

# The Dual Dimensions of Chinese Nationalism: Civilizational Rhetoric and the Practice of Control

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In contemporary China, nationalism under Xi Jinping operates through a dual mechanism that integrates domestic identity engineering with outward-facing narratives of moral leadership. This article argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s shift from describing China as a "unified multiethnic state" to promoting a "united community of the Chinese nation" (中华民族共同体) (China Daily, 2017) marks a decisive ideological turn that normalizes assimilationist governance and reshapes the cultural and religious life of minority regions. Based on discourse analysis of Xi Jinping's speeches, official policy documents, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Xinjiang in 2024, the study shows how this ideological shift produces a museumized multiculturalism that narrows space for ethnic autonomy and diversity. At the same time, China amplifies a peacebuilding discourse—particularly in its engagement with the Russo-Ukrainian war and conflicts in the Middle East—to present itself as a responsible global actor. The findings reveal three interlocking dynamics: First, cultural homogenization remains central to the Party's long-term stability strategy; second, China's civilizational rhetoric resonates most strongly where material partnerships outweigh normative concerns; and third, the contrast between domestic coercion and external reassurance functions not as a contradiction, but as a coherent political pattern. These dynamics show how nationalist ideology, cultural governance, and foreign-policy messaging form an integrated project that expands China's influence while exposing the limits of its moral legitimacy.

*Keywords:* China, Xi Jinping, nationalism, ethnic policy, Chinese nation, Uyghurs, Xinjiang

## Introduction

The phenomenon of Chinese nationalism has attracted sustained scholarly attention across the past decades. Early theoretical frameworks—from Ernest Renan's civic interpretation of the nation to Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolist model—offered conceptual anchors for later work on the Chinese case. In the 1990s, Dru Gladney highlighted the tension between state-promoted multicultural displays and the erosion of genuine minority autonomy, while Prasenjit Duara reframed nationalism as a state-led project of historical narration. More recent scholarship by Chun Han Wong, Kevin Rudd, and Suisheng Zhao has documented the ways in which Xi Jinping has recast nationalism into both a domestic legitimizing strategy and a foreign policy instrument. Their analyses emphasize how the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation fuses Marxist-Leninist statecraft with a Han-centric vision of cultural revival. Building on this, James Millward, Sean Roberts, David Tobin, and Darren Byler have analyzed the intensification of securitization and coercive assimilation in Xinjiang—the most internationally

visible case—offering a critical lens through which to assess how Chinese nationalism is operationalized on the ground.

Despite this rich literature, domestic ethnic policies and foreign policy discourse are often treated separately. What remains underexplored is how the language of homogenization at home is intertwined with the rhetoric of partnership abroad. This nexus is especially salient under Xi Jinping, when nationalism functions simultaneously as an instrument of internal control and a vehicle of global positioning.

The goal of this article is to bridge China's domestic and external nationalist narratives by placing them within a single analytical frame. Methodologically, the article combines empirical insights from my 2024 fieldwork in Xinjiang with a discourse analysis of official speeches, policy documents, and ideological texts, supported by a focused literature review on Chinese nationalism, civilizational discourse, and ethnic governance. In parallel, the article engages with the theoretical work of historian Prasenjit Duara (Golod, 2025), whose insights help sharpen the conceptual lens for interpreting China's evolving nationalism. Together, these approaches demonstrate how nationalism under Xi Jinping operates through a unified dual logic: reconfigured internally through cultural homogenization and identity engineering and projected externally through civilizational rhetoric that positions China as a moral global actor.

The argument unfolds across three sections. The first, *Control of the Nation*, traces how the shift from “unity in diversity” to a Han-centric “Chinese nation” discourse legitimizes assimilationist ethnic policies, drawing on Duara, Gladney, Heberer, and others to expose the hollowness of official multiculturalism. The second, *The Crisis of Representation*, builds on my fieldwork in Kashgar to show how Uyghur culture is reduced to sanitized performances while lived identity is constrained, situating these dynamics within broader scholarly accounts of securitization and coercive assimilation. The final section, *Revivalist Nationalisms Across the Globe*, situates Chinese nationalism within a broader comparative framework, highlighting how its civilizational discourse resonates with external audiences while simultaneously exposing the limits of Beijing's credibility as a global order-shaper.

### **Control of the Nation**

In *Rescuing History From the Nation*, historian Prasenjit Duara argued that nationalism functions as a state-led project—crafting linear, goal-oriented historical narratives to legitimize power (Duara, 1995, p. 23). Nowhere is that insight more relevant than in Xi Jinping's China. What once served as a unifying identity has hardened into a civilizational nationalism—one increasingly Han-centric in scope and function. Echoing the assimilationist policies of the Republican era, Xi's nation-building agenda marginalizes alternatives such as religious pluralism, federalism, or regional autonomy—dismissing them not just as misguided, but as threats to national unity (Xinhua, 2024). This shift lays the foundation for the contemporary model of domestically enforced unity that the article later contrasts with China's external peacebuilding rhetoric.

China's official rhetoric of “unity in diversity” has given way to a campaign of ideological standardization (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2019). In regions like Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, that means not just tighter surveillance, but deeper forms of social reengineering. Xi Jinping's vision draws heavily on 19th-century racial theories and civilizational rankings, framing ethnic minorities as “backward” and in need of modernization. These narratives justify sweeping campaigns aimed at remaking minority populations in the image of Han modernity. While some analysts label this a resurgence of Han chauvinism, Duara suggests it is less a revival of ethnic supremacy and more a continuation of China's long-standing centralizing tradition—now

intensified through digital governance and ideological engineering, which reveals how China's nationalism is designed to discipline difference, rather than accommodate it.

Thomas Heberer gives another explanation, framing these domestic policies as part of a broader state-led project of civilizing and disciplining (Heberer, 2023, p. 112). He argues that Sinicization functions not merely as a tool of ethnic assimilation, but as a deeper campaign to reshape social behavior, instill Han-centric moral norms, and construct a new social order grounded in loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This agenda, especially visible in regions such as Xinjiang—as well as other areas with large ethnic minority populations—targets both urban and rural communities. It seeks to discipline minorities through ideological training, behavioral regulation, re-education, and cultural reengineering. For Heberer, these policies reflect a long-term nation-building strategy: to “civilize” and modernize minority groups, in order to forge a unified, stable, safe, and ideologically conformist society aligned with Han-defined visions of modernity and citizenship.

Among China's 55 officially recognized minority groups, who comprise roughly 8% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021), governance reflects the logic in distinctly hierarchical terms. Under Xi Jinping, it has been intensified by a civilizational ideology that leaves little room for pluralism or dissent. This approach aligns closely with what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have called “extractive institutions”: centralized systems that demand cultural submission in exchange for limited material rewards. In this context, economic development becomes less a tool of empowerment than a mechanism of control—used to purchase loyalty from minority groups, though not always successfully (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, pp. 107–109). This framing helps explain why China's nation-building relies on coercive inclusion rather than negotiated accommodation.

In Xi Jinping's China, the situation on the ground resembles what Dru Gladney once described as a “body without organs”—diversity without substance—underscoring the hollowness of the country's multicultural model (Gladney, 1996, p. 293). Diversity is showcased for display yet stripped of genuine autonomy and political agency. Duara and others have termed this as a “performative multiculturalism”: Minority cultures are curated in museums,<sup>1</sup> textbooks, and state-sponsored festivals, but denied lived autonomy and meaningful political participation. Such symbolic inclusion reinforces the state's narrative of unity while obscuring the coercive mechanisms sustaining it.

The “performative multiculturalism” is reinforced by a powerful digital architecture of control. Duara notes that China's vast surveillance ecosystem—from the social credit system to algorithmic behavior tracking—does not merely punish dissent. It anticipates and molds behavior. Conformity becomes not only expected but internalized. The result is a society where dissent is framed as deviance, and any departure from state-prescribed norms is presented as abnormality rather than a political stance. In such an environment, loyalty to the CCP is equated with social normalcy, while alternative identities or viewpoints are reclassified as signs of disloyalty or instability. This dynamic erodes the space for genuine pluralism, producing a managed harmony based less on persuasion than on the cultivation of self-discipline and fear of condemnation.

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, the China National Museum of Ethnology in Beijing explicitly states that it was “established to safeguard national unity and ethnic solidarity, to rescue and protect the excellent cultural heritage of all Chinese ethnic groups, to carry forward the culture of the Chinese national community, and to serve as a national-level ethnic museum representing the national cultural image”. Access: 中国民族博物馆. “关于我们”. 中国民族博物馆官方网站 (China National Museum of Ethnology. ‘About Us.’ Official Website of the China National Museum of Ethnology). <https://www.cnmuseum.com/content.aspx?page=aboutus>.

Scholars such as Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe make no attempt to conceal their advocacy for assimilation (A. L. Hu & L. H. Hu, 2012, pp. 1-6). They call for China to move beyond its “first-generation” ethnic policy—which grants recognition and protections to 56 officially designated groups—toward a “second-generation” framework designed to foster integration, consolidate a unified national identity, and reinforce state security. In their view, the fate of ethnic relations is inseparable from questions of social stability and national unity. They argue that building identity around cohesion offers a more durable foundation than pluralistic governance. Pointing to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia as warnings, they reject autonomy-based systems and instead promote a “melting pot” approach, drawing on examples from the United States, Brazil, and India that highlight intermarriage, migration, and common schooling. Here, diversity is not treated as a source of strength but as a risk to be carefully managed.

Ma Rong reinforces this assimilationist stance by redefining the “Chinese nation” not just as a political project but as a civilizational identity (Ma, 2024, pp. 5-13). Invoking Confucian notions of “harmony in diversity” (和而不同), he argues that regional ethnic autonomy should give way to a civic model grounded in equality and a collective national destiny. For Ma, ethnic pluralism is a transitional arrangement rather than a sustainable principle; its continuation, he suggests, undermines unity. He is critical of Soviet-style ethnology in China, which he sees as entrenching rigid categories that encourage division. Instead, his vision favors a civic identity that transcends ethnic lines and aligns with the state’s pursuit of a “community of shared destiny” (命运共同体).

The eventual removal of ethnic designations from national ID cards may be only a matter of time. Duara warns that as China faces mounting economic headwinds, the CCP may escalate both digital and physical tools of control. The Soviet-inspired framework of ethnic classification could quietly vanish, replaced by a Han-centric model of national citizenship. If implemented, this would mark a decisive break from China’s historical approach to managing diversity.

Since Xi Jinping came to power, nationalism in China had intensified and become deeply ingrained in daily life. Through patriotic education, campaigns, and media control, the CCP has cultivated national pride, especially among those born after the 1990s, who are more vocal in supporting China’s global role and tougher policies toward the U.S., Japan, India, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Xi Jinping—often described as an “ardent nationalist”—has placed the unification of the “Chinese nation” at the heart of his agenda (Wong, 2022, p. 180). By channeling patriotic sentiment into political legitimacy, he seeks to secure his legacy through what the CCP calls its “most sacred mission”: safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity. Any push for independence, particularly in Taiwan, or greater autonomy in Xinjiang or Tibet, is thus framed as an existential threat to unity.

In Xi Jinping’s era, nationalism is also linked to economic growth and future prosperity. Younger generations, including minorities, may be less ideologically driven than earlier cohorts, yet rising living standards reinforce their sense of pride and loyalty to the CCP—a form of pragmatic nationalism rooted in material gains as much as historical narrative.

Beijing consistently rejects criticism of its repressive ethnic policies as unwarranted foreign interference. Yet in today’s interconnected world, the boundary between domestic governance and international legitimacy is increasingly blurred. The gap between symbolic inclusion and systemic coercion not only erodes China’s soft power abroad but also casts doubt on its credibility as a global standard-setter. This tension between a coercively unified domestic order and an externally projected image of harmonious rise forms the central contradiction that the next section examines.

### The Crisis of Representation

While the first section outlined the ideological architecture of civilizational nationalism under Xi Jinping, its effects become most visible in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where national unity is tested through the everyday management of identity, space, and culture. The region offers a concentrated illustration of how the CCP translates its discursive project of assimilation into lived experience—producing what Duara calls “performative multiculturalism” and what local residents describe as a constant negotiation between visibility and erasure.

A massive billboard greets all who arrive at Kashgar’s newly expanded airport in southern Xinjiang, boldly proclaiming: “Ancient City of Kashi” (喀什古城). The image encapsulates the CCP’s carefully choreographed multiculturalism: a celebration of Uyghur culture as performance—stylized, sanitized, and packaged for touristic consumption—while subtly centering Han civilizational imagery as the symbolic heart of the “Chinese nation”.

However, China’s nation-building project remains incomplete. Ernest Renan reminds us that a nation is meant to be a “daily plebiscite” (Renan, 1882). In China, however, that plebiscite is neither free nor inclusive. In the years since the 2009 Urumqi riots, Xinjiang has become the epicenter of Beijing’s intensified campaign of surveillance, coercive assimilation, and mass internment—developments well documented by scholars such as Darren Byler (2021, p. 32), James Millward (2021, p. 400), and Sean Roberts (2020, pp. 199-235), and others, many of whom characterize the CCP’s treatment of the Uyghurs as genocidal.

Yet the persistence of Uyghur identity can also be understood through Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolist lens. Smith emphasizes that nations derive resilience and cohesion from premodern ethnic identities, foundational myths, and shared memories—resources that Uyghurs continue to draw upon even under intense repression. He further introduces the notion of *ethnicism*, a collective movement that emerges when communities seek to resist external threats and internal fragmentation by renewing their cultural traditions and reintegrating their members. From this perspective, the suppression of sacred symbols and practices in Xinjiang does not extinguish Uyghur identity; rather, it often rekindles resistance, fostering new forms of solidarity and cultural restoration (Smith, 1991).

On the ground in Kashgar in 2024, I encountered a fragile equilibrium. Conversations with Uyghur residents revealed how deeply the state’s assimilation campaign had seeped into daily life—shaping everything from religion and language to family and community bonds. The demolition of mosques, the shrinking space for Islamic education, and the systematic erosion of Uyghur-language instruction in schools were cited as painful reminders that faith and culture were being pruned to fit within state-sanctioned boundaries. At the same time, officials actively promoted interethnic marriage and the adoption of Han cultural norms as markers of “modernity” and “progress”, reinforcing the message that assimilation was the only acceptable path forward.

What emerged was not genuine harmony, but rather a tightly controlled choreography of peaceful coexistence—carefully managed through surveillance cameras, neighborhood committees, and ideological education campaigns. A new, state-engineered “Xinjiang identity” has begun to take shape, one that detaches Uyghur culture from its roots while presenting a sanitized version for outside consumption. Local cuisine, once embedded in family traditions and Islamic dietary customs, is increasingly rebranded as generic “Xinjiang food” to fit tourist expectations (Grose, 2024). Traditional dress is often staged for performances and photo opportunities aimed at Han visitors, stripped of its deeper cultural and religious significance. In classrooms,

Mandarin steadily displaces Uyghur, not only as the language of instruction but as the language of aspiration and success, with young people encouraged to abandon their mother tongue in order to secure better futures.

The overall atmosphere in Kashgar thus oscillates between surface-level vibrancy and latent unease. Markets teem with activity, and state-orchestrated displays of music and dance animate designated cultural spaces, projecting an image of harmony and abundance. Yet, beneath this curated façade, many residents I spoke with conveyed a sense of estrangement: Their identity is simultaneously exhibited and emptied, celebrated as folklore but constrained as lived reality. The state-promoted “Xinjiang identity” aims to reconcile diversity with uniformity, but in practice it reduces culture to performance—preserved for tourists and political symbolism rather than for community agency. In stripping cultural practices of their autonomy, the policy leaves little room for genuine self-expression or political participation, breeding quiet dissatisfaction and the risk of deeper unrest among those whose traditions are being hollowed out under the guise of national unity.

As Duara argues, Uyghur nationalism is not simply oppositional; it emerges from a system that defines political belonging through ethnic majoritarianism. Historically grounded in oasis-based affiliations (Rudelson, 1997, p. 26), Uyghur identity has been further fragmented by repression and assimilation. Abroad, the diaspora faces its own set of challenges: intimidation, surveillance, and forced repatriation, especially in countries like Turkey (Reuters, 2024) or Thailand (The Washington Post, 2025). Duara notes that China’s growing global reach—economic, diplomatic, and technological—has expanded its authoritarian influence far beyond its borders.

Nationwide, the pattern holds. In Inner Mongolia, school protests erupted over language restrictions. In the southwest, Miao and Yao communities face land seizures and environmental degradation. Even Korean Chinese now report discrimination in public employment and shrinking cultural autonomy. Across regions, repression varies by group—but the intent is consistent: to consolidate power through ideological and cultural standardization. Its underlying logic remains the drive to collapse difference into conformity.

These disparities are not just tactical—they reveal a deeper ideological agenda. Three key factors shape the CCP’s treatment of minority groups: perceived security threats, religious markers, and political utility. The resulting governance model is highly hierarchical. Hui Muslims are granted some religious space—within state-dictated bounds. Korean Chinese in Yanbian were long considered “model minorities”, tolerated due to their perceived loyalty and geopolitical irrelevance. In contrast, Uyghurs are treated as a high-security threat, not only because of their distinct cultural and religious “otherness”, but also because of their resilient capacity to resist assimilation—subjected as a result to one of the most intrusive surveillance regimes in the world.

While Beijing presents its ethnic policies as a purely domestic matter, their global dimension is unavoidable. Surveillance technologies, diaspora suppression, and selective cultural diplomacy reveal that the internal and external faces of Chinese power are deeply intertwined. China’s strategy is not merely administrative; it is grounded in a civilizational mission to unify, discipline, and reconfigure identity. Assimilation is cast as a moral project—one that seeks to “civilize” and discipline ethnic minorities into loyal, modern, Han-aligned citizens. To achieve this, the state deploys a broad toolkit encompassing ideological training, behavioral regulation, and pervasive digital surveillance. In contemporary China, conformity is not simply expected; it is systematically engineered.

The CCP’s reliance on coercion over consent, and assimilation over accommodation, may secure a fragile stability—as I observed in Kashgar in 2024—but it erodes trust, alienates communities, and provokes international backlash. The selective use of coercion and recognition reinforces Duara’s insight that Chinese nationalism is not monolithic but strategically curated, deployed to discipline, absorb, and silence. The legacy of

Qing-era layered sovereignty has been recast as a modern project of cultural absorption and moral unification. Political agency for minorities is not expanded but increasingly subsumed into a central narrative—one where unity is equated with sameness, and diversity survives only at the state’s discretion. This tension between curated diversity and coercive homogenization shapes how China presents itself beyond its borders, setting the stage for the next section’s analysis of foreign policy and global legitimacy.

### Revivalist Nationalisms Across the Globe

If the domestic face of Chinese nationalism is grounded in assimilation and ideological discipline, its external face operates through a different register: civilizational assertion, developmental appeal, and selective leadership. This is where China’s internal and external narratives converge and where its global ambitions become visible.

Nationalism is back at the heart of global politics. From Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” to Donald Trump’s “America First”, leaders across regimes are invoking nationalist rhetoric to consolidate power and reshape the international order. Duara argues that these revivalist nationalisms are not merely about sovereignty—they are about historical redemption and future ambition. The “Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation” seeks not only to restore national pride but to redefine what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century.

Nationalism has become a central pillar of legitimacy in Xi Jinping’s China. My analysis of Xi Jinping’s speeches, as archived in *People’s Daily* from 2013 to 2024, reveals the strategic repetition of four key phrases: Chinese nation (中华民族), Chinese style modernization (中国式现代化), ethnic unity (民族团结), cultural confidence (文化自信). These are not mere slogans—they frame domestic cohesion and global ambition. Since 2021, the rhetoric has shifted from emotionally charged themes like the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦) to a more technocratic narrative of Chinese style modernization (中国式现代化), mirroring China’s Belt and Road diplomacy. This discursive shift shows how nationalism functions less as rhetoric alone and more as a governing framework—an ideological performance through which the CCP seeks to align ethnic policy, domestic control, and global ambition under a singular vision of China’s rise. In this narrative, Beijing casts itself not merely as a nation-state but as a civilization-state—an ancient moral and political force positioning itself as an alternative to Western liberalism (Pye, 1990, pp. 56-74).

For many developing countries, this vision has appeal. Unlike Trump’s “America First”, which emphasized withdrawal and unilateralism, China’s nationalism projects a broader aspiration: to reestablish China as a global civilizational center—economically, culturally, and increasingly, militarily. Whereas American nationalism often emerges from bottom-up populist movements, constrained by democratic institutions, China’s nationalism is a top-down project, fused with one-party rule and enforced through state media, education, and surveillance.

This complexity challenges the simplistic binary of “good” versus “bad” nationalism often used in global debates. Ukrainian nationalism, for instance, is typically framed in the West as civic and defensive—grounded in democratic self-determination and resistance to foreign invasion—while Russian nationalism under Putin is cast as imperialist and expansionist, invoking civilizational myths to legitimize war. Yet, as Prasenjit Duara reminds us, the civic–ethnic divide is ultimately insufficient. Nationalism is malleable: Under pressure, even civic forms can adopt exclusionary or religious features.

Duara proposes a more functional distinction: between imperialistic nationalism, which seeks domination (as seen in Russia’s “Russian World” doctrine), and reflexive nationalism, which responds to perceived external threats (as in Ukraine). Chinese nationalism, however, defies neat classification. It is not militarily expansionist,

but its civilizational discourse does carry imperial undertones. Long before Xi Jinping's rise, Magnus Fiskesjö argued in *Rescuing the Empire: Chinese Nation-Building in the Twentieth Century* that China's statecraft under both the Republic and the PRC can be seen not merely as an effort to "rescue the nation" but to reclaim an empire (Fiskesjö, 2006, pp. 15-44). Under Xi Jinping, China promotes its governance model as a global alternative—positioning itself as a provider of order, especially for mid-sized and developing states that view Western-led systems as unreliable or extractive.

The appeal is real. In Africa and parts of Southeast Asia, China has positioned itself as a partner in post-colonial revival through the Belt and Road Initiative. In many cases, it is not simply the preferred option—it is the only viable one. Yet China's soft power rests less on universal values than on selective memory: a shared narrative of humiliation, recovery, and sovereignty that resonates with states historically marginalized by Western dominance. By invoking this history, Beijing presents itself not as a hegemon but as a fellow traveler on the path to development.

Still, the limits of this model are clear. In my view, China functions less as a universal architect of global order and more as a context-dependent order-shaper, pursuing influence selectively across economic, security, and institutional domains. Its influence is strongest where material benefits dominate—such as infrastructure, trade, and digital connectivity—domains where the promise of rapid development outweighs concerns about governance. But its legitimacy is far weaker in areas tied to pluralism, cultural autonomy, or human rights, where its own domestic practices undermine credibility. This asymmetry suggests that China's global role, though rising, is bounded: persuasive when material gain is at stake, but fragile when confronted with questions of identity, justice, or rights.

As Duara notes, China's ideologically coherent, state-crafted nationalism resonates more deeply in parts of the Global South than Russia's militarism or India's Hindutva-driven assertiveness. Ironically, the retreat of U.S. multilateralism under Trump may have cleared the path for Beijing's rise—creating a vacuum that China has eagerly filled (Financial Times, 2025).

How, then, should we classify Chinese nationalism: as good or bad, imperialistic or defensive? Duara cautions against such binaries. The question is not whether nationalism is "good" or "bad", but how it functions and where it leads. Chinese nationalism is best seen as imperial in function yet civilizational in form—a top-down project of identity engineering that seeks both to reshape ethnic relations domestically and to recalibrate global perceptions of China's role. It blends strict internal discipline with external assurances that China's political model is not for export, speaking of global harmony while limiting cultural autonomy at home.

This dual face is not contradictory but complementary. The globalist ambitions of the Chinese state are neither purely reactive to past humiliations nor simply defensive against U.S. power; they are strategic and expansive, positioning China as a norm-setting force in a reconfigured world order. As Fiskesjö observes, China's contemporary ascent must be understood as part of the long historical cycles of imperial rise and decline that have shaped world orders since antiquity. Such moments of ascendancy, he reminds us, generate not only material power but also ideological conviction: Empires come to view themselves as custodians of civilization, endowed with a moral right to lead (Fiskesjö, 2024). In China's case, his conviction manifests in its rhetoric of rejuvenation and moral order, intertwining economic expansion with a civilizational self-image inherited from imperial precedents. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road and appeals to ancient cultural continuity, Beijing cultivates trust among states seeking alternatives to Western leadership. The very tools that reinforce internal legitimacy are used to construct China's narrative of responsible leadership on the world stage. For now, the

strategy appears to be working: China is playing the long game—anchored in civilizational depth, economic leverage, and institutional patience.

### Conclusion

This study has shown that nationalism under Xi Jinping has hardened into a civilizational project that is simultaneously assimilationist at home and expansionary abroad. What distinguishes the Xi Jinping's era is not the invention of these dynamics, but their intensification and synchronization: Coercive homogenization of minorities is mirrored by an assertive, civilization-centered discourse of harmony projected globally. Chinese nationalism thus presents not two contradictory faces, but two dimensions of the same project—discipline and standardization at home, and the rhetoric of peace and partnership abroad.

At the domestic level, the CCP's commitment to ideological conformity has hollowed out the very multiculturalism it claims to preserve. Ethnic pluralism survives largely as display—museumized, sanitized, and staged for political performance—while lived autonomy and cultural agency are steadily eroded. In practice, “unity” has come to mean sameness, enforced through surveillance, assimilation, and the dismantling of minority institutions. The Uyghur case demonstrates that the outcome is not harmony but fragile acquiescence—a precarious equilibrium sustained by fear, incentives, and the shrinking space for cultural and religious expression.

Internationally, Beijing deploys a very different vocabulary. Invoking “a community with a shared future for mankind”, it positions itself as a peacebuilder and responsible global actor. Yet this communitarian rhetoric is selective: It resonates most strongly where states prioritize material benefits, sovereignty, and alternatives to Western dominance. In Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of the Global South, China's narrative of humiliation and revival has real appeal. But the same practices that secure loyalty at home—assimilation, censorship, and surveillance—undermine its credibility in liberal, rights-conscious contexts.

This duality exposes a structural contradiction. By exporting surveillance technologies, suppressing diasporas, and framing dissent as deviance, Beijing extends its coercive logic beyond its borders, revealing that its “peaceful rise” rests less on universal values than on strategic leverage. As a result, China should not be seen as a universal architect of global order, but as a selective order-shaper: persuasive in domains where economic delivery outweighs political values—trade, infrastructure, digital connectivity—but far weaker in domains tied to identity, religion, pluralism, or cultural freedom. This asymmetry suggests that China's global role, though rising, is bounded: compelling where material needs dominate, fragile where legitimacy and cultural rights matter.

The consequences of this duality merit careful consideration. First, the Uyghur case shows that enforced unity breeds estrangement rather than harmony. Second, China's global credibility is tethered to the same instruments of control it deploys domestically, blurring the line between nationalism and authoritarianism. Third, the long game Beijing plays—anchored in civilizational rhetoric and economic patience—may secure influence, but its reach is ultimately conditioned by the very values it suppresses: cultural autonomy, pluralism, and the freedom to dissent.

The challenge, then, is not to ask whether Chinese nationalism is “good” or “bad”, but to recognize its function: imperial in design, civilizational in rhetoric, strategic in execution. Left unchecked, it risks reproducing abroad the very fractures it enforces at home—sacrificing pluralism to unity, difference to conformity, and autonomy to control. For the international community, the task is not simply to respond to China's rise, but to manage its influence—measuring how far its ambitions align or clash with local nationalisms.

The Uyghur case starkly illustrates the dangers of privileging unity over pluralism: peace imposed rather than negotiated, belonging conditional rather than inclusive. If nationalism is to remain a viable governing framework in the 21st century, it must adapt—creating space for difference, dissent, religion, and shared belonging. Without such evolution, it will perpetuate the very fractures it claims to resolve—both within states and across borders—while exporting discriminatory norms through the soft power it wields.

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