

Joshua Eisenman on "Chinese National Socialism"

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Joshua Eisenman, Devin T. Stewart

Podcast music: [Blindhead and Mick Lexington](#).

DEVIN STEWART: Hi. I'm Devin Stewart here at Carnegie Council in New York City, and today I'm speaking with Josh Eisenman. He's a professor at the University of Texas LBJ School in Austin.

Josh, it's great to have you back here in New York.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: It's great to be here, Devin. Thanks again for having me.

DEVIN STEWART: You just came back from spending the summer in China as a visiting professor. You were in at least three cities in China. Tell us what you were doing there and which cities you visited.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I was in China for about 10 weeks. I was a visiting professor at Fudan University. We also spent some time in Fujian Province in Ningde, which actually was where [Xi Jinping](#) used to be the chief, so it's a bustling city. It's amazing how that place has changed in about five or six years. Then I was a trailing spouse when my wife was a visiting professor at Peking University. So I was in Beijing, Shanghai, and in Ningde, Fujian, and visiting some of the rural areas in Fujian as well.

DEVIN STEWART: What was the course you were teaching?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Actually, I wasn't teaching. I was doing research for a new book that I'm working on with Ambassador [David Shinn](#) on China-Africa relations.

DEVIN STEWART: You are always working on new books.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Well, you have to keep going. That's what academics do.

DEVIN STEWART: Tell us what you saw in China. It's increasingly difficult to know what's going on inside China. You were just there. What is it like on university campuses? What is it like speaking to young people? What do you see?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I can say that universities have become much tighter places than they were in the past. There is no doubt about it. Several professors, who will remain nameless, said to me they thought it was a new [Cultural Revolution](#). That's a pretty interesting statement because Premier [Wen Jiabao](#), just before he stepped down as premier of the National People's Congress, said that if China doesn't take a different road, it's going to have another Cultural Revolution. So it's very interesting that professors are now saying that.

DEVIN STEWART: What would you make of the academic environment generally speaking?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: The academic environment is tighter than it has ever been. Many university professors, especially junior professors, have to receive approval or comments from higher-level senior [Party](#) officials in order to be promoted.

Similarly, there is different funding that they have to receive called *kètí* [phonetic] from the government. If they don't receive this funding, even if they were to receive funding from other sources and published articles in top places, it wouldn't be enough necessarily to get tenure.

DEVIN STEWART: What is the source of this constraint? What's the rationale behind making things tighter and raising the level of control? What's the goal there?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I don't know if any of you listeners have seen [Document Number Nine](#). It's certainly worth a Google, because it was a leaked document that came out a few years ago where the Communist Party basically said that "liberal values are bad, and we need to watch out for liberal values." And one of the bastions of liberal values is universities, liberal-thinking professors. So inspection teams have been sent out to all the major universities to ensure that liberal values are not being promulgated. Textbooks, for instance, that are liberal-leaning textbooks or Western-printed textbooks have been removed from shelves and removed from classes.

I would say that perhaps one of the more disturbing trends is that many university students—especially top students who wish to study abroad—have been asked to essentially spy on their professors and come back and give reports about professors, who are then called in and scolded for the types of either materials they're using or the points that they're making.

So we can consider this a Cultural Revolution of the political right. When the political left came to get you, the workers and the peasants would come and [lead you out in the "airplane" position](#). That was [Mao's](#) Cultural

Revolution. But Xi's Cultural Revolution is quite different. Xi's Cultural Revolution is one of the political right, so what happens is you have political indoctrination sessions followed by lists of books that are not approved that you can't use or syllabi that must be approved, students in the class who are going to rat you out, and then you'll end up with a knock on the door, and then you've got to deal with that.

So there is a lot of concern. A lot of people who in my experience used to speak very frankly are really refraining from speaking frankly. I can tell you that many people, or all Chinese professors who want to leave the country, have had to turn over their passports to the university and have to reapply to the university to get their own passport back to attend an academic conference abroad.

They are also encouraged now to travel not on their private passports, but university professors are given official government passports and asked to travel on those passports if they're doing any work-related matters. If they're going to Barbados for a week or something, then they travel on private passports, although they still must get permission. But if they're going to do an academic conference—so a variety of different methods are being used in order to curtail what is the realm of the possible in China today.

DEVIN STEWART: The people who are doing the scrutinizing, the supervisors, technically are they university officials? Who are these people who are taking the passports or reviewing the work and so forth? Who are these people?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: It's a great question. I'm not sure I know every answer, but I can give you some insights on it.

Generally, the universities are placed under pressure. An inspection group will be sent from the Center [the Central Government, in this case, specifically [the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection](#)] to go in and inspect them and make sure they're doing what they ought to be doing according to the Center. Last year that was Fudan University, but this year it wasn't; this year it was Peking University or vice versa. So whenever an inspection team is there, the pace of academic output slows considerably. People are not willing to risk anything when they've come so far. You can imagine when these inspection teams show up, things slow down.

I also want to stress that just, I think, a week or two ago [Wang Qishan](#), who is the head of the disciplinary bureau—a very important person in China today—had an editorial in the People's Daily, which is the Chinese government newspaper, which said that these inspection teams are going to become permanent fixtures.

In the past, the Communist Party—and this goes all the way back to the 1950s and 1960s—had used inspection teams as ad hoc measures when they thought there was a problem. If they thought there was corruption in a particular locality, they would send in an inspection team. But now, what Wang Qishan said a couple of weeks ago is that this is going to be institutionalized. So it's not only for universities, it's also for enterprises. Basically every unit is going to be inspected regularly. And these kinds of regular inspections are done by people who I suppose the Party feels confident are going to toe the Party line.

Also, Mr. Wang was saying in his editorial that there are certain problems they're finding repeatedly, and those problems often have to do with basically parroting the Party line without actually adhering to it. So a lot of the issues that China watchers like myself have seen for years, the Party sees, but the way they cope with it is not to have more transparency and openness, but to crack down harder to make sure that people are adherent to the Party line.

DEVIN STEWART: Tell me more about the sort of right-wing Cultural Revolution that's taking place that you're seeing. What are some of the characteristics of life on the street, for example? Can you feel it in day-to-day life?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Well, I'm assuming there's a glorification of the central authority of Xi Jinping. For instance, Xi

Jinping said that China should have more shared economy; he's been stressing that. The entire streets of China, in Beijing and Shanghai, are so cluttered with bikeshares that people can't even walk on the sidewalks anymore. The local governments have had to start cracking down on these bikeshare companies because under orders from the Center they should just make as many bikes as possible. One externality is basically the leader says, "Do this," and thus, everybody does it, whether it's a market-driven process or not.

Certainly what I said before in terms of supervision, a lack of feeling comfortable speaking out against things that one might have spoken out about during the [Hu Jintao](#) administration—and I do want to stress that the Hu Jintao administration was not a liberal democratic government by any stretch—but this is a kind of step down the road.

What's interesting is that in the past when I said, "China is a fascist government or a national socialist government," I would get pushback. People would say, "No, no, you don't understand. You're on the fringe." Not anymore.

In this period, Chinese experts, Chinese scholars, people at think tanks, even government-related people—and interestingly enough, a lot of people at the Italian embassy—were thinking, Hey, this looks familiar to us. This is the [fasci](#); the binding of people together through nationalism to return to a state of grandeur and glory. In an Italian sense, that was the Roman Empire; in the Chinese sense, that was the Chinese era of grandeur and glory.

DEVIN STEWART: What are Chinese friends saying to your notion that it is becoming a fascist state?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Like I said, in the past, people would say, "No, no, no, you don't understand," but more and more people are willing to accept that socialism with Chinese characteristics is actually [National Socialism](#).

DEVIN STEWART: Including Chinese people?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Including Chinese people. And in Chinese, the word for National Socialism is guójiā shèhuì zhǔyì, but the word for statism is guójiā zhǔyì, and so people have been using guójiā zhǔyì, statism, saying National Socialism makes them bristle for a variety of reasons. You think of the [Anti-Japanese War](#) and a variety of different historical instances. In fact, they had a few years ago a parade, the anti-fascist parade with goose-stepping soldiers, which was ironic.

But what's going on now is that people are not pushing back like they used to. They used to say, "Josh, you're taking it too far with that." But now people are saying, "Actually, you know what? That's a pretty good description." They're not saying it's bad—and part of what I'm doing here, and I want to be clear about it, is that I'm not being judgmental. I'm not saying National Socialism is inherently bad, although I personally am a liberal, so I don't like it.

But some people, including people like [Mussolini](#), argued—sometimes convincingly—that fascism was better than liberal democracy, that it was superior, that it could achieve things that liberal democracy simply couldn't because liberal democracy would be mired in debate all the time, whereas the fascists could get things done. And the Chinese government most definitely gets things done. So there are many people out there who might not want to say China is National Socialist, but they are willing to say the Chinese system is better and gets things done.

That is not the point I'm making, but I want to say here that that is simply because I hold liberal values. But if somebody does not hold liberal values—and there are millions and billions of people who do not—then they might not see the fact that China is a National Socialist country in a bad way. In fact, they might say it's a good thing.

But I want to say this without overlaying my liberal-value bias on top of this and say it more as an observer looking at the color of a desk or something and say, "This is what I see that it is."

So most people describe the U.S.-China relationship, in China especially, and in the United States as well, in terms of nation-states, the United States versus China, and then they talk about things like the [Thucydides's Trap](#) and

international relations theory. [Editor's note: For more on this, check out Stewart's recent [interview](#) with [Graham Allison](#), who wrote a [book](#) on this theory in regard to the U.S. and China.] But I think that actually miscategorizes the nature of the relationship. What we have—and what we've had for years—has been a marriage of elites in Beijing and to some degree Shanghai, I suppose, with elites in New York and in Washington. One professor, when I was there at a top university, told me that this is a marriage, particularly with Wall Street.

So the idea is that the elites come together and essentially exploit the working people of China and steal the jobs of the working people of the United States. And then it is basically balled up and wrapped up as a nationalist conflict. So what is essentially a classist issue, a [Marxist](#) issue, a struggle between the different strata of society—the elites versus the rest of society—is actually intentionally disguised as a national struggle between two nation-states.

DEVIN STEWART: You had also mentioned that there is a cultural component to this. Earlier, before the podcast, you mentioned that there was banning of [Winnie-the-Pooh](#). Can you explain that to our listeners?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I don't know that Winnie-the-Pooh has been necessarily banned, but the fact is there were some people out there who had basically taken a picture of [Tigger](#) and a picture of Winnie-the-Pooh walking and transposed them upon [Obama](#) and Xi walking as kind of a joke. So what's happening is the Chinese Internet environment is so tight right now—

DEVIN STEWART: Is this because of the upcoming [19th Congress](#), or what is it?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: People have different views about that. Some people say, "Well, after the 19th Party Congress, it will get better." My sense is it's not getting better. My sense is that the fascist social syndrome does not get better in and of itself and that it will only get worse until something happens that stops it, but that it just doesn't get better in and of itself.

But this is just another kind of example—the Winnie-the-Pooh example—where people go too far because they don't want to take any risks, so they take a step perhaps even beyond what might seem plausible or laughable simply because they're so concerned about offending.

DEVIN STEWART: How does this work in practical terms? Are people being criticized for posting these jokes? What happens?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: A lot of it is removed.

DEVIN STEWART: So, censorship?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Yes, censorship, but it's censorship on a level which we've never seen before. It's censorship on a level that the [Stasi](#) could never have dreamed of. It's the ability to basically when somebody hits "send" on a message, before it arrives it has been censored.

DEVIN STEWART: Has that happened to you?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Yes. I was sitting there with one person sitting on the right of me and the other on the left, and one person said: "Oh, look, this so-and-so, this dissident, decided he's going offline. He's been told to delete all of his accounts." So he sent out one more last thing where he said, "I've been told to delete everything," and then that person hit "forward" on it. By the time it got to the person sitting on the other side of me, it said "gutter oil in Shanghai" or something.

DEVIN STEWART: Some gibberish?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: A completely different story.

DEVIN STEWART: Just gibberish.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Well, not gibberish. It was a different story. It linked up to a story.

So the other guy was like, "Why are you sending me a gutter oil story?"

He said, "Wow, I didn't realize."

DEVIN STEWART: Oh, I see. Okay.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: So, in forwarding the story—

DEVIN STEWART: Gutter oil as in the food scandal?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Food scandals, yes.

Another example: I was getting my business cards made, and I sent an email from my gmail account with a picture of my old business card to the woman who was making my business cards. My email in her Chinese account showed up, and then immediately disappeared, just disappeared in front of her, right out of her email account.

DEVIN STEWART: What service was she using?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: [163](#), which is a Chinese—the fact that it would even show up and then be disappeared—

DEVIN STEWART: That's wild.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: So we're at a level of surveillance and a level of restrictions on the Internet which is unprecedented in history.

DEVIN STEWART: What about attitudes toward foreigners? What have you experienced recently?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Again, it's tougher. There is this idea out there that, We needed the foreigners at a certain period of our development. Now we don't need them anymore. So we don't have to be as welcoming as we once were.

It's palpable. The very first thing that happened—I arrived on May 15, and May 15 is an interesting date because it is the date of the [Silk Road Conference](#) that Xi Jinping held with a bunch of foreigners. I was sitting in the airport with a German woman who said, "I've been in China for 10 years. I'm leaving because I can't take it." That was my first introduction. I had just arrived.

DEVIN STEWART: What was her story?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Her story was that it's not a friendly environment. It's just not a friendly environment. She didn't give me much detail, but I saw detail while I was there. For instance, at one point we were eating dinner in a restaurant in Shanghai with another fellow professor, and he ordered two beers that didn't show up, and he got upset about that. And then they said, "Well, you didn't pay for it."

He said, "Well, I did."

Regardless of whether he paid for it or not, what ensued was other Chinese patrons stood up and in English began to scold him and said, "You know, we've kowtowed to you foreigners too much," and basically made it into a racial-national debate. It became very aggressive. I had to step in between and separate people because it became a nationalistic question. It wasn't about the beer anymore. At that point it became about whether or not "we have

bent over backwards for you foreigners too much, and you're being too demanding of the waitress." They ended up leaving, the other patrons.

DEVIN STEWART: So where does this all go? You said it's not going to change itself; something's going to change it, whether it's a crisis or a movement. What do you see coming up around the bend here?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Look. I don't want to be a guy who tries to predict the future of China.

DEVIN STEWART: Of course not.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: That's a really tough thing to do. To be the predictor of anything is hard.

What I can say is this: If U.S. policy, or any policy, is predicated on the notion that China is becoming a liberal democratic country, that is a really bad policy. It is not rooted in reality in any sense.

DEVIN STEWART: But can China help the United States in Asia, for example, with North Korea? That's the big question this week.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I've never thought that China would. I think that anybody, in my personal opinion, who believes that China is going to help us with North Korea doesn't understand China and doesn't understand North Korea. That is a fool's errand, and it always has been. To think that China will carry water for us on North Korea is a joke.

Now what are we prepared to do? The options are poor. One would be to use violence, to do what the [president](#) has [talked about](#), to use violence toward North Korea.

But the other thing, which might be something worth considering, is asking yourself where the problems truly lie and whether or not they're actually created in Pyongyang or if Pyongyang is a symptom of a larger set of problems that originate in Beijing. If that is the case, then talking to Pyongyang could have benefits if the United States is willing to talk to them about things that go beyond nuclear weapons.

We are so obsessed with nuclear weapons—and my point is not to say that nuclear weapons aren't important, but maybe what we need to do is talk about a bigger set of issues that include more than just nuclear weapons, that nuclear weapons is one of many issues on the table, not just the only issue. If that would be the case, then we could start talking about East Asian security issues, and those issues, of course, have to do with China. And we could talk about them, and maybe the Republic of Korea (ROK) should be in the room as well.

DEVIN STEWART: Before we get to your next couple of books and we wrap up here, one of the themes this summer has been trying to figure out what is the worst case for Asia, and the world really. Given what you know about China, what worries you about what's possible?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Wow. That's such a great question. It's really hard.

Here's what I'm concerned about. Because the environment of information flow has been so retarded in China, so stilted, if there was a major crisis, let's just say with one of China's dozens of nuclear reactors, I don't think we would know about it. I don't think we would hear about it. Things like that scare me—what I don't know, what goes on that we have no idea—and trust me, there's a lot going on. I'm not saying there's been a meltdown, that's not what I'm saying. But something like that could happen, and my sense would be that it would be covered up first, especially in this kind of political climate. So my key concern is this lack of transparency in a country as large as China.

I'm also just concerned because I don't think that most Westerners—and this may sound a bit condescending, and for that I apologize—understand that the Chinese Communist Party has changed a lot over the last few decades. It has changed from a leftist party to an ultra-rightist party, and it would be very wrong of us to start saying, "Well, this is

just [Maoism](#) again."

This is different; this is Xi-ism, this is a different thing. It's got elements of that. There is path-dependence. There are elements of it. But it's more elements in terms of the tactics than it is in terms of the politics. The tactics that they're using are neo-Maoist tactics, but the ideas are neo-fascist.

DEVIN STEWART: So what's the risk with a right-wing fascist state rather than the left-wing Maoist one?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: The risk as [Ivo Feierabend](#) said 30 years ago in his [seminal piece](#) is that a country like this, as it becomes more internally repressive, it could become more externally aggressive. And this external aggression is linked to the fact that we, the great and glorious Chinese, have been mistreated and abused by foreigners and therefore must regain our place in the sun. That sounds familiar, right?

DEVIN STEWART: Of course.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: That kind of thinking generates a sense of entitlement that leads to conflict. And we're seeing it in India. The [India-China border](#) is one example, but it's by far not the only one. The [South China Sea](#), we know; the [Diaoyu Islands](#), we know.

My question is—and there was actually one that happened recently where on official Chinese websites they were basically saying that part of Kazakhstan's territory, which was actually formerly part of the USSR and then prior to that was formerly part of the Russian Empire, actually belongs to China and that Kazakhstan should return that to China. Of course, Astana was not happy to hear that. The Kazakhs were pissed.

But you can imagine how this grows. You can look at every piece of territory that once might have been Chinese, and you could basically end up in tensions with it. To me, the China we want is an open China, a prosperous China, and in my perfect world a liberal China.

DEVIN STEWART: A free one.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: A free China. To me, that's the China we need. That's a great China.

DEVIN STEWART: Like Taiwan.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Taiwan has a lot of the elements that I think we'd like to see. That being said, we're seeing the opposite. In terms of the risks you're talking about, I mean Hong Kong is a fantastic, very special place, and it's losing a lot of that specialness. It's falling in the [Transparency International index](#), and it's falling in a lot of ways which are unfortunate because Hong Kong is such a special place.

The idea of maintaining the one country/two systems, that is something that really, I don't see it happening. I just don't see it. And it's not because there aren't well-meaning people who want it to happen. It's because the nature of the regime could not be, in my opinion, to have a portion of its territory be able to have a free and open society while the remainder of the territory would be completely closed. That would be very difficult.

To me, the Hong Kong question is a foregone conclusion. Anybody who thinks that Hong Kong is going to return or move to a sense of more freedom—and what I'm not saying is that Hong Kong people shouldn't fight for their rights; I don't want to be saying that. But I think they should be very realistic in terms of the willingness of Beijing to ensure that it gets its way.

DEVIN STEWART: Before we wrap up, Josh, a quick plug for your two books that are coming out.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Thank you.

DEVIN STEWART: It's amazing. Red China's Green Revolution is one of them, and I think that was your Ph.D. dissertation, if I remember correctly.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: That's right.

DEVIN STEWART: That's Columbia University Press.

And the other one is [China Steps Out](#). Tell us quickly about those two and when people can find those and buy a whole bunch of copies.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: This is great. I started these projects separately, and they are kind of coming together to be released within a few months of each other.

Red China's Green Revolution is a project where I went to the agricultural universities of China over a period of seven years and collected the agricultural data for the entire Maoist period, agricultural data on the provincial level that has never been had before.

DEVIN STEWART: You went there in 2011?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: From 2011 to 2016. In working with this data, I was able to demonstrate a few things which are somewhat controversial, and I hadn't intended to. When I got the data, I had no idea what it was going to say.

DEVIN STEWART: What did you find?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: What I found was that the commune was a really productive institution if the question is: "Does it produce rice and pigs?" It doesn't seem to have produced a lot of strawberries or fruits and vegetables, but the goal was to produce a lot of grain, even if it tasted bad, and a lot of pigs, even if they were thin. And it did that, and there is no question.

The average Chinese person in 1964 lived to be 49 years of age. The average Chinese person by 1978 lived to be 64 years of age. That kind of increase in average life expectancy is unheard of in the world.

What we think of as the failures of the Mao era mostly took place in the late 1950s during the [Great Leap Forward](#) and in the cities, where the Maoist experiment was an utter failure in many cases. But in the countryside, where 85 percent of the Chinese people lived, the population grew by 300 million people under the commune. That's the entire population of the United States. Yet we have no incidence [after 1961](#) of mass starvation, and China was a generally closed economy with very little trade. With very little trade and a closed economy and the increase of 300 million people, what did these people eat? And the answer is, they ate pretty bad-tasting grain, but they ate. They didn't die.

So the takeaway from this book is that the commune was not a failure rectified by [Deng Xiaoping](#), the commune provided the essential bedrock so that you could have a reform and an opening-up period.

Actually, it's funny. President Xi Jinping has himself said this, so I want to go ahead and quote him—and his quote is on the first page of my book, where he said: "China's socialism can be divided in two periods: the period before reform and opening up, 1978, and the period after, and we should neither negate the contributions of the former nor the latter." And I agree with that, and I think that is what my book demonstrates. It demonstrates that the people who suffered in the 1960s and 1970s had a major contribution to China's growth and prosperity, and it would be right of us to recognize their contribution.

DEVIN STEWART: How about the other book, China Steps Out?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: China Steps Out is an edited volume I did with [Eric Heginbotham](#).

DEVIN STEWART: Can you tell our listeners who that is?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Eric Heginbotham is a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He and I worked together on a [previous book](#).

The foreword of this book is written by a guy named [Kurt Campbell](#), who is a former assistant secretary of state for East Asia, and [Derek Mitchell](#) wrote a chapter in the book—a friend of ours, former U.S. ambassador to Burma. It is very diverse. We've got young; we've got old; we've got Europeans, Americans, and Asians, all working on the book.

What we do is we look at how the Chinese look at the developing world, and we use the Maoist framework, and so we got people to write about Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Africa would be me and Ambassador Shinn, Latin America, etc. So we've got the whole developing world.

What Eric and I did is we used a comparative politics framework. To us—stepping back for a moment—this is pushing back against international relations (IR) theory, saying that we can somehow understand Chinese behavior by applying theory.

Instead, what we do is apply a comparative politics framework where we look at Chinese behavior in different regions of the developing world, having experts answering the same questions in each chapter. And then in the final chapter we pull together all the threads and say: "Well, this is what they're doing in Latin America; this is how it's similar to what they're doing in Africa; this is what they're doing in Southeast Asia; this is similar to what they're doing in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia," and we start to pull together and be able to generalize—not based on just one or two examples, but based on a systematic analysis of each and every region—what is China's approach to the developing world.

DEVIN STEWART: And the big takeaway?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: A big takeaway?

DEVIN STEWART: Everybody wants a big takeaway, right?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Well, the big takeaway—and this might not be surprising—is that domestic politics, in my opinion, is the primary driver of Chinese international politics. Maoist foreign policy is fundamentally different than Dengist foreign policy. And so one of the major takeaways is that Chinese foreign policy in the developing world has changed after Hu Jintao and now during Xi Jinping. In the past, China's strategy was primarily economic—almost entirely economic—but now we've got a new leader in China, a new domestic politics reality which I just discussed, and the extension of that internationally is that China's international politics, international engagement, is deeply political in ways it hasn't been since before Deng Xiaoping, and is more military than it has ever been with the [new base in Djibouti](#).

DEVIN STEWART: Political in terms of what? Like increasing influence? What do you mean, "political"?

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Let's just put it this way: The Communist Party of China's International Department is hosting more than it has ever hosted before, is sending more delegations than it has ever sent before, is doing things like the [Silk Road, the One Belt, One Road strategy](#)—which you and I have talked extensively about—and these are, I don't want to call them aggressive, but they're interventionist; they're hands-on.

Under the previous generation, you had something called "tāo guāng yǎng huì." Tāo guāng yǎng huì means "bide your time and hide your capabilities." It's a low-risk, low-engagement approach. But what China is doing now is that

it's stepping out into the world in a way it never has before, with an aggressiveness it has never had before, with a willingness to be involved in the affairs of others in a way it has never been before.

DEVIN STEWART: Would you go so far as to say we're seeing the emergence of Chinese global leadership? That's something you see a lot on social media creating a lot of anxiety among Americans.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: I would say that the idea of Chinese global leadership is overblown. China simply doesn't have the capacity right now to be a global leader. And this is actually a question a very famous scholar in China named [Jianrong](#) has talked about, that China has built up expectations. He calls it, I think, the "expectations deficit"—I think that's right—where he essentially says that China has gone too far building expectations among its people and internationally about its global leadership capabilities, and that there may be a letdown, and that letdown would be problematic for China. He doesn't believe that China is ready.

Frankly, China right now to me is very inward-looking. It sees external events through its prism. So this new movie that has come out and gotten half a billion dollars in sales within a few weeks is about the Chinese commandos going in and saving Chinese who were kidnapped in Africa or something like that. [Editor's note: The movie is called [Wolf Warriors 2](#).] It's a very nationalistic thing.

But it's an important indicator of the level of nationalism which is extremely high and the idea that we've used the foreigners enough, we're finished, and now it's time to assert our Chinese rightful place on the world stage. And Xi Jinping summarizes this in his concept of the "China Dream," a dream of national reemergence and resurgence of the Chinese nation.

DEVIN STEWART: Well, Josh, you've taught us a lot today. Thank you for coming by Carnegie Council. Josh Eisenman is a professor at the University of Texas in Austin. We'll see you again soon, I hope, Josh.

JOSHUA EISENMAN: Certainly. Thank you.

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