other criticisms of *China’s Crisis Behavior* unrelated to the core arguments of the book. First, He quotes party-approved sources uncritically—primarily a biography of Jiang Zemin by Robert Kuhn, who now hosts his own show on CCTV, *Closer to China with R. L. Kuhn*. He says we need to treat Kuhn’s book with some skepticism, but in practice, Kuhn’s claims are quoted without any challenge. It is undeniable that party-approved sources in English are designed to manage perceptions or even mislead Western audiences. A good example of this is Kuhn’s depiction of Jiang as a great man of history with “strategic vision” striding above a nationalist public and factional party politics; in reality, all Chinese leaders are embroiled in nationalist fervor and party factionalism (p. 72). I believe this portrait of Jiang subtly influences the way He frames all other Chinese leaders.

China’s Crisis Behavior also portrays a false equivalence between the United States and China, frequently claiming China was the victim in international crises when it was in fact the initiator. The only times He recognizes China as the aggressor

sor was in the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, the 2014 CNOOC oil rig crisis with Vietnam, and the 2014 P-8 interception incident. This false equivalence extends to competing US and Chinese legal interpretations of surveillance conducted by ships or airplanes within a country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—of which China's criticism now looks hypocritical following its decision to send an Electronic Reconnaissance Ship (AGI) within the United States' EEZ around Hawaii to conduct surveillance during the Rim of the Pacific exercise (RIMPAC) 2014.[4] Furthermore, He denies Chinese leaders' agency: He ignores compelling evidence that during the Belgrade embassy bombing crisis, top Chinese leaders did not just approve protests against US diplomatic facilities or even bus students over, they actively organized and incited them.[5] In addition, He claims that during the *Impeccable* crisis local military officials may have gone "rogue" and that top Chinese leaders may not have been directly involved, ignoring more compelling evidence that top Chinese leaders have taken personal interest in the development of the same maritime law enforcement and maritime militia forces that were involved in the *Impeccable* incident and many others (pp. 87, 93).[6] These false equivalences, the denial of Chinese leaders' agency, and a focus on short-term leadership decision making obscure the degree to which China's long-term strategic campaign to undermine international norms, delegitimize competing territorial claims, and modernize and expand the mission set of the People's Liberation Army increases the number and severity of crises. In retrospect, events such as the *Impeccable* incident or the Scarborough Shoal incident look like the beginning of a long-term Chinese strategy, not one-offs.

Despite all of these flaws, He's original research "puzzle" motivating the book is an intensely interesting and useful one: why do Chinese leaders choose different strategies in different crises, and under what conditions and when will Chinese leaders adopt accommodative versus co-

ercive policies (p. 4)? He argues that a linear relationship between nationalism and leadership behavior is "too simple to be true" (p. 43). While the level of nationalist outrage does not automatically lead to hawkish Chinese leadership behavior, the ideological influences (which, should be noted, transcend simple nationalism) certainly delimit acceptable potential outcomes. If ideological influences are held constant, what then explains variations in Chinese crisis behavior over time? The answer is beyond the scope of this book review, but may boil down to simply, in an anarchic international system, Chinese leaders will push their prerogative as long as they can get away with it.

Notes

[1]. For a popular explication of prospect theory, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). He also cites Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (1979): 263-291.

[2]. The alternatives, that Chinese nationalism arises ex nihilo or that it is *purely* the product of pre-1949 historical grievances, are not plausible. Chinese leaders are "true believers," having been conditioned from birth to approach the outside world with certain ideological and historical assumptions. For more on the ways in which the party-driven intellectual environment influences Chinese foreign policy behavior, see Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); or Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

[3]. To use Yang Jiechi's now infamous quotation ("China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact"), the military balance disfavoring "small countries" like the Philippines would seem to make China more risk acceptant. John Pomfret, "U.S. takes a tougher tone with China," *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp->

dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/
AR2010072906416.html.

[4]. Sam LaGrone, "China Sends Uninvited Spy Ship to RIMPAC," *USNI News*, July 18, 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/07/18/china-sends-uninvited-spy-ship-rimpac>.

[5]. Zong Hairen, "The Bombing of China's Embassy in Yugoslavia," *Chinese Law and Government* 35, no. 1 (February 2002): 76-77.

[6]. Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia," The CNA Corporation, March 7, 2016, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/Chinas-Maritime-Militia.pdf.

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