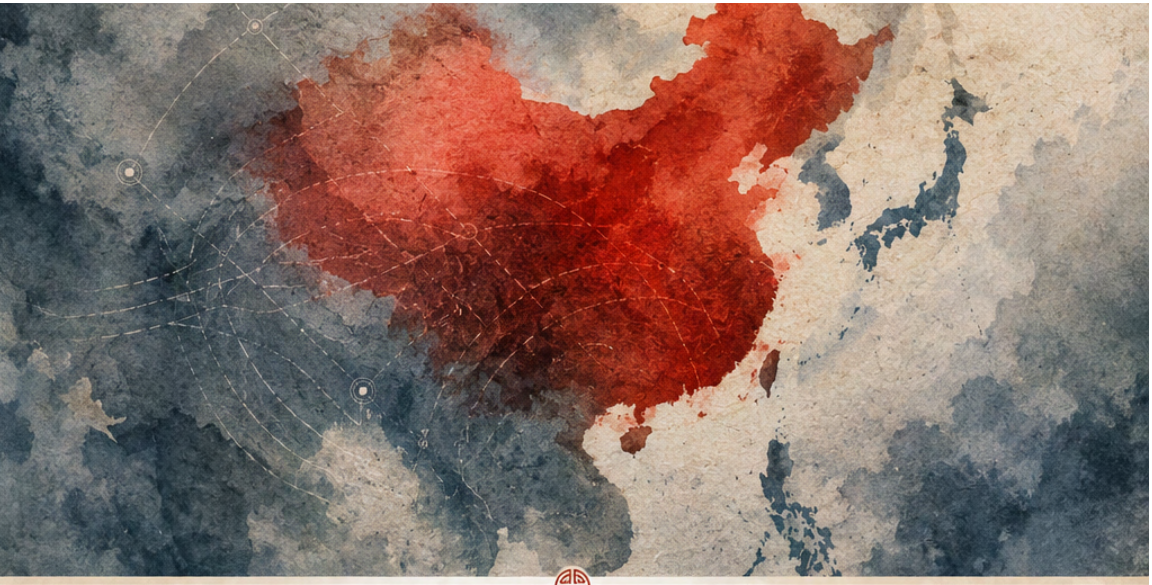
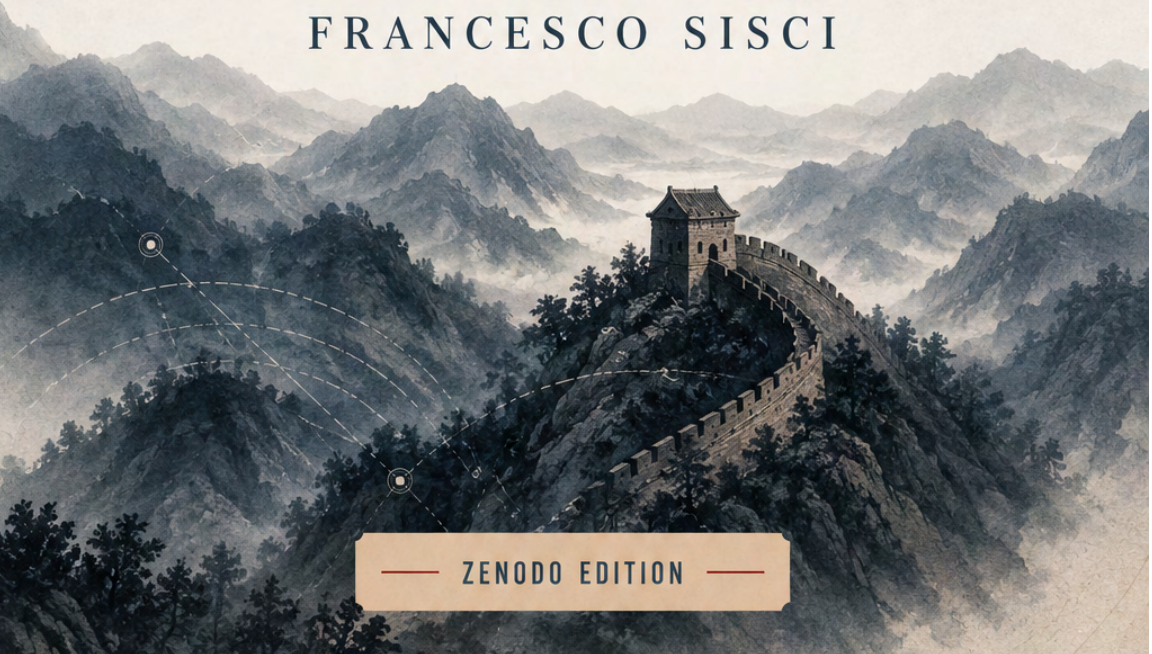


THINKING FROM THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

Military Power, Political Order, and the Making of China's Grand Strategy

FRANCESCO SISCI



ZENODO EDITION

Thinking from the Tip of the Spear

Military Power, Political Order, and the Making of China's Grand Strategy

Francesco Sisci

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Praise For

Thinking from the Tip of the Spear

—

"This is such a rich and well-researched book, appropriate for any college or graduate school textbook dealing with classical and contemporary China. The closing chapters dealing with current issues with China and Xi's hold on power and likely decisions are relevant to what's happening today."

Ambassador Joseph R. DeTrani
Former U.S. Special Envoy for
the Six-Party Talks; former Director,
National Counterproliferation Center

—

"*Thinking from the Tip of the Spear* is a bold and illuminating work that masterfully bridges ancient Chinese intellectual traditions and contemporary geopolitics. Drawing on decades of scholarship, diplomacy, and journalism, Francesco Sisci offers a historically grounded and analytically rigorous exploration of China's grand strategy and its global implications. By weaving together philosophy, governance, and military thought, he provides readers with a rare framework for understanding the deep logic shaping China's present choices. This is an insightful,

nuanced, and timely contribution, essential reading for policymakers, scholars, and anyone seeking to grasp the strategic foundations of China's rise and its global consequences."

Nada Kakabadse
Professor of Policy, Governance and Ethics

—

"The concept of identifying a 'Chinese' strategic mindset that differs significantly from the customary 'western' strategic mindset is a useful point of departure. It can be very enlightening, especially to the non-expert reader, to identify origins of this 'Chinese' way of assessing strategic challenges/relative power/options for response in the writings of Chinese antiquity, especially the sage-philosophers such as Laozi/Zhuangzi/ Confucius/ Mencius/Mozi/Sunzi/Han Feizi. The parts of your book that do this seem to me the strongest and most interesting ones, especially when you are able to relate classical thinking/strategic approaches to the way that contemporary Chinese civilian and military leaders might analyze international relations and strategic challenges."

Donald W. Keyser
Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs; former senior U.S. diplomat and longtime specialist in China and East Asian affairs

—

"A useful way to approach Francesco Sisci's book is to begin not with theory, but with encounter. In my documentary *Better Angels*, which examines the U.S.–China relationship, the opening scene features Henry Kissinger reflecting on his first trip to China and his initial meeting with Zhou Enlai. Kissinger recalls saying that China seemed deeply mysterious to Americans. Zhou replied simply: what is so mysterious? Come and visit us—there are 900 million of us, and you will get to know us.

It is an elegant answer, and a revealing one. But Sisci's book suggests it is not so simple. To "visit" China, in the deeper sense, is not to observe but to grasp the structure through which it understands itself. His central claim is that Chinese behavior emerges from an interlocking triangle of strategy, governance, and worldview. It can be read as a response to Zhou's invitation: China is visible, but only intelligible as a system.

From this perspective, Sisci brings into focus a contrast between two political logics: a China in which strategy, economics, and worldview are integrated, and a United States in which these domains have historically been more separated. For much of the postwar period, American policy tended to distinguish trade as economics, security as military posture, and diplomacy as political management. Sisci captures that asymmetry at its clearest point, and in that sense has produced an extremely valuable framework for understanding

recurring cycles of misinterpretation between the two countries.

That distinction, however, may no longer hold as firmly as it once did. Under Donald Trump, and increasingly in the policy architecture that followed, trade ceased to function as a discrete economic domain. Tariffs, export controls, industrial policy, and technology restrictions are now treated in Washington as instruments of geopolitical power.

As the United States increasingly integrates economic and strategic policy into a single frame of competition, the interpretive gap that long shaped misunderstanding is beginning to change form. The result is not convergence, but a partial overlap between systems that remain structurally distinct even as their internal logics evolve under pressure.

The implication is that Sisci's framework now tracks not only contrast, but interaction. The question is no longer simply how to distinguish two logics as stable categories, but how to follow their growing entanglement—without assuming that greater intelligibility produces convergence, stability, or predictability. If anything, what is emerging is a relationship that is more legible in structure, but more uncertain in consequence."

William A. Mundell
Chairman
NeuroSphere Entertainment

—

"Everyone concerned about the drums beating for war with China should read *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear.* Francisco Sisci was trained in Classical Chinese philosophy at the University of London and was the only foreign student at the graduate school of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing in 1989, the year of the Tiananmen movement. Since then, he has lived off and on in China working mainly as a journalist. In this book, Sisci brings his long view and unique civilizational perspective to China's past experience, practice, and philosophy of warfare and explains how it affects the thinking of current Chinese leaders."

Sarah Allan
Emeritus Burlington Northern Foundation
Professor of Asian Studies,
Dartmouth College
Distinguished Visiting Professor,
Tsinghua University

—

"This is a remarkable and highly original manuscript. Its power lies in the breadth of its vision: it moves from Mozi and the Warring States to the Asian financial crisis, from the structure of Chinese bureaucracy to the psychology of the PLA, from ancient concepts of legitimate war to the present danger of U.S.-China confrontation. Few works attempt to connect classical Chinese thought, modern Chinese politics, military reform, financial crises,

nationalism, and global strategy in one sustained argument.

The manuscript is learned, provocative, and deeply informed by lived experience. Sisci brings together the eye of a journalist, the training of a classical sinologist, and the practical instincts of someone who has watched China from very close range for decades. Whether or not every reader agrees with every judgment, the work forces one to think harder and more historically about China's choices and the world's response to them. It is therefore not only a study of Chinese grand strategy, but also a serious warning about misunderstanding, miscalculation, and the urgent need for deeper historical intelligence in international affairs."

Guy S. Alitto
Associate Professor Emeritus of History,
East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the College,
University of Chicago; scholar of modern Chinese
intellectual and cultural history

—

"The author draws on extensive research in ancient Chinese history and experience as a diplomat, journalist, and scholar in China.

The book is divided into an introduction and then six parts, each describing a period of significance in the history of China and to the start of the present resurgence of China as a great global power.

The book begins with an introduction that frames it because of the author's privilege, gained through forty

years of dedicated work and thousands of articles covering all facets of Chinese life, from theology and religious affairs to crime and fashion gossip. This section outlines the military-strategic development discussed in the book, which is examined across three distinct phases. The author uses various examples to highlight China's political and military strength, focusing on its interactions with the USA, Russia, the EU, and other global powers, while also providing historical context.

The chapter outlines ancient Chinese war theories from the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., covering the rise and fall of the Zhou dynasty and the emergence of powers like Zheng, Chu, and Qi. It also examines the impact of political ideologists and philosophers such as Confucius, Mozi, and Sunzi on warfare.

The book explores early civilizations and their geopolitical philosophies, tracing influences from Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Greeks, Romans, and Chinese, as well as examining military developments and expansion. Later chapters cover the unification of China under Chairman Mao, the cultural revolution, subsequent governance, and how these events have led to contemporary leadership under Xi Jinping.

The book spans roughly 256 pages and provides an insightful look at China's emergence through historical, political, and economic lenses. It skillfully recounts how China has evolved over centuries to reach its current status.

My fascination with China began when I was a child reading about Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, but my curiosity grew even more during Deng Xiaoping's era, especially because of his impact on China's educational and industrial development.

I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to have a depth of knowledge of the place of China in the modern world from an understanding of its history and political emancipation, along with projections for the future. This is critical at a time when the USA may be dwindling in its global influence while that of China may be in the rise."

Segun Toyin Dawodu, MD, JD, MBA
Physician, attorney, and healthcare executive
Founder & CEO, PMREHAB Pain and Sports Medicine Associates
Attending Physician, WellSpan Medical Group
Founder and Editor, Dawodu.com

From the Editor

I met Francesco Sisci in New York City in 2012, at the eightieth-birthday celebration of Professor Robert Mundell. We took to each other quickly. The conversation moved easily from China and economics to history, politics, and the people who had shaped our thinking. By the end of the evening, I knew I had met someone I wanted to keep talking with. We have remained in contact ever since.

In the years since, I have read Francesco steadily: his essays, his analyses, the pieces he circulates through the Appia Institute, and much of what he has written on China and the changing international order. A long acquaintance with a writer's work reveals more than any single book can. You see what he returns to, what he reconsiders, and what he refuses to accept merely because it has become conventional. I have come to appreciate both his scholarship and his practical instinct for people, institutions, and public life.

Francesco is, above all, a thinker. There is courage in the way he thinks. He does not borrow his conclusions from prevailing opinion. He studies a problem, turns it over carefully, places it against history, and reaches his own judgment. Then he speaks plainly. His conclusions can run cross-grain to accepted views, and sometimes they meet vigorous resistance. What impresses me is that he does not confuse disagreement with enmity. He can remain in conversation with people who oppose him strongly, explain his reasoning, hear theirs, and continue the exchange without surrendering either conviction or friendship. That is an uncommon intellectual discipline.

Thinking from the Tip of the Spear comes from that same habit of mind. Francesco does not treat strategy as an isolated military

subject. He follows it backward into institutions, political order, geography, philosophy, and historical memory. The result is a book that asks more than what China may do next. It asks what has formed the habits of thought through which Chinese power understands itself and the world around it. Whether the reader approaches China as a scholar, policymaker, student, or concerned citizen, that is a question worth taking seriously.

My own years as a researcher, writer, and professor have taught me to distrust scholarship that is technically accomplished but detached from human consequences. Francesco is not that kind of scholar. He wants ideas to do work in the world. He sees possibilities and has the practical temperament to move toward them. Behind his sometimes hard-edged analysis is a desire for a better order and a conviction that serious understanding can lessen the chance of catastrophic miscalculation.

I have enjoyed working with Francesco on this book. He has also graciously invited me to contribute an Afterword. I value the invitation. It allows the conversation that began in New York in 2012 to continue inside the book itself, where readers can weigh the arguments and carry that conversation further.

I am pleased to have had a hand in bringing this work to its readers.

Shawn D. Mathis, PhD, MSc (Oxon), MA
Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Foreword

More than two decades ago—around 2003—a friend in Beijing helped arrange a meeting between Mr. Sisci and me at Zhongguancun to discuss my two-volume *History of Chinese Thought*. The friend, who also joined the conversation, told me that Mr. Sisci worked at the Italian Embassy and was also a journalist. He mentioned that the year before (2002), Mr. Sisci had published a book review of *History of Chinese Thought* in *Asia Times*, which I had seen. I recall Mr. Sisci writing in the review that my work had altered the conventional approach to Chinese intellectual history. It not only paid homage to Foucault and Braudel but also adopted a method reminiscent of Angus Graham, attempting to present a wholly new intellectual history. It is truly new, rich in ideas on every page"—I still remember this line from his review.

Since then, although we never met again and only exchanged sporadic messages, I gathered from various media that he remained deeply engaged with and offered broad, incisive commentary on China's politics, culture, international affairs, and religious beliefs. However, I never fully understood why, over twenty years ago, he had taken an interest in my book on ancient Chinese thought. It was only after reading the manuscript he sent me, *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear*, that I learned he had pursued his doctorate in London under Angus Graham (1919–1991), specializing in ancient Chinese history. Additionally, during his research visit to the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one of his advisors was the late Chinese scholar Li Xueqin (1933–2019), a longtime mentor and friend of mine. This finally shed some light on his interest in ancient Chinese intellectual history.

The manuscript before me is Mr. Sisci's attempt to break down the boundaries between ancient and modern, China and the world, and history, politics, and culture. After a quick read, my impression is that his approach to understanding contemporary China follows this logic:

First, he examines the interaction of contemporary China's worldview, political governance, and strategic thinking as a triangular structure. Second, he seeks to demonstrate how modern China has evolved from traditional China, with historical genes profoundly influencing its contemporary form. Finally, he believes it is essential to place China—both ancient and modern—within a comparative framework of global political civilizations to assess its preferences and choices in worldview, political governance, and international strategy.

I lack expertise in contemporary world politics, culture, and military affairs. However, Mr. Sisci's choice to begin with Warring States texts and extensively discuss ancient Chinese history and thought captured my interest. I have noticed a significant shift in the field of contemporary international politics: the so-called "historical turn." Regardless of criticisms of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, scholars observing international politics today are increasingly recognizing how history, as a genetic imprint, influences contemporary international trends and strategic choices. They also note how factors like religion or civilizational identity shape various developments and global rivalries.

Yet, integrating history and reality, the world and China, and worldview, political governance, and strategic trends requires academic training, practical experience, and deep observation—no easy feat. Having spent many years in China as a diplomat, journalist, and research scholar, Mr. Sisci combines historical knowledge, a journalist's sensitivity to news, and on-the-ground observations of contemporary China and the world. Therefore, I believe anyone who genuinely hopes to understand contemporary China should read Mr. Sisci's work.

Ge Zhaoguang
Fudan University
Shanghai

Preface

The idea and project for this book began and took an initial form in 1990–91 through discussions with Paolo Beonio Brocchieri. He had been my professor of Eastern philosophy in Venice and later invited me to a conference in Pavia. I proposed to him a comprehensive work on the concept of warfare and its links to political organization and the development of logic in ancient China. It would not be limited to examining only *Sunzi*, the famous classic on war, or only the contemporary military texts. Rather, it would broaden the perspective on warfare to include all pre-Qin (before the 3rd century BC) classical literature.

Essentially, it involved sifting through classical literature to find passages that referenced war. The starting point had to be Mozi, who addressed defensive warfare, politics, and logic, and even detailed the tactics for defending a besieged city. I didn't even realize how ambitious that project was. Beonio Brocchieri was interested. He told me we would discuss it in detail upon his return from a short trip to India. But he returned from India ill, and shortly afterward, he passed away.

At the same time, I was working on the Italian translation of Angus Graham's book (my professor from London). I was very proud of this work because I had retranslated, from Chinese into Italian, all of Graham's original citations, sometimes uncovering typos and misquoted passages. Graham also encouraged me in my thesis work. However, he too died in those months. The deaths of my two mentors deeply affected me, mainly because I was already quite shaken after returning to Beijing after two years and having experienced the entire Tiananmen movement in 1989. I had finished writing my thesis and was set to take an oral exam with Professors Paul Thompson and Sarah Allan. They had generously

sent me to study in Beijing as the first foreign student at the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. There, I had the privilege of learning and reading the classics under the guidance of three exceptional teachers: Li Xueqin, Huang Quanmin, and Suo Jieran.

By 1991–1992, I was married, with two daughters, and working for the foreign desk of ANSA, the Italian national news agency in Rome. The dynamism of modern China, its politics, upheavals, and the promise of returning to work in Beijing pushed me to leave the Academy.

However, the sense of that initial research has never left me and, over the years, has taken on a different form. Much of this was influenced by my work first as a journalist in Beijing, then as a consultant for Chinese think tanks such as Strategy and Management, the Academy of Social Sciences, the Central Party School, and Renmin University. This blend of academic training, practical journalism, and contemporary research, spanning over thirty years, has given the current draft project of China's grand strategy a non-conventional, certainly heterodox, and perhaps eccentric edge.

Acknowledgments

In those years, the list of people to thank would have been just too long, and many Chinese helped me deepen my understanding of China. I am deeply grateful to many of them. To name just a few: Lu Xiang, Zhao Tingyang at CASS, Yu Shicun, Qiao Liang, Wang Xiangsui, Wang Jian, Li Xiaoning, Qin Chaoying, and David Yang.

I am grateful to Donald Keyser for his continued assistance and support over the past few years. I enjoyed, over the years, the discussions with Michael Pillsbury and the indispensable encouragement from Edward Luttwak for more than two decades on grand strategy, which have significantly shaped my thinking about long-term strategic continuity, state behavior, and the relationship between domestic order and external threat.

I am indebted to Lorenzo Infantino for extended discussions on political economy and for his work *Unintended Consequences and the Social Sciences: An Intellectual History* (New Thinking in Political Economy series, 2023), which informed the article's treatment of Hume, Adam Smith, and the emergence in Western thought of trade as a morally grounded and mutually beneficial practice.

I thank Moss Roberts, David Goldman, and Joseph DeTrani for sharing their cultural reflections and interests and for their invaluable support over these many years.

For decades, I accumulated thoughts and notes on the subject of this book. Still, I had little or no organization of the idea of a link between military, statecraft, logic, and geographical-historical conditions. I couldn't make head or tail of my work. I knew I needed external eyes to set them in order and help me make sense of it.

I was fortunate enough to meet Shawn D. Mathis again in an online conversation, and, on the spur of the moment, I asked if he

could help fix those notes and turn them into a book. I didn't expect him to accept and to dedicate so much time, devotion, patience, and care to this project.

He not only put everything in order but also prompted me to think through the book: What did I want to say? Why was it important to me and other people? What was I pursuing? The final graphs, for instance, wouldn't be here without the exchanges and the conversation I had with Shawn.

To me, the fact that he is not a "China hand" actually was important because it forced me to think outside the specialist box. I also think this book is not only about China but also about a way of thinking about grand civilizational issues. In sum, without him, there wouldn't be this book. For this I'll be forever grateful.

However, any mistakes, errors, misinterpretations, and the like are entirely my responsibility.

Table of Contents

From the Editor xiii
Foreword xv
Preface xvii
Acknowledgments xix
Introduction 1

Part I. Mohism and the Roots of China's Grand Strategy 34
Part II. The Contrast with Western Antiquity 82
Part III. Unified China through the Opium Wars 115
Part IV. Communist China: The Cultural Revolution and the One-Child Policy 151
Part V. Governance in the 1990s: A Plunge into the Past 279
Part VI. Chinese Grand Strategy in the Xi Jinping Era 319

Afterword: The Historical Life of Institutions 432
Bibliography to the Afterword 442
Bibliography 444
Selected Bibliography 454

Introduction

This book is the result of efforts spanning over forty years. The seed was planted during my doctoral research in London, but it continued to evolve, mature, and change over time through my studies and work as a journalist, diplomat, and in the business world and academia throughout the following decades. During those long years, I had the privilege of studying, meeting, and debating with some of China's finest intellectuals. I thus faced an immensely complex challenge: trying to explain Chinese thinking on ancient China and Western tradition—both ancient and modern—with extreme clarity, so as to be understood by people who thought from very different perspectives.

I also had to deeply understand the objections, challenges, and alternative viewpoints presented to me, which I then had to selectively analyze, ponder, and respond to. This had not only general academic value but also a very direct and practical value: an impact on the policies China had to confront in every direction, internally and externally, from period to period. It was therefore a cultural discussion, but also one about policies, because it helped me understand current Chinese affairs as well, and in many cases, it aimed to help my Chinese friends understand and deeply consider the economic and trade policy choices made primarily by the United States and secondarily by Europe.

For me, as well as for my Chinese friends, the issue was not finding an immediate, instant justification for what an American president did or did not do in Iraq, Yugoslavia, or even in America itself. It was about understanding the deep underlying logic driving those actions. Similarly, for me, it was not about understanding the short-term tactical motivations behind the choices of this or that Chinese leader, but about grasping the profound motivations

driving Chinese leadership within the logic of the Communist Party, and even beyond the Communist Party system.

I had to deeply understand, make myself understood, and help others understand. Only then would communication be effective, day after day, article after article. This book is the fruit of the privilege I received during these forty years of work and the thousands of articles written about every aspect of China's life, from theology, remote religious matters, to crime and fashion gossip. Each article always stemmed from discussions and reading. From this modest and humble daily effort emerges this reflection, in some ways perhaps unique due to the experience and access I have had. It aims to be a humble contribution primarily to America, but also to China and to anyone interested in China and the future of the world, on the fundamental frameworks that drive us to think and address political issues and the challenges of daily events in the way we do.

China, due to its geographical isolation and the particular conditions of its cultural development, was born and remains fundamentally different from the rest of the world. Or, if you will, the opposite is true: the world, due to its geographical conditions and the nature of its development, was born and remains profoundly different from China.

A Comparative Framework

STRATEGY, GOVERNANCE, WORLDVIEW, AND GEOGRAPHY

A SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK'S ARGUMENT

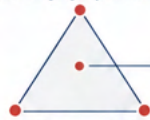
THE THEORETICAL TRIANGLE



Geographical conditions
(affecting the entire system)

ANCIENT ROME

Pater familias defending their rights and property in the *res publica*



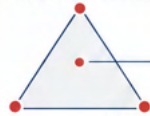
Capricious, unpredictable Mediterranean, to which one responds with coordinated actions and modern adjustments ... including a sudden change in ruler, while the system (abstract-egalitarian rule) stays the same.

Res publica with civil law, with a market creating social mobility

B&W—true/false logic; mathematical logic

ANCIENT CHINA

Grandparents giving up grandchildren to be drafted, e.g., as payment to the state (embodied by a ruler), in return for security from chaos and sustenance



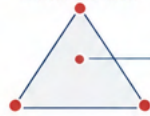
Fertile land to be conquered from forests, wild animals, and swamps. Need long-term plans entrusted to a ruler. If plans fail, the ruling family falls, and so does the system — except for long-term planning.

Bureaucratic state with penal law or rituals, held together by a ruler; social mobility by managerial capabilities

Following the long-term WAY. Not believing in YES/NO, TRUE/FALSE, but in the possibility of changing the narrative to adapt to a new reality

WESTERN WORLD, 16TH–17TH CENTURIES

Venturers — seeking fortunes in finding and conquering new worlds, defending interests and values



Global direct contacts with everybody; discovery and conquest of America; rule of global "Mediterranean" seas.

Sophisticated *res publica* with bureaucracy and entrepreneurs; balance of powers

Modern science: fallibility; open to criticism; open, transparent market; discovery of the idea of discovery

MODERN CHINA

Has it adapted? Will the world adapt to China?

"West"

Will it thrive, grow, or decline?

The Triangle: A Glimpse of the Argument

Before entering the details of this book, it may be useful to stop for a moment at the illustration that precedes it. It is deliberately simple. Perhaps it is too simple. The following pages will complicate it, qualify it, sometimes challenge it, and certainly add many exceptions. Yet the simplicity is useful because the problem this book addresses is not primarily what China, America, or any certain leader may do tomorrow. It is about the longstanding frameworks that make some choices appear natural, reasonable, or even inevitable to one side and strange, dangerous, or irrational to the other.

For many years, this has been the practical problem before me. The point was never simply to explain why an American president took one decision in Iraq, Yugoslavia, or elsewhere, or why one Chinese leader adopted a particular policy. It was to understand the logic underneath the immediate explanation—the structures of thought that make people see a problem in one way rather than another. If these underlying frameworks remain different and unexamined, two intelligent people can look at the same facts and reach opposite conclusions, each believing that the other has failed to understand something obvious.

The first triangle in the illustration has three points: strategy, governance, and worldview. They are not separate compartments. *Strategy* is influenced by the way a society organizes political authority; *governance* is influenced by what that society believes to be true, legitimate, or useful; *worldview* is tested by war, success, failure, wealth, famine, invasion, and political order. How a state fights, how it rules, and how it thinks are connected. This is the first proposition of the book.

Then comes the line from the center of the triangle: *geography*. It comes from the center intentionally. Geography is not a fourth corner. It does not sit beside strategy, governance, and worldview as another independent idea. It works on all three. Geography creates recurring problems, opportunities, limits, fears, and habits. It does not mechanically determine a civilization—history is never so simple; however, it can influence what a society repeatedly has to do to survive. Military history, shaped in part by geographical conditions, then reaches beyond the battlefield. It affects the organization of the state and, over long periods, the way people think about the world. Civilization provides the roots, the state provides the structure, and the military provides the reach. The historical triangles are intended to show this process in extreme compression.

Ancient Rome

Take first the Roman, or more broadly the ancient Mediterranean, experience. The Mediterranean is not simply a pleasant blue sea surrounded by ports and vineyards. For the people who had to cross it before modern engines and weather forecasts, it was treacherous. Winds and currents could shift suddenly. Rowers had to act together. Two lines of men pulled their oars in rhythm; the captain operated the heaviest oar, the rudder, but he was part of the same physical system. If he made a mistake, the error became immediately visible. The rhythm itself was an abstract rule independent of the captain's will. He could adapt the pace, but he could not decide that coordination no longer mattered.

A similar principle emerged in the phalanx and later in the legion. The strength of the formation depended on men acting together. The commander could not simply stand outside the system and command an inert mass. A break in the line

endangered everybody. The warrior had his own position, his own shield, his own property, his own stake. In the Mediterranean tradition, the soldier was a participant in the enterprise of war rather than merely material supplied to it. The Roman soldier, by defending his home, family, estate, and property, also defended the *res publica*—literally the public thing.

This is what the Roman triangle tries to catch in a few words. At one point is the *pater familias*, defending rights and property in the *res publica*. At another is the *res publica* itself, with civil law and a market capable of creating social mobility. At the third is the tendency toward B&W—black-and-white—true/false reasoning and mathematical logic.

These things are not identical. One does not automatically produce the other. The triangle is not an equation. But they belong to a family of historical habits: rights that can be distinguished from the ruler; rules that can be abstracted from the person applying them; interests that must be coordinated; propositions that can be tested as true or false; mistakes that can be identified and corrected.

The geography line points to the capricious Mediterranean because the system must deal with surprise. The wind changes. The commander makes a mistake. A ruler dies. An ally defects. The response cannot always be to destroy the whole structure and begin again. The rule may remain while the person changes. Indeed, even when Rome moved from Republic to Empire, elements of the older republican structure survived beside imperial authority. The emperor grew in importance, but the legion, legal distinctions, religious authority, and divided responsibilities did not simply disappear. Roman history accumulated layers rather than replacing the whole system each time a ruler failed.

Ancient China

Ancient China developed under another set of pressures. The early Yellow River civilization was comparatively isolated. Its problem was not primarily how to navigate an open sea linking many civilizations. The great tasks were to control water, floods, and silt, and to expand usable land by clearing forests, draining swamps, flattening earth, and pushing back wild animals. The environment could be transformed, but only through organized effort extending far beyond the time horizon of a battle or a voyage.

Here a different logic becomes possible. At the start of a great waterworks project, nobody can immediately know whether the chief planner is right. A ship is sinking, or it is not; one may know in minutes. A canal, an embankment, the clearing of a forest, or the reorganization of agriculture may take years or generations before its success is evident. The system puts great weight on the person or institution that sets the plan and on the bureaucratic machinery that carries it out. Failure at the top can become failure of the whole order.

The family was integrated into this structure. In ancient times, a grandfather presiding over a large household could send some grandsons into military service, expecting that others would preserve the family line and that successful service might bring rewards and glory. State, family, agriculture, taxation, military duty, and ancestry formed one connected chain.

Thus, the Chinese triangle has at its apex grandparents giving up grandchildren to be drafted, as payment to the state embodied by the ruler, in return for security from chaos and sustenance. On another corner stands the bureaucratic state, with penal law or rituals held together by a ruler and with social mobility through

managerial capability. The administrator is important because administration itself is central to survival.

The third corner concerns the WAY. Here the contrast with the Western search for true/false propositions becomes especially important. The manuscript does not argue that Chinese people cannot recognize truth or that Westerners never compromise—both claims would plainly be absurd. The difference lies in intellectual emphasis and historical habit. Greek and later Western traditions elevated the search for a truth that could, at least in principle, stand independently of king, people, or circumstance. Chinese traditions often emphasized the Tao, the Way: finding or recovering a workable relationship among ruler, people, nature, and circumstances. The Way is relational. When conditions change, the task can be to find the Way again.

This is why the diagram says: not YES/NO, TRUE/FALSE, but the possibility of changing the narrative to adapt to a new reality.

Again, this is deliberately compressed. It is not a moral ranking. One approach is not simply intelligent and the other foolish, one flexible and the other rigid. They solve different historical problems and produce different strengths and weaknesses.

The geography line emerges from the center toward fertile land conquered from forests, wild animals, and swamps, and toward the need for long-term plans entrusted to a ruler. The extraordinary transformation of difficult terrain into rich agricultural land required organized social effort over generations.

If the plans fail, the ruling family falls, and the system may collapse with it. Yet the need for long-term planning remains. A new dynasty may condemn the old one, but it inherits the same fundamental problem: keep the realm together, preserve order, feed the population, manage the land, and prevent chaos.

For roughly two millennia, a powerful Chinese assumption consequently emerged: preserve unity and internal order, and external threats can normally be contained. China had no peer state permanently sitting beside it, compelling it to operate within an enduring balance of powers comparable to the Mediterranean. The unity of tianxia could break, but the historical answer was repeatedly to restore it.

The Western World, 16th–17th Centuries

Then something extraordinary happened in the West. The Roman-Mediterranean inheritance did not disappear, but the scale changed. The discovery of America and the opening of oceanic routes transformed the old Mediterranean into something almost planetary. The world itself increasingly became a kind of global "Mediterranean": interconnected, competitive, unpredictable, and impossible for any single ruler to seal off completely.

The actors of this new world were often venturers. Columbus, Magellan, and Cortez were not simply officials following an administrative blueprint issued from the center. They operated with enormous autonomy and risk, backed by financing, political support, personal ambition, and the prospect of private reward. Later European systems refined this model through public and private investment in ventures whose consequences nobody could know beforehand.

Thus, the Western triangle of the 16th and 17th centuries is not simply the old Roman triangle enlarged. It represents a transformation.

At the top are venturers seeking fortunes by finding and conquering new worlds, while defending interests and values. On one side is a sophisticated res publica containing bureaucracy and entrepreneurs and a balance of powers. On the other is modern

science: fallibility, openness to criticism, an open and transparent market, and the discovery of the idea of discovery. That last phrase is important: the discovery of discovery.

The great innovation was not simply that Europeans discovered America. It was the growing realization that something genuinely new could exist, that it could be sought deliberately, and that the new was not necessarily a corruption of an established order. Discovery itself became an activity.

Modern Europe was also not created by Europe alone. The book argues for three interacting contributions: its inherited Mediterranean traditions of political fairness, rights, and property; the discovery of America and worldwide trade routes; and ideas coming from China through the Jesuits, including bureaucracy, administration, and new ways of thinking about knowledge and social organization.

Modernity, in other words, was a hybrid. It was not simply Greek, Roman, Christian, Chinese, American, commercial, or scientific. It emerged from contacts among these things.

Science increasingly institutionalized fallibility. A proposition might be accepted today and disproved tomorrow, while the method allowing criticism survives. Markets did something analogous: countless actors made independent judgments and were rewarded or punished by outcomes. Politics developed systems in which rulers, parliaments, courts, churches, merchants, and later voters could coexist in tension. The system became capable—never perfectly—of surviving mistakes made by particular people. This is the historical West that eventually expanded beyond Europe and became global.

Modern China and the Question Left Open

At the bottom of the illustration, the structure changes deliberately. There is no completed Modern China triangle. Instead, there are questions. Modern China: Has it adapted? Will the world adapt to China? "West": Will it thrive, grow, or decline? This is a comparison of perspectives, not a conclusion.

The preceding triangles belong largely to history. We know, at least imperfectly, what happened. Modern China and the contemporary West are alive. Their forms are changing as this book is being read.

China has already changed enormously. Communist rule introduced concepts of equality into a historically hierarchical society. Deng's reforms introduced market mechanisms. Modern China participates in global trade at a scale unimaginable to earlier dynasties. It controls territories that once served as buffers and has diplomatic, economic, technological, and military relationships extending around the world. The old geographical isolation is gone.

Yet historical habits do not evaporate simply because ships, airplanes, satellites, or financial markets erase distance.

China entered a world increasingly resembling the Mediterranean model: many powers, shifting interests, independent actors, sudden crises, markets, alliances, public opinion, and rules that no single sovereign can fully control. The manuscript puts the issue sharply: today's world is more like the Mediterranean universe than the old Yellow River space.

So, what happens?

Does China adapt its inherited political and strategic habits to this larger, open, unpredictable world? Does it preserve some of them but transform others? Can an old system develop new

mechanisms without losing itself? Or does the world, impressed by China's size, efficiency, discipline, technology, and economic weight, instead move toward Chinese assumptions about order, hierarchy, sovereignty, and planning?

But the question also points in the opposite direction.

The "West" is in quotation marks for a reason. What is the West now? Is it still the liberal, scientific, market-based order formed over the past several centuries? Is it becoming more centralized, more imperial, less confident in debate and pluralism? Can the West preserve a system built partly on criticism, fallibility, divided power, and voluntary participation when these very features often make it look confused and weak? Or are its apparent weaknesses precisely part of its capacity to correct mistakes and renew itself?

The book will return repeatedly to these questions. It does not assume that China rises because China has risen, nor that the West declines because Westerners frequently announce their own decline. Historical systems are not races in which one runner simply passes another. They are living arrangements of institutions, ideas, people, habits, interests, and memories. They can learn. They can become rigid. They can misunderstand both themselves and their opponents.

This is also where the issue becomes dangerous.

Misunderstanding between China and the West is not merely an academic inconvenience. If one side believes the other is weak when it is resilient, or aggressive when it believes itself defensive, or irrational when it is acting coherently within a different framework, mistakes can accumulate. Political errors can become strategic errors, and strategic errors can become wars.

The triangles are not meant to provide the answer before the book begins. They map the questions.

The pages that follow will go backward in time—to Mozi, the Warring States, ancient warfare, geography, logic, administration, Greece, Rome—and then forward again through unified China, the encounter with the global West, communism, the one-child policy, the reforms, and contemporary China.

The argument will become more complicated. It should. But perhaps, after all the complications, the reader may return to this simple picture and see it differently. How do we fight? How do we rule? How do we decide what is true, useful, or possible? And beneath all three: what kind of world taught us to think this way?

Those are the triangles. The rest of the book is an attempt to find out how much they explain.

The Strategic Foundations of Chinese Statecraft

In ancient China, reflections on warfare already revealed a distinctive understanding of what determined success in battle. Master Wu wrote:

> Although Qi's battle array (*chen*) is dense in number, it is not solid. That of Qin is dispersed, with the soldiers preferring to fight individually. Chu's formations have good order, but they cannot long maintain their positions. Yan's formations are adept at defense, but they are not mobile. The battle arrays of the Three Jin are well controlled, but they prove useless.[1]

In ancient China, each state had its own battle formations, and each fought in its own way. According to the generals of the time, each formation had its pros and cons. Therefore, the text suggests that battle formations were not particularly crucial to winning

[1] Ralph D. Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 210.

battles. Something else was afoot. Clearly, what prepared armies for the fight was more important than the formations. This contrast, central to the broader China–West divergence, emerges early in ancient military practice.

This was quite unlike the situation in the Mediterranean, where first the phalanx and later the legion dominated the military organization of the rising powers—first the Greek city-states that defeated the Persians, then Alexander the Great, who conquered half the known world, and finally the Romans, who came to dominate the entire Mediterranean. Alexander and Caesar won because of their armies' organization. In China, battle formations were less important. Something else was determining the outcome of battle. In China, armies won because the state equipped and fed them.

The findings of the present study can be summarized in a simple sentence: military history, shaped in part by geographical conditions, touches nearly everything. Military-strategic evolution shapes much cultural thinking, the state's way of thinking, and its worldview.

This first step is simple. However, fleshing out the kinds of military thinking that arose in different cultures and, subsequently, the worldviews that emerged is more complex. To this end, in a nutshell, the following pages focus on China—a cultural, political, and strategic presence often regarded as having no modern parallel.

Thus, the theory advanced in this study is that Chinese strategy can be viewed as roughly divided into three parts: (1) before unification by the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi; (2) after reunification up to Mao's People's Republic; and (3) after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). These three distinct phases have three corresponding main directions of

march—that is, broad trajectories of strategic development: the first two are confined within a definite space, the basins of the Yellow and Yangzi rivers, while the third extends beyond those basins.

Three Phases of Chinese Strategy

A SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK'S ARGUMENT

Chinese strategy can be viewed as roughly divided into three parts.

PHASE I	PHASE II	PHASE III
Before unification by the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi	After reunification up to Mao's People's Republic (PRC)	After the foundation of the People's Republic
Before 221 BCE	221 BCE–1949	1949–present
Confined within a definite space: the basin of the Yellow and the Yangzi River		Extends beyond that basin



The first two phases are rooted in the Yellow–Yangzi core.
The third projects beyond it.

China today poses very practical challenges to the present world order dominated by the West and the United States (U.S.). But these challenges have deep roots, grounded in China's self-perception. I shall briefly look at the present, then move to the origins, and then return to the present. All of this is done while comparing the Chinese and the Western traditions.

The following are preliminary notes important for deciphering some elements of modern China and its clash with the U.S. They concern a triangle (strategy, governance, worldview)—a deep connection among how states strategize war, how they rule themselves, and how they think about the world —that is, the philosophical tradition. There are differences between China and Western conventions.

Many elements contribute to the divergence, including the evolution of logic and what is considered a coherent and convincing argument; the way societies portray reality in art; and the way they "forecast" future events—for instance, who will win a war and why. This element is particularly urgent in light of the present war in Ukraine, Russia's difficulties there, and China's possible temptation to enter into a conflict with one of its neighbors.

These are huge topics, and I cannot address them comprehensively here, but I offer some initial notes on the first "triangle" to help both sides perhaps better comprehend some of their sources of friction.

Notes on Designing a Grand Strategy

The condition of the State's strengths and weaknesses:

- Its culture: internal and international projection
- Its self-trust and the trust extended to others

- Its politics, pros and cons
- Its economy
- Its finance and taxation
- Its technology and innovation capacity (and their impact on industry and economy)
- Its education system and level

All of the above constrain the military areas, and there are also elements, each with its own goals, which cannot be total. He who tries to defend everything defends nothing:

- Purpose: Global power, regional power, or national defense?
- Cyberspace, space, air, navy, and army: What purpose?
- Integration with society, politics, and the economy.



The People's Liberation Army (PLA): A Double-Edged Sword

On the eve of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Paris, on May 5, 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron issued a public warning, remarking that Europe faced rising danger and that events could unravel quickly. He was concerned about the Russian

war in Ukraine, supported in part by China's industrial capacity. Macron also raised the prospect of an EU army and did not rule out a possible direct European intervention in Ukraine against Russia.

Prudence would then have demanded that the message be taken seriously. If he were wrong, little harm would be done, but if he were right, Europe could have averted a historical disaster. Similar voices also came from America.

On May 1, 2024, a senior National Security Council official during President Donald Trump's first administration observed that China had crossed what Washington had previously indicated as a red line regarding Beijing's support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Matthew Pottinger, then Deputy National Security Advisor, reminded audiences that in 2013, President Obama drew a red line vis-à-vis Syria's potential use of chemical weapons. Syria ignored it, and Obama failed to follow through on his warning. This hesitation by the U.S., Pottinger argued, was seen as prompting Russian President Vladimir Putin to take over Crimea in 2014. The U.S. did not intervene at that time either. The comparison may not be exact, but the mindset is important. It tells of the sense of drama developing in the U.S. about China, however distant.

The week before Pottinger's address, at the end of April, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Beijing and stated that China should limit its military support for Russia's war in Ukraine, or risk sanctions against its participation in the SWIFT system, the global financial messaging network that enables banks to conduct cross-border payments. This U.S.-centered financial messaging system controls many of the global financial transactions. Such a move would deal a major blow to China, the largest exporting power in the world, hindering its much-needed trade and access to foreign exchange.

The question was then: would the U.S. act, and if so, how? Or would China comply, and how?

From China's perspective, it was rational to preserve maximum flexibility and delay any definitive choice, at least until the U.S. presidential election in early November. Donald Trump could become president and seek to cut a deal with Russia and possibly also with China but, so far, this has not materialized. This, in retrospect, helps explain Beijing's caution: in a fluid strategic environment, postponing commitment can be preferable to acting prematurely.

Short of that, Beijing would try to pull any lever it could to keep Russia afloat and the war ongoing. Beijing did not want Russia to cut a separate deal with the U.S. behind its back. In return for no agreement with the U.S., Moscow wanted Chinese goods to keep flowing in. Moscow was well-positioned to bargain with both China and America. Moscow's position remains viable so long as uncertainty persists, since Trump has already altered the course of U.S. policy and continues to signal further changes, even if with diminishing effect as other actors adjust and hedge against policy volatility.

Regarding the SWIFT threat, Beijing might have been calculating how real and costly it could actually be. The internationalization of the renminbi (RMB) is risky because it can lead to a dual exchange rate for the RMB—one domestic and one external; thus, the RMB could grow beyond the control of China's central bank. But if pressed by Secretary Blinken, Beijing might elect to bite the bullet, perhaps encouraged by certain American advisors.

Establishing a common foreign policy between Republicans and Democrats may be urgent for maintaining U.S. credibility, but the claim lacks specificity and practical grounding. Bipartisan

consensus in foreign policy has largely eroded since at least the Clinton administration, making such coordination unlikely. Recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration have further underscored the extent of this divergence. Without greater policy consistency, the situation could escalate in the coming months.

In many strategic assessments, China appears to be surpassing the U.S. in the current arms race. These estimates, while widely cited, remain sensitive to differing accounting practices, cost structures, and strategic priorities between the two systems. Recent assessments continue to vary depending on methodology, with adjusted estimates of China's effective military spending ranging broadly between approximately $400 billion and $700 billion, with higher-end estimates, such as those advanced by Mackenzie Eaglen, emphasizing the full scope of undercounted expenditures and purchasing power adjustments (see the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database 2024, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *Military Balance* 2024, and the U.S. Department of Defense's 2024 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*).

Several key conclusions, also articulated in Mackenzie Eaglen's report *Keeping Up with the Pacing Threat: Unveiling the True Size of Beijing's Military Spending*, are the following:

- Beijing's publicly released military budget is widely seen as inaccurate and as failing to capture the colossal scope and scale of China's ongoing military buildup and wide-ranging armed forces modernization.
- After accounting for economic adjustments and estimating reasonable but uncounted expenditures, the buying power of China's 2022 military budget is often assessed as reaching

$711 billion—roughly triple Beijing's claimed topline and nearly equal to the U.S. military budget that same year.

- Comparable defense spending between the U.S. and China tends to play to Beijing's benefit. As a global power, the U.S. must balance competing priorities in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, which spreads Washington's budget thinly across multiple theaters. Meanwhile, each yuan China invests in its military directly builds its regional combat power in Asia.
- America's intelligence community has assessed that Beijing's defense spending is on par with Washington's, but questions remain. The intelligence community's estimate of China's approximately $700 billion in annual military expenditures would benefit from greater transparency to better convey Beijing's military budget breakdown and inform policy debates regarding U.S. defense spending investments, gaps, and imbalances.

Comparing Chinese and U.S. Military Spending, 2022

Different measures answer different questions

CHINA · OFFICIAL NATIONAL DEFENSE BUDGET

$229B
(1.45T yuan)

WHAT IT REPRESENTS
Budget submitted in China's legislature for 2022 and released.

HOW TO READ IT
Official topline; narrower than broader estimates of total military expenditure.

CHINA · SIPRI ESTIMATE

$292B

WHAT IT REPRESENTS
SIPRI's standardized estimate of Chinese military expenditure in 2022.

HOW TO READ IT
Compare directly with SIPRI's estimate for the United States.

CHINA · ADJUSTED ESTIMATE

$710.6B

WHAT IT REPRESENTS
Estimate of effective 2022 military buying power after dollar adjustments and related analytical considerations.

HOW TO READ IT
A rough closer U.S. comparison; methodologically different from official-budget or SIPRI totals.

UNITED STATES · DoD BUDGET

$742.3B

WHAT IT REPRESENTS
FY2022 U.S. Department of Defense budget.

HOW TO READ IT
The closest U.S. comparator to the adjusted China estimate above.

UNITED STATES · SIPRI ESTIMATE

$877B

WHAT IT REPRESENTS
SIPRI estimate of total U.S. military expenditure in 2022.

HOW TO READ IT
The relevant comparator for SIPRI's $292B China estimate.

KEY POINT
Do not compare the 710.6B adjusted China estimate directly with SIPRI's 877B U.S. total. Compare like with like.

Source note: China official budget; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; adjusted estimate as cited in the manuscript.

The roughly $700 billion figure was, until recently, about three and a half times greater than European defense spending; it is now broadly comparable, reflecting the recent surge in European outlays. Recent data indicate that European military expenditure has risen sharply since 2022, reaching approximately $693 billion in 2024 and continuing to grow (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2025), with EU member states alone spending about €343 billion (approximately $370 billion) in 2024 and rising to approximately €381 billion (approximately $410 billion) in 2025 (European Council data). Moreover, EU spending is divided among 28 countries with different agendas, making it highly inefficient. The Chinese PLA (People's Liberation Army) has much lower industrial production costs, allowing it to extract more bang for the buck than the U.S. and EU.

The Chinese military budget, at this level, is possibly more cost-effective than the U.S. $800-plus billion defense budget. Moreover, PLA spending has increased rapidly and, over time, has outpaced both European and American military spending, despite Europe's recent surge in defense outlays. The PLA is also reducing corruption, which historically diminished efficiency in military expenditure.

A Chinese destroyer is estimated to cost $888 million, while an American one costs about $2.2 billion, almost three times as much. The difference widens further in the production of drones and other state-of-the-art equipment. These trends—outlined above—highlight the growing structural asymmetry in military-industrial capacity between China and the U.S. Additionally, China has the world's most comprehensive industrial capacity, which it can increasingly deploy at will to support its military efforts or those of any country it chooses. The American industrial base has been under strain for decades. This doesn't mean Chinese weapons will

be better, or that the PLA will inevitably be stronger. But they are signs that China is making a huge effort to catch and surpass the US military.

As a result, the scale of Chinese military-industrial capacity and its efficiency in supporting Russia or any country it chooses to support creates a growing imbalance, one that is particularly dangerous for European countries today facing the Russian threat and even more so in the future. If European countries do not address this, they risk putting themselves in a weak position against any future strategic blackmail.

The PLA buildup has thus fed into growing U.S.-China frictions over Beijing's support for Russia's war in Ukraine, and if these fears are not adequately addressed, they could spiral out of control. There is no quick fix for this predicament. Meanwhile, each side still struggles to fully grasp the other.

The Yawning Gap of Understanding Leading to War

After spending two intensive weeks in Beijing between March and April 2024, I sensed more than ever a yawning gap in how China and the rest of the world understand global affairs. I was haunted by the images on Chinese TV of Zhao Leji, China's number three top leader, visiting Pyongyang. Zhao and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un hugged and held hands like best friends. Moreover, the Chinese delegation was seated at a table before Kim alone, almost as if they were reporting to him. Did Beijing want to tell its people that China and North Korea are indeed in the same boat, heading in the same direction? Did China want to learn from North Korea?

These were unsettling questions for Western businessmen who were being wooed back to China after the long years of COVID.

These questions could not be easily dismissed, as they were much more significant than merely broadcasting some bad footage on TV. The situation went deeper, and perhaps an essential book on the early history of China could help: *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* by Dingxin Zhao.

Zhao and other historians puzzle over why no European state adopted the strict autocratic reforms that led to Qin's unification of China in the 3rd century B.C. This query is particularly poignant in 17th-century Europe, when authoritarian theories proposed by Hobbes were available and popular. Zhao's answer is multifaceted. He considers the legacy of the feudal civil society, the nobles, the leagues of craftsmen, and the church, fighting the concentration of power. He also notes that Europe had a much vaster war theater than early China. This inquiry is pressing because, although the Western world was once unified under the Roman Empire, such unification of the Mediterranean basin was never repeated. Conversely, after the 3rd-century unification by the Qin in China, the empire broke apart but was repeatedly reunified. This pattern of unification after disintegration has been a constant in China, whereas the Mediterranean world has remained fragmented.

Zhao's observations are certainly true but possibly not conclusive. Two other crucial elements could have contributed to the divergence from Hobbes' theories of governance.

One is geographical. The Yellow River Basin, the cradle of Chinese civilization, was relatively isolated. Once Qin or another power unified the central plain, no other contender could challenge it from outside.

Conversely, the Mediterranean formed an open system among four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and linking to the Atlantic Ocean. Here, the Romans, at the height of their power, were challenged by the mighty Persian Empire, descendants of

Cyrus, which attempted to invade Greece in the early 5th century B.C. and was rooted in the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia. Furthermore, in Africa, Rome contended with the powerful Aksumite empire, in what is now Ethiopia, and faced restive steppe peoples in Eastern Europe. Thus, the Roman Empire arose at a crossroads of competing threats, in stark contrast to the geographic conditions faced by Qin and other Chinese empires, which lived among minimal external threats.

Furthermore, Hobbesian measures to concentrate power contrast starkly with the Western experience. A loosely organized league of Greek states, mainly Sparta and Athens, repeatedly defeated the much larger, strictly organized Persian Empire. Even during Hobbes's era, a few loosely structured Italian city-states, mainly Genoa and Venice, managed to stop and defeat the well-organized Ottoman Empire. Historically, for many centuries, Europeans observed that creativity and free association prevailed over despotism.

Plus, it all had a religious spin. The Bible, at the core of both Christianity and Islam, the two largest religions in the world, tells the story of David, a young man with guile and a technologically advanced weapon (a slingshot), who prevailed over a heavily armed giant, Goliath. The story was mirrored in 80 years of confrontations between puny Israel and a vast, motley array of Arab states. Israel always prevailed.

Additionally, liberal policies, evolved from medieval foundations, led to the discovery of the American continent and, later, the Industrial Revolution. The outcomes far surpassed any profits accrued from a Leviathan state.

Columbus, Magellan, and Cortez acted much like modern private equity managers, operating independently. They were financed by the crown, which received the majority of their profits,

yet a significant portion, roughly one-third, was retained by the adventurers.

This system was perfected by the French, the Dutch, and the British, who gathered public investment for daring ventures—a model reminiscent of the Roman armies, which raised venture money in the capital, then conquered and divided the spoils among the victors.

The pertinent question now is: Can a state expand without private interests? If private interests are allowed, how can they be reconciled without tearing the country apart? Creating a res publica has been the Western solution for three thousand years.

Coming from a vastly different tradition, China struggles with this concept, and, facing the imposing Western challenge, President Xi Jinping may be tempted to emulate Qin's 3rd-century B.C. state experience, drawing on aspects of the North Korean model. It would be a potentially disastrous mistake. The world has changed, and it is more similar to the Mediterranean universe than to the Yellow River space; the modern Chinese populace is different, and plans rarely unfold as expected.

A way to establish a "Chinese empire" in the modern world could have been through a new Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, it failed because it was poorly implemented, akin to an architect sketching a skyscraper on a napkin, which is then constructed by an inexperienced builder. Naturally, it was bound to collapse.

China also felt frustrated in 2024 because, in 1999 and 2001, after incidents like the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the EP-3 crash landing, Beijing managed to pivot its relationship with America, joining the WTO and commencing fruitful cooperation with the U.S. Why wasn't this happening now? For this reason, people in Beijing were futilely attempting to woo

businessmen as allies in America. In the U.S., a parallel argument held that China should have been confronted then, in the late 1990s; it should not have joined the WTO, as the world would be better off now.

Having covered these events extensively while based in Beijing in 1999 and 2001, I perceive a deep misreading of the situation. At that time, China was still quite poor; the one-child policy had not fully taken effect, people in their 30s and 40s, in their prime, had siblings, and many impoverished Chinese could have been conscripted into the army to fight against America. This would have resulted in Beijing's defeat and a scenario akin to what unfolded in Iraq—only China had 60 times Iraq's population. A collapse of China could have submerged the Far East and perhaps half the world.

Moreover, it was just after the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. Asians were wary of the U.S. yet hopeful about China. These were strong arguments then, coupled with the hope that China would, in time, change for the better.

After COVID, the dynamics were different and required a fresh analysis.

Attempting to curry favor in Washington, D.C., through this was naïve and counterproductive. The general American sentiment had already changed; if anything, it has exacerbated it.

There were no shortcuts for China out of its intricate situation, and Beijing should have pondered long, hard, and creatively about its next steps.

Simultaneously, the U.S. also needed new thinking. China's missteps may have inadvertently given the U.S. the continued dominant role in Asia, but Chinese errors were not a substitute for American wisdom and foresight.

Additional tensions in Europe due to the war in Ukraine and in the Middle East because of Gaza and Iran would only make matters worse.

Still, before going further, I shall take a deep dive into what I believe is a seminal and neglected moment of the history of Chinese military and political thinking, Mohism. The movement was defeated. But in its defeat, there is much to be learned about why China moved in a different direction.

There is something unique and very special about tackling the text attributed to master Mozi. It is the first comprehensive philosophical corpus in China and one of the few in the world that addresses issues of politics, logic, economics, and warfare within an integrated system in which each part stands together with the others.

From this great strength comes perhaps also the reason for its poor fortunes over the centuries. In fact, the Mohist corpus, after a period of extreme good fortune between the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C., passed into oblivion for millennia until it was partially rediscovered in the 20th century because Mozi had traits of "Western" analytical thinking similar to the thinking that had invaded China at the time.

Mohism failed perhaps because it was a single integrated body, making it a take-it-or-leave-it whole. Certainly, two of Mozi's main ideas were resoundingly rejected by the dominant Chinese thought of the centuries to come. The first concerned the choice of heir, the question of political succession. The Mohists argued that the heir should not be a natural son of the ruler but instead be chosen as the most capable by the ruler. This choice never had much of a following among the various kingdoms in the basin of Chinese civilization.

The second idea also had little luck. The defense of the small kingdoms against the wars of conquest and destruction fought by the large kingdoms involved the creation of a balance of power guaranteed by the semi-religious figure of the Son of Heaven and by a religious appeal to Heaven.

This defense of small states and religious appeal led to a religious aspect, something virtually unique in ancient China. And there is Mozi's military aspect. On the military level, Mozi contrasts himself with Sunzi, the famous war theorist.

Sunzi advocates attack warfare (gong 攻) with a prevalence of force of 5 to 20 times greater than that of the attacked. Mozi responds by arguing on moral grounds that he is against attack warfare (feigong 非攻) but also by expounding in a series of very technical, and unfortunately very corrupt, chapters, defensive measures to prevail against an attack war. The defensive chapters in the Mozi corpus are, in fact, barely little more than fragments, and we have lost the original.

In contrast to the Greek experience, in which the few hoplites of the Spartan or Athenian phalanxes prevailed against the preponderant Persian troops, the Mohist forces of small states did not win against the larger armies of larger states.

So it is conceivable that, because Mozi had opposed the wishes of the ruling families (who wanted their kin on the throne) and the large states (which prevailed with unification under Qin), his influence was erased.

But even in political defeat, it remains a unique contribution of aligning a part of pure logic, the *Mojing* 墨经, with chapters of pure military and city defense. Both aspects are without any comparison in all Chinese thought. Likewise, the systemic approach, including politics, economics, and religion, remains unparalleled.

It is a total and totalizing approach that, for this reason, is both futile (because who can think of everything?) and fascinating, similar to efforts that have successfully dotted Western thought from Aristotle onward.

Why then was it preserved at all? It apparently was very valuable. After the collapse of the Han Empire, new ideas, particularly Buddhism, came to the fore. And when the unified empire returned with the Tang, after five centuries of slaughter and fighting, its politics reverted to the ideology that had buttressed the old empire, the Han. Han ideology was inspired by Confucius, so Confucius came back, plus inspiration from the then newly popular Buddhism.

The study of Mozi is thus that of a strategic approach defeated by the combined assault of Confucianism, Legalism, and Sunzi's military thought. Precisely because of this, the study of Mozi sheds new light on the thinking of the "victors."

Such a study, however, can only begin with a careful examination of the text that has come down to us. Here, I present a detailed study of the first six chapters of the three Mohist schools (two chapters each), the oldest part of the text. After that, the chapters got mixed up, and textual analysis would have to take many other elements into consideration. These chapters are also the most ancient complete body of thought. Confucius' Analects are surely more ancient, but they are fragmented, combining reasoning, dialogues, and prophetic utterances, unlike Mozi, where I find reasoned, systemic thinking.

Part I
Mohism and the Roots of China's Grand Strategy

Strategy (B.C.): Background History for the Ancient Chinese War Theories

Wars and war techniques were well developed in the central basin of the Yellow River in the place we now call "China" in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. The states (guo or bang) that composed the mosaic of the region's political geography at the time were often at war with each other, and the wars were changing. They were moving from a series of brief chivalrous encounters between professional warriors with highly developed skills in archery or charioteering, fighting in an open field, to more prolonged efforts mobilizing hundreds of chariots, infantry clashes, and sieges of cities.

Moreover, whole states were being gobbled up by conquerors who would take over the administration of the previous state and incorporate it into a bigger administration. The historical map of a myriad of states or city-states all paying homage and fealty to the semi-religious authority of the Zhou Dynasty, the Son of Heaven, was crumbling. To be sure, the figure of the Son of Heaven had not yet disappeared, but his real power had been taken over by forceful ba, a term that now translates as "hegemon," but that could resemble the Japanese idea of a shogun. He was, in fact, the lord of a single state, in theory a fiefdom of the imperial house of Zhou, who would claim authority over the whole "under Heaven," tianxia, the cultural world of the time, while still retaining the prestige of the Zhou emperor.

In the 5th century B.C., the heads of these emerging larger states had given up on the pretense of the Zhou emperor; they would take on the title of wang, king, formerly limited to the Zhou Son of Heaven, and would start having larger ambitions of their

own. It was a time between the two historical periods of Chinese history known as Spring and Autumn and the Warring States. But this seminal historical period for China started a couple of centuries before, with the fall of the power of the Zhou Son of Heaven. Around the end of the second millennium B.C., the rulers of the Zhou dynasty had organized a system of granting territories to people who were very loyal to or related to the ruling house. With this system, the new Zhou rulers superseded the former Shang dynasty system, which, however, continued to retain a certain cultural appeal for many centuries. This system presented characteristics similar to the Western feudal system, and Marxist historians have called it simply "feudal." In this system, vast land and resources were directly under the control of the Zhou Son of Heaven, who had actual power to back his political influence over the minor lords and his religious primacy, as supreme mediator of the universal order between Heaven and Earth. In this sense, the Zhou ruler was different from a Western emperor. He held religious and cultural powers, direct power over his dominion, and political power over his lords.

Traces of this system of enforcement can be found in the ancient word for what came to be called "state"—bang, which preserves a part of what symbolized the imperial Zhou seal. This process, also centered around garrisoned cities, which are at the origin of the word guo.[2] From these two words, we can tell that there were two

[2] It is not entirely clear how sharply the ancient words bang 邦 and guo 國 differed in meaning. The problem is complicated by the fact that bang became a taboo character under the Han dynasty because it was the personal name of the dynasty's founder, Liu Bang. Chinese naming-taboo practices required the emperor's personal name to be avoided, and in many transmitted texts bang was consequently replaced by guo. The substitution was not complete, however, and some occurrences of bang survived. Moreover, excavated manuscripts and bronze inscriptions unavailable to

important elements in the Chinese "proto-states"—an imperial grant from the Zhou emperor and an original city-state, most likely with some land around it for its upkeep.

Over time, the Zhou imperial power was whittled away as the lords of many "guo/bang" grew stronger. A turning point for the Zhou imperial order came in 770 B.C., when a ferocious foreign attack pushed the Zhou dynasty to move east, into an area easier to defend against central Asian raiders. The capital city was moved from what is now modern-day Gaojing to present-day Loyang, and historians now separate the two periods into "Western Zhou" and "Eastern Zhou." The latter is also split into the Spring and Autumn period, when many states were vying for prominence against each other, but the Zhou house was still present, and the Warring States period, when only a few organized states had survived, fighting for power or survival until the Qin unification in 221 B.C.

The Zhou's move eastward brought a major change in the political balance of the ancient Chinese world. A second major sign of the shifting power was when a former Zhou subject state, Zheng, repeatedly raided the Zhou dominion and seized its harvest. In 707 B.C., Zhou initiated a war to punish Zheng, a process that had taken place many times before, and it was called "zhu" in ancient Chinese, which was different from the "gong," the unjust offensive war. However, the Zhou were soundly beaten. Then Zheng emerged as the strongest guo in the region, and the political

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earlier scholars now allow us to recover part of the earlier pattern of usage. These sources suggest that bang and guo were not originally identical, although the exact distinction remains a matter of interpretation. Was the difference primarily political and territorial, or did it also reflect regional patterns of language? A comparable geographical distinction can be seen in the historical use of he 河 and jiang 江 for rivers, terms associated especially with northern and southern China respectively.

power of the Zhou house, having been defeated by both "barbarian" raiders and domestic upstarts, was doomed.

The Zhou continued to exercise a strong cultural influence by demarcating territory: There was a Zhou area of cultural influence clearly different from a non-Zhou cultural area. Before the Zheng "rebellion," major threats to the area came only from outside, and the ruling Zhou elite could address all "internal" threats, policing their dominion. After 707 B.C., the main source of instability and threat to the "domestic" Zhou order came from the ambition of single states, and the foreign threat totally subsided.

In other words, the single states could no longer count on the Zhou intervention to protect them from foreign invasion or the encroachment of other states. After 707 B.C., every state had to fend for itself. This created new dangers for the smaller states, which could fall under the power of bigger states, and also created opportunities for larger states to expand their power and territory.

About fifty years after the momentous Zhou defeat, the Zhou world descended into total war. The southern Chu state attacked Zheng several times between 659 and 653 B.C. This prompted the northern Qi state to mobilize a northern alliance to assist Zheng by invading Chu's territory in 656 B.C. It was the first systemic war of the Zhou world involving almost all Zhou states.

In fact, before this first China-wide war, historical records written in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods have many accounts of how "guo" evolved from city-states to territorial states[3]

[3] For an extensive survey of scholarship and historical sources on warfare and interstate relations in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, see Victoria Tin-bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 2.

and ceased claiming the Zhou imperial seal for their right to rule or encroach on a given territory.

"In the early Zhou period, guo were sparsely located throughout the middle and lower Yellow River Valley. As stronger guo conquered weaker neighbors, they became larger and larger territorial units encompassing multiple city-states."[4] At the time of the first Zhou world war in 657 B.C., a covenant read, "let no boundary markers be set without announcement."[5] That means states were busy marking exact borders, trying to acquire as much land as they could. In a way, the clearly marked borders of the city extended to a larger space where basically a wall confronted another wall, and there was no longer a true no-man's land between territories.

Territory states were increasingly "marked by the building of chains of watch stations and forts at strategic points, and ultimately the creation of large walls along the boundaries of the various states."[6] At this stage, the word jing (frontier boundary) appeared, and the written character for guo acquired a stable, box-like graph outside the boundary.[7]

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[4] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[5] Cho-yun Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," in The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 557.

[6] Mark Edward Lewis, "Warring States Political History," in The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 629.

[7] Tian Changwu 田昌五 and Zang Zhifei 臧知非, Zhou Qin shehui jiegou yanjiu 周秦社会结构研究 [A Study of Social Structure in the Zhou and Qin Periods] (Xi'an: Xibei Daxue Chubanshe, 1996), 40–41.

Within a growing, clearly marked territory, the state claimed total power, disregarding any other interference. As early as the Spring and Autumn period, envoys and travelers had to seek permission before entering or passing through border gates, and people and goods were subject to customs and inspections. In the late Warring States period, travelers were required to carry identification documents, effectively passports.

The clear demarcation of territory, distinguishing one state from another, created space for distinct administrations and policies in states with differing ambitions.

One pattern that emerged fairly soon after the virtual demise of the Zhou power was the emergence of dominant power, ba, or hegemons in proto-China. The first to emerge was Zheng, which, in the late 8th century B.C., successfully challenged and brought down the Zhou primacy. After Zheng, there were Chu, Qi (in two different eras), Jin, Wu, and Wei.[8]

Right at the start of this time of fierce competition for land, resources, and power, Qi, a prominent state in the northeast, introduced measures to build up a rich state and a strong military, fuguo qiangbing, during the reign of Duke Huan (685–643 B.C.). In fact, the Qi duke appointed a talented official, Shangjun, to be his chief minister. Shangjun became the first of the ruling philosophers who were to dominate the period. He introduced a system, later perfected by many following rulers, of land around the capital area

[8] A summary time frame for the great-power status of proto–China states is as follows: Qi (656–284 BC), Chu (656–278 BC), Qin (632–221 BC), Jin (632–453 BC), Wu (584–475 BC), Yue (482–335 BC), Wei (408–293 BC), Han (404–293 BC), Zhao (404–260 BC), and Yan (284–279 BC). See Victoria Tin-bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55.

allotted to peasants. In return for the land, the farmers had to pay taxes and serve in the army. In this way, Guan was able to mobilize greater economic resources and larger armies.

This was necessary to confront the state of Chu, which had attacked Zheng and appeared poised to seize too large a territory. Chu was a powerful state located in the south along the Yangzi River, outside the Zhou cultural heartland, and possibly still retained some Shang dynasty cultural allegiance. For instance, in the Mozi, the exemplary past was the Shang dynasty, while in the Confucian texts, it was Zhou. In the 7th century B.C., it was the largest and richest state in terms of natural resources. It had a form of "proto-bureaucratic government" ahead of other states.[9] That is, it relied more on officials promoted on the basis of talent rather than on blood relations with the ruler. It was the first state to rule newly conquered territories as "xian," commanderies with centrally appointed officials rather than as fiefs by hereditary aristocrats. Chu also collected rudimentary population and resource records, possibly as early as 548 B.C.

In the mid-7th century B.C., Qi defeated Chu and checked its northward expansion. It was an important legacy. From the example of Chu and Qi, many states came to comprehend the importance of reforming and bringing new wealth to the state, and making a strong military. But the results were not so clear-cut. After its victory, Qi's power declined, and Chu rose again, casting doubt on whether Shangjun's reforms could have lasting effects.

This first war set in motion an open competition of states against one another. In retrospect, one can follow the trends toward strict administrative reforms, in the sense applied by Qin

[9] Herrlee G. Creel, "The Beginnings of Bureaucracy in China: The Origin of the Hsien," The Journal of Asian Studies 23, no. 2 (1964): 155–84.

with its chief minister Shang Jun, which were ultimately conducive to the first Chinese unification under the first emperor. However, until the very last few years, it was far from clear whether any given state could unify China, or what the most effective measures to achieve this result might be.

Two things were clear and were to have a lasting effect on Chinese politics and military strategy: a state could win in this growing competition with a strong military and an effective administration, capable of mobilizing resources for sustained military effort. The Chu-Qi war had made this clear, yet it was not clear what constituted a strong military and effective administration. That is, large numbers of soldiers do not necessarily mean a strong military, and a rich country does not necessarily mean abundant resources efficiently distributed to maximize state power.

The history following the major 7th-century B.C. war further confused the situation.

In the middle of the century, Qin, a western, "semi-barbaric" state (not part of the original central plains cultural cradle), strong in the technology of war chariots imported from Central Asia, soundly defeated the conservative Jin, a state located in the middle Yellow River valley, closer to the Zhou cultural heartland. Jin then learned the previously unfamiliar practice of chariot warfare from the enemy and, in 645 B.C., introduced a form of military draft from the capital area, drawing on the common people most loyal to the court, in a way similar to what Qi had formerly done. Jin was the first to clearly single out, after some 40 years, the Shangjun administrative reforms as a catalyst for military enhancement. As we saw, because of Qi's decadence, the positive result was not guaranteed. However, it worked for Jin. Its armies and revenues expanded dramatically. Furthermore, Duke Wen, a later ruler of Jin,

had lived in Chu, and thus also added some reforms modeled after the Chu bureaucracy. The success of these reforms was clear in 632 B.C., when Wen's armies defeated Chu, which had meanwhile become ba, the hegemonic power of the time.

Jin's victory did not manage to gain hegemony, and it started a power struggle with Chu.

Chu tried to make allies among Jin's rivals, such as Qin, but Jin grew bolder: It passed the know-how of chariot warfare expertise to Chu's southeastern neighbor and enemy, Wu, and courted Chu's old enemy, Qi.

This situation of total competition carried on for almost a century until 546 B.C., when the two states Jin and Chu signed a sort of peace treaty, agreeing to honor the status quo with Jin as an emerging power.

In the meantime, many reforms in war technology and administration had spread to basically all proto-China states, the states that were conquered by Qin at the end of th 3rd century BC. The most ambitious in the middle of the 6th century B.C. was Wu, which had been a devout student of Jin's reforms, and like Chu, out of the Zhou cultural heartland. Wu tried to weaken and possibly cause the fall of its neighbor Chu, invade and annihilate its other neighbor Yue, and thus gain the resources of the south to project itself to the north.

Its military and administrative build-up lasted decades, and in 506 B.C., it attacked Chu and conquered its capital. This, however, was not a final blow for Chu. Wu did not invade and conquer all of Chu's territory. Qin attacked Wu and drove it away. Still, this success emboldened Wu, which defeated Qi in 484 B.C. This was a turning point. Wu broke with its old ally Jin, which, with Chu's defeat, had become the clear hegemon, and in 482 B.C. forced Jin to yield to Wu, which, according to some later historical records, may have

sought the services of Sun Wu, the putative author of the later Military Methods of Sunzi.[10]

This success was also crucial for sowing doubts in the hearts of those who had come to believe that better administration and warfighting would suffice to gain more power. Wu was bankrupt because it had committed enormous resources to build very large armies with thousands of war chariots, compared with armies of the former century with only a few hundred chariots. It had built roads and a canal system to provide necessary logistics for its large armies in their expeditions.

In fact, just at the peak of its power, Wu engaged in a northern expedition and was defeated by its smaller neighbor Yue in 482 B.C. Nine years later, in 473 B.C., the smaller and more effective Yue conquered and fully eliminated Wu.

Just twenty years later, in 453 B.C., because of internal problems, the former hegemon Jin disintegrated into three states: Han, Zhao, and Wei. The new hegemon was then Wei at the beginning of the 4th century B.C.

This was the time of the first historical thinkers in China, Confucius and Mozi, who founded two influential schools. Mozi organized a tightly knit group of people, the Mohists (mozhe), who branded their opposition, Confucius' followers, as rujia, "the

[10] See Ralph D. Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993). For disputes of this view, see E. Bruce Brooks, "The Present State and Future Prospects of Pre-Han Text Studies," Sino-Platonic Papers 46 (July 1994): 59–62; and Mark Edward Lewis, "Warring States Political History," in The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 604.

softies,"[11] a name that Confucians took up with pride. In the 4th century B.C, they were the most widespread lines of thought, and neither the Mohists nor the Confucianists advocated strong power politics.

Confucius promoted the cultivation of the declining Zhou virtues among rulers -- humanity (ren), righteousness (yi), courtesy (li), and so on. These virtues in the ruler were those that would have the moral influence (de) to command the loyalty of the subjects and thus would enable the ruler to strengthen his rule.

Mozi harked back to Shang ideas for the promotion of the most talented despite their bloodline and worked for small states to resist against the aggression of larger states dreaming of a universal system, the all "under heaven" of the time, peaking in an ideal son of heaven, tianzi. This was a cultural-religious leader who took his cues from the will of heaven (tianzhi), and then spread it to the rulers of all the states.

These two dominant schools of thought proved that most of the potential clients of the roaming scholars, be they Confucians, Mohists, or others, did not, at the time, believe in the reality of a growing, ever more powerful and dominant force. In fact, the example of Jin and Wu suggested the opposite: the pursuit of hegemony was a road to self-destruction, as Wu had been totally destroyed by relatively minor Yue, and Jin had imploded into three states. Neither was it clear whether administrative or army reforms would bring a favorable result. The political horizon was muddled: should a state limit itself to defense by gaining some marginal or significant reform? The idea of effectively conquering all of the cultural world of the time, tianxia, did not yet exist and came much

[11] See A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989).

later. A state still sought to become hegemonic. I see it in what is possibly the first historical mention of a title for "military methods," which became famous with Sunzi. In this chapter of the largely third-century B.C. text, attributed to Shangjun, the author suggested studying military matters to become a hegemon (cheng ba). But there is little writing on hegemony. From this, we can see that the idea was not dominant in China, in part because its advocates could get an audience only from a small circle of clients. In fact, the idea of clear hegemony was waning, and another political order was emerging.

This historical progression is important because this period was the cradle of the theories that inspired the military strategy of the future. However, the historical context that inspired thinkers such as Sunzi, Mozi, Shangjun, and Confucius was dramatically different from that of the Chinese empire. These thinkers were working within a cultural horizon of competing states in a rough balance of power to win control of the rich central plains. The Chinese empire was by far the most significant power in the region, surrounded by formidable geographic obstacles: freezing deserts in the north, high mountains in the west, wild jungles in the south, and the ocean in the east. In these neighboring areas lived people who had the strength to harass China but could not, by themselves, compete on an equal footing with the Chinese power. China, at times, fell and succumbed to the threat, but it was weakened and torn by huge domestic troubles.

Yet, the Chinese state defined its grand strategy based on ideas born in this early period, in a political context totally different from that of the empire. These ideas later became extremely important and influential in a country that worshiped these early writings, much as Western societies have long grounded themselves in the Bible. It is then a necessary philological effort to understand the

ideas of this defining moment and how they actually helped shape the later strategy, despite the different political contexts.

Strategy (B.C.): The Earliest Thinking of War: Mozi

In this period, Confucius (Kongfuzi, Reverend Master Kong), one of the earliest known philosophers in Chinese history, began teaching, advocating a return to the old Zhou tradition. About a generation after him—some thirty years, according to historian Sima Qian—Mozi, or Grand Master Mo, as his followers would call him, came from the same land, the state of Lu, or from the neighboring state of Song. Confucius was to have a lasting influence on China, which still prides itself on being "Confucian." However, from Confucius we have only a collection of unsystematic thoughts, the Selected Sayings (or Analects), Lun Yu, attributed to him. From Mozi, we have a whole body of knowledge.

By comparing the two, we can see that while Confucius was giving verbal, unsystematic lectures on a number of issues to his followers while traveling around the central plain, Mozi had developed systematic thought over the whole spectrum of knowledge of the time. In fact, Mozi was arguably the first systematic thinker in China. Interestingly, central to his thoughts was the issue of war. That is different from the West. In China, philosophy and contemplation of war were intimately connected, born of the same womb at the same time. This is also crucial: it provides the necessary backdrop for assessing the later thinking about war by the now ultra-famous Sunzi.

In the extant Mohist Corpus, about twenty percent of the writing is dedicated to war, and not to theory but to very practical techniques. Here is a list of the surviving chapters:

- Preparing against attacks at the city gates, chapter 52

- Preparing against attacks by climbing the high walls, chapter 53
- Preparing against attacks by ladders, chapter 56
- Preparing against attacks by water, chapter 58 (five lines)
- Preparing against attacks by ramming or breaching the wall, chapter 61 (three lines)
- Preparing against attacks by tunneling, chapter 62
- Preparing against attacks by siege and starvation, chapter 63
- Taking prisoners, chapter 68,
- The use of flags and banners, chapter 69
- Sounding battle orders, 70
- Miscellaneous defense, chapter 71

This is the very last part of the Mohist corpus, and the text has been corrupted by inadvertent use of a great many incorrect characters. Even the latest critical edition of these chapters[12] leaves many details unclear, both on the issue of the actual techniques and mostly on the text itself, owing to the fact that so many characters appear to be corrupted.[13]

However, what is clear is that Mozi's followers, the Mohists, were not simply philosophers and scholars, preaching the theory of war

[12] Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉, Mozi chengshou gebian jianzhu 墨子城守各篇笺注 [Annotations on Every Chapter on City Defense in the Mozi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987).

[13] The corruption of the ancient Chinese texts is due to many reasons. Due to language standardization promoted by the first emperor Qin Shi huangdi, many texts were rewritten in standardized form adding sometimes the wrong radical to the word. Furthermore, in the case of texts where there was no school for "strong textual protection", as with the Confucianists for example, texts were being dictated, once memorized, to scribes unaware or not fully aware of the original meaning and thus of the characters implied. Lastly, in ancient Greek texts, written with an alphabetical language, the mistake of a labda or a delta can be often surmised by the context of the word, made of many letters, if we find "kumé" in a context of animal husbandry we can be reasonably sure that the writer meant to write "kuné", dog. However, in Chinese, where a word is a symbol, a sign even slightly can be misleading and is often reconstructed with much less precision and certainty.

to generals and princes interested in the cloudy ideas of a grand strategy, but who would not soil their boots with the blood-soaked mud of a battlefield. The Mohists were practical warriors, well prepared in the nuts and bolts of warfare – manning the ramparts of the city wall, repelling a siege, or winning a battle. In fact, they are unique among Chinese thinkers on war in that we possess both a theoretical and a technical body of writing. Of Sunzi and his contemporaries, we have only a theoretical part, although from the theory, we can discern that they also had real experience in actual battle.

But in Mozi, compared with Sunzi, the sense of war in the technical chapters is immediate, while in the theoretical chapters, it is more removed. Yet Mozi, arguably the earliest systematic philosopher to engage seriously with the problem of war, clearly set the precedent for later thinkers. It set the context for the correct interpretation of Sunzi, his preferences, and their war theories, just as the Napoleonic empire and its wars are the context in which one reads Clausewitz.

It is thus crucial first to fully grasp the Mohist theory, see its legacy in the building of the empire, and the shaping of the grand Chinese strategy.

Understandably, this approach was never attempted before. The military classics—seven, according to Sawyer,[14] or nine, according to other Chinese sources—tend to treat war as an autonomous field of theory, in a manner broadly comparable to Clausewitzian thought. By contrast, the Mohists and Shangjun (the political architect who engineered the Qin state that eventually unified the empire, as we shall see) clearly consider war as part of

[14] Ralph D. Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

state administration, indeed as its central component. In this view, war becomes a form of state management. With this idea in mind, if we go back to Sunzi, Wuzi, Weiliao zi, we see that, actually, even they saw war in these terms. Famously, Sunzi starts off speaking about the state:

"War is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of its life and death, the way to its survival or extinction."

But before moving on to the "traditional" war thinkers, we should move to the three chapters of Mozi's "Rebutting Offensive War" (Fei Gong) and the philosophical background of his theories and those of Sunzi's.

Worldview (B.C.): Discourse and Ideas

The rationalization of discourse had a political purpose: the disputants were competing for political power—they wanted a post from which they could put into practice their ideas; or, like Zhuangzi, they sternly opposed the idea of assuming a post; he proposed an anarchistic solution to the chaos (luan) of the world. His political ideas parallel his subversion of discourse: he refutes the politics of his time, the ever more organized state of that period, and proposes an anarchistic withdrawal from the social and political world.[15]

The philosophers, on the one hand, had to win over their audience by convincing it and thus gain the necessary support for their policy, and, on the other, had to provide the ideas they wanted to put into practice. The early Mohists may have been pushed toward a more rational discourse by challenging Confucian

[15] A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989).

tradition, but the language they chose is highly relevant to their thought.

Thus, this division between persuasion and content is, in many respects, flimsy. The Sophist Hui Shi argues that the way of presenting his ideas is not a tool that can be exchanged for another without differences, for the tool itself is his philosophy:

"A client said to the king of Liang, "When Hui Shi talks about anything, he is prone to use illustrative comparisons. If you forbid him to use illustrative comparisons, he won't be able to speak."

The king agreed. To the audience the next day, he said to Hui Shi, "When you speak about something, I wish you would simply speak directly, without illustrative comparisons."

"Let's suppose we have a man who does not know what a tan is," Hui Shi said. "If he says, 'What are the characteristics of the tan like?' and you answer, 'Like a tan', will it be conveyed to him?"

"It will not."

"If you proceed to answer instead, 'A tan in its characteristics is like a bow, but with a string made of bamboo,' will he know?"

"It will be known."

"It is inherent in explanation that by using something he does know to convey what he does not know, one causes the other man to know. To give up illustrative comparisons as you are telling me to do is inadmissible."

"Well," said the king."[16]

In this passage, the client and the king are already persuaded that some logical strategies are necessary to convey one's ideas (i.e., the illustrative example for Hui Shi). Hui Shi then persuades the king that his logical strategy serves a concrete purpose (to

[16] Shuo Yuan, ch. 11, trans. A. C. Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science (Hong Kong, 1978), 444–45.

convey the unknown by means of the known) and is not empty words. A few decades after the early Mohists, the intellectual world seems to have become aware of the link between the organization of the argument and its content (which, in this case, is certainly political, since Hui Shi was meeting a king).

But a gap has also clearly appeared: Words can be deceptive and may push someone to do something that later proves to be wrong. Thinkers no longer believe in a sort of naive magic of words that ought to mirror facts and realities, as in Confucius' "Rectification of Names," where it seemed enough to the philosopher to say that relationships should be shaped according to the norm contained in names to set the empire in order: "Let the ruler be the ruler, the subject the subject, the father a father, the son a son."[17]

Later, Hanfei zi is even more conscious of the link and its "deceptions," so he takes many other things into account when he advises kings and ministers on how to speak: the former have to persuade without revealing themselves, the latter have to choose between different suggestions without showing which one has persuaded them. This is the art of ruling.

Another aspect that links the Mohist effort to the historical trend of rationalization and to the arrival on the political scene of new classes is evident in the *Hanfeizi* passage translated above. The standard for the right method of action and speech is taken from the artisans; it turns out that both examples are taken from the world of carpentry, like the vast majority of examples in Mozi, who allegedly was a carpenter himself. The carpenter responds to the sophistries of Fanqie and Yuqing not with words but by letting the truth of the facts speak for itself.

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[17] Confucius: The Analects, tr. D.C. Lau, Penguin, 1979, pp.114–5; 12/11.

This attitude is basically the one that the Mohists had always proposed. By the time of Hanfeizi, the appeal to the wisdom of the craftsman's method did not need to be defended; by then, it seems universally accepted that one can take a standard from the work of artisans. In the *Hanfeizi*, the author goes so far as to say that artisans are wiser than aristocrats, as we have seen in the passage above.

The early Mohists, conversely, had to spend a lot of energy persuading their audience that policy-making is in many ways not different from the work of a carpenter and should follow the carpenter's methods. A fixed standard, like the square and compass, had to be found. It had to measure and test ideas in reality to see if they work or not, because organizing a clear standard is necessary to organize political work.[18]

This is a long inquiry into the way to acquire power by using words. These words have to show effectively a better way to manage power and social organization. It is a long and successful endeavor that the early Mohists began by rejecting Confucius's conservative position. Their achievements have marked the logical and political thought of ancient China.

The Mencian political ideas show the same spirit and attempt as the Mohists. Mencius claimed a return to antiquity, but wanted to shape society by taking into account the new organization (the necessity of punishments and fixed standards), while integrating it with the renewed ancient concepts of ren, and the like. By so doing, Mencius integrated a work at the level of discourse (giving new content to old ideas and inventing new ways of discourse,

[18] Fa is often used in crucial passages of the early Mohists. The same word is used by the legalists for what in Western languages is translated as 'law'.

both convincing and yet not pedantically explicit) with his conservative political purpose.

This structure is widely used in the *Hanfeizi*. The thinker does not explain the meaning of the example, as we shall see with the Mohists, whose ideas are considered clear and self-evident, requiring only a general theorization and a comment.

Worldview (B.C.): The Times of the Early Mohists and the Three Sects

In the *Mencius*, there are fierce attacks on Mozi.[19] These attacks imply a wide diffusion of Mohist doctrines; therefore, we can infer the existence of the core chapters.

Another criterion for establishing a definite period for the chapters is Mozi's death, since the split into three sects occurred after it. In the *Shiji*, Sima Qian says that Mozi lived at the same time as Confucius or shortly after him. Han Shu is more precise: Mozi lived after Confucius. There is agreement among historians of ancient Chinese philosophy to place Confucius before Mozi because the latter seems to react to many Confucian ideas, whereas the opposite is not true. Therefore, both the life of Mozi and the writing of the core Mohist chapters can be placed in the period between Confucius and Mencius.

Moreover, in the Lüshichunqiu, it is clearly indicated that at the time of the death of King Su of Chu, Wu Qi was the head (juzi) of the Mohists (380 B.C.).[20] By then, Mozi must have been dead; otherwise, he himself would be holding that head position. We do not know when the split into three sects occurred. Yet we can

[19] Mencius, 3B.9, in Mengzi, trans. D. C. Lau, Mencius (London: Penguin Classics, 1970).

[20] Bi Yuan 畢沅, Mozi zhu 墨子注 (Commentary on the Mozi), juan 1, fol. 1a.

assume it was not much later than the death of Mozi, because the language appears much older and less sophisticated than that of the later Mohists.

Therefore, we can suppose that the Mohists were already split into three sects by 380 B.C., each sect eager to prove itself the true one by writing its own version of the master's teaching. This also accords with the inference that the Mohists' works were earlier than Mencius (372–289 B.C.). Thus, we can say that the core chapters must date back to the early fourth or late fifth century B.C.

The earliest core chapters are divided into ten doctrines. For each of them, we also have the titles of the versions. Each doctrine is divided into three versions: *shang, zhong*, and xia. We thus have a total of thirty titles for thirty pian. However, only twenty-three of these are still extant, and seven are lost. Both in the Below in the Empire chapter of the Zhuangzi and in the Hanfeizi, there are mentions of three rival Mohist sects.

The disciples of Xiangli Qin, the followers of Wu Hou, and the Mohists of the south: Ku Huo, Ji Chi, Denglingzi, and their kind.

All recited the canons of Mozi, but they quarreled and disagreed, calling each other "heretical Mohists," abusing each other in disputation about "the hard and white" and "the same and different," and answering each other with propositions that do not match. They regarded their grand master as a sage, and all wished to become the acknowledged head and aspired to lay down the line for later generations of the school; even today, the issue is undecided.[21]

And the Hanfeizi says:

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[21] Translation by A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 18.

"From Mozi's death, there were the Mohists of Xiangli, of Xiangfu, of Dengling. So after Confucius and Mozi, the Confucians divided into eight, the Mohists split into three, what they were for and against were opposed and dissimilar, yet they all called themselves the true Confucians or Mohists."[22]

For a long time, there has been a suspicion that the three versions of each doctrine reflected the three Mohist schools, but Graham argued convincingly that the three schools of thought were distinctly identifiable. Through an analysis of the language, he was able to differentiate the three Mohist strands, which he called Y, H, and J.

The central chapters 17, 18, and 19 are historically the first philosophical discussion in early China on war, and they are textually tampered with, a sign of how controversial and important they might have been in later times.

The first six chapters do not present any problem of tampering. The dislocation of texts begins with Concern for Everyone. As Graham suggests, the collating of pian was made by later editors who had the ten titles and filled the triplicated divisions with what they had, on the basis of length: because chapters 8 and 11 (shang) were distinctly shorter than the other four, the editor assumed that the shorter chapter of the Concern for Everyone should similarly belong to the shang pian series, and so the other two were displaced accordingly. From this first displacement, all the others followed with an increasing confusion for the editor who, at a certain point, did not have enough pages to put under the titles. The proper order is re-established with the doctrine Heaven's Intent because the lack of the text of the three

[22] Graham, Disputers of the Tao, 18.

pian makes shang, zhong, and xia coincide again with Graham's Y, H, and J.

DOCTRINE	UNASCRIBED	Y	H	J
Elevation of the Worth	—	8	9	10
Conforming Upwards	—	11	12	13
Concern for Everyone	14	15	16	—
Rebutting Offensive War	17^{25}	18	19	—
Thrift in Utilization	20	21	(22)	—
Thrift in Funerals	(23)	(24)	25	—
Heaven's Intent	26	27	—	28
Elucidating Ghosts	(29)	(30)	31	—
Rejection of Music	?	?	32	—
Rejection of Destiny	35, 36, 37 *(dislocated by transposition)*	—	—	—

The first six chapters illustrate an orderly state that must be organized around the ruler and his wishes. The center of this state is the "son of heaven," a moral-political and cultural authority that dictates norms for the organization of the state. However, it is actually with the state, as we shall see in the chapters on "Rejection of Wars of Aggression," that the thinkers are concentrated. The existence of a superstate model of the Son of Heaven is useful for providing the ultimate guarantee against offensive wars.

The question of 'concern' (ai), coming next, has an indubitable authoritative flavor. Shangjun, Sunzi, Xunzi, Hanfeizi, and Zhuangzi use this word in a context that means a special concern implying "social cohesion" with the ruling elites. The word meant an ethical bondage that should unify society in the state. Using terms of our Western tradition, we can say that ai was to unify the morals of individuals to make them ready to be organized in a centralized state.

The Confucians correctly saw in ai the main enemy of their many social virtues, but it was not the love seen by many Westerners and Chinese, but rather the social glue that made possible the application of the ruthless system of collective responsibility, where, when a criminal was not denounced by his relatives, his entire family could be executed. This concept was thus one of the bases of the authoritarian centralized empire of Qin.[23]

[23] Incidentally, in the Mohist text there is widespread use of the words lianshou and lianzuo—legal terms for collective penal responsibility—in a context close to the usage of ai.

Worldview (B.C.): The Philosophical Differences Among Mohists, According to Graham

Graham considers Y a Purist, H a Compromiser, and J a Reactionary. He notices that H addresses his argument to "kings, dukes, great men, knights, and gentlemen." In Elevating the Worthy, the Compromiser does not mention promotion of peasants, craftsmen, and traders, and is not explicit about appointment depending solely on merit; the Reactionary dilutes the doctrine to the demand that those appointed be "not necessarily blood relations of kings, dukes, and great men, enriched and ennobled without reason, or handsome of face."

"In Conforming Upwards, the Compromiser does not have the chief at each level calling on the people to conform to the level above himself, and omits the crucial point that they also send up reports over his head; the Reactionary reverts from a bureaucratic to a completely feudal hierarchy of Emperor, rulers of states and 'lords of families,' with each demanding conformity not to his own superior but to himself."[24]

Two preliminary observations follow:

1. Y seems rather rough in his description of the state, leaving out important questions discussed by H and J.
2. The label bureaucratic versus feudal seems to me too restrictive in the face of the great effort of building a new state organization.

Thus, J is 'reactionary' insofar as his structure suggests independent structures superimposed on each other, but he is much subtler in looking at the deep reasons of social order: He

[24] A. C. Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), 51–52.

starts the chapter with an epistemological passage on how to know there is order and disorder, and later adds this very deep insight into the social structure:

Today, why are the superiors unable to set in order their inferiors, and are the inferiors unable to serve their superiors? That is because inferiors and superiors offend each other. What is the reason? It is: they have different principles. If so, there will be partisan opposition.

The superior may consider a man good and reward him. The man, though rewarded by the superior, will not avoid the condemnation of the hundred families. Thus, the good doers will not necessarily be encouraged by rewards. The superior may consider a man bad and punish him. The man, though punished by the superior, will receive the approval of the hundred families. Thus, the evil doers will not necessarily be restrained by punishments.

Thus reckon that the superior's rewards and praises are not sufficient to encourage the good. Reckon that his blame and punishments are not sufficient to refrain the bad. What is the reason for that? It is: the principles are different. So we want to unify the principles of the world. How can it be possible?

This Mohist makes a very abstract, utilitarian, and authoritarian point: unification of principle is important for ruling, but it does not matter what the principle is, whether, in our terms, it is good or bad. It is necessary because once unified, punishments can be carried out, creating social cohesion. If the ruler is felt to be a tyrant, his punishments and orders will also be felt as cruelties and will create a rebellion. Therefore, unification of principle, interest (li), and concern (ai) will command people's desires (yu) and then create order and welfare. This point is absent in Y.

And similarly in Elevating the Worthy, J adds the word "necessarily," noticed by Graham, but just before that sentence, there is a very complex passage which gives the sense of his proposal:

And today, the gentlemen and princes of the world speak of elevating the superior everywhere, but when they get down to the masses and issue administrative regulations and try to set in order the people, nobody knows, elevating the worthy and employing the capable.

"How do we know that?

If today, kings, dukes, or grandees want to slaughter some oxen or goats but do not know how to do it, then they must look for a good butcher. If they have some furs but do not know how to make a coat out of them, they must look for a good tailor. In this case, kings, dukes, and grandees, even if they have kinsmen related flesh and blood to them, do not look for the ones who have no reason to be promoted but the fact that they are noble and rich, or beautiful; they truly know who is unable and do not employ him.

What is the reason? They are afraid of wasting their own goods. In this case, kings, dukes, and grandees do not miss 'elevating the worthy and employing the capable.

If kings, dukes, grandees have a sick horse that they cannot cure, then they must look for a good veterinarian; if they have a half-broken bow that cannot bend, then they must look for a good artisan. In this case, kings, dukes, and grandees, even if they have kinsmen related flesh and blood to them, do not look for the ones who have really no reason to be promoted but the fact that they are noble and rich, or beautiful; they truly know who is unable and definitely will not employ him.

What is the reason? They are afraid of wasting their own goods. In this case, kings, dukes, and grandees do not miss 'elevating the worthy and employing the capable.

But when it gets down to their own state and clans, then it is not like that. Kings, dukes, and grandees, if they have kinsmen related flesh and blood to them without any reason but the fact that they are noble and rich, or beautiful, then they will promote them. Thus do kings, dukes, and grandees think the value of bows, horses, fur coats, oxen, and goats is greater than their own state and clans?

In this way, it is clear to me that the gentlemen and the princes of the world understand little matters but not big ones. This is like making a dumb man your messenger and a deaf man master of music. Therefore, the sage kings of ancient times, in setting in order the world and making some rich and honored, did not necessarily look among the kinsmen related flesh and blood to kings, dukes, and grandees for the ones who had really no reason to be promoted but the fact that they were noble and rich, or beautiful.

Here, J quotes butchers, possibly the lowest among the artisans, almost outcasts, whereas Y quotes only archers and chariot drivers, not really artisans but rather expert noble people. Thus, we could turn Graham's opinion upside down: call J a Radical and Y a Reactionary. I do not want to go as far as that, but I wish to show that these labels should not be taken in a strict sense.

Graham also bases his opinion on an examination of all the core chapters, whereas I look only at six pian. My observations on a limited part of the text show that on many political issues, later inherited by the legalist trend of thought, the contribution of J was richer than that of Y.

Graham, in his chapter on Xunzi, stresses how much this Confucian thinker learned from the later Mohists, but points out that in spite of the essay form given to his chapter, Xunzi chose a different rationality from the later Mohists. The reasoning of these latter is analytical. They divide up the entire realm of what they consider knowledge and proceed to define different sets of concepts, both political and logical, much like Aristotle did. Though Xunzi, as Graham maintains, draws heavily on the later Mohists, he does not adopt their method of reasoning; he uses a more comparative mode of argument, also aided by the typical parallel sentence so common in classical Chinese.

Early Mohists argued by mixing analysis and comparison, together in the same train of thought. This method would be further developed in Mencius, who would use only comparison, as used in an early Mohist form in Xunzi. But we can also say that their rational attempt was also the foundation for the pure reason of the later Mohists. In this respect, the three Mohists also show distinctive characteristics, and Y's argument seems less comprehensive than those of the other two. H is less repetitious, but this also makes him miss some crucial passages.

As we shall see, the same differences exist when speaking of war. Of the two chapters that can be traced with certainty, one is in favor of just defensive wars, the other has mixed feelings and justifies attacks, calling them "punitive missions," zhu, borrowing a term used in earlier times by the Zhou son of Heaven when he attacked unruly fiefs to re-establish order in the empire.

The general theory of Mozi was to defend the small states against large states, preserving the status quo. This failed for two reasons: (1) the trend to conquest of the larger states, and (2) if the status quo were maintained, the Mohists, organized as some

kind of warring monk order, could have emerged as the balancing power, something no state, big or small, could have tolerated.

Worldview (B.C.): The State Within: Social Changes in Ancient Chinese States

The new Chinese states, besides the foreign challenge in the quest for dominance on the central plain, faced also a domestic challenge – new social mobility. In the mid-first millennium B.C., social classes were more mobile, and common people were promoted to positions of higher responsibility. The "knights", shi, a group of people with skills in the traditional warlike exercise, like archery, and with scholarly education, came closer to the centers of power in the states. In fact, they went roaming from state to state offering their services to the courts, seeking advice to advance their own fortunes. Furthermore, the craftsmen, the artisans, who in former times were a caste of serfs attached to a manor or an urban princely court, also enjoyed greater proximity to power.

According to the Zuozhuan, in 519 B.C., Prince Zhao of Zhou "started a rebellion with the support of those among the former officials and the hundred crafts who had lost their jobs, together with the descendants of Kings Ling and Jing."[25]

In 477 B.C. in Wei, "The duke made the artisans work too long. The duke wished to expel Shi Pu, but before he could do so,

[25] *Zuo zhuan*, "Zhao" 22, trans. James Legge, in *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 693.

trouble broke out, and on the xinsi day Shi Pu attacked the duke with the support of the artisans."[26]

Thus, the artisans were starting to play a crucial role in the evolution towards a new order for the new times.

Laws were made public. They were no longer a secret privilege of the upper classes, but, by being publicized, they could be disputed and advocated in defense of the rights of the lower classes. On the other hand, with public laws, the organization of the state could become more efficient; administrators had to apply the laws known both to the people they administered and to the upper class, and therefore, the privileged could not thwart hazy traditional rules at their will but had to follow the explicit norms set by the central organization.

The relationship between rulers and subjects changed. It started to be governed not only by ethical values or rituals learned from almost esoteric writings, but by explicit norms rigidly applied. In this way, the organization of the state and its structure were becoming apparent, and its order explicit.

In the year 534 B.C., the state of Zheng, seeking hegemony, under the administration of the chief minister Zichan, the Zuozhuan records:

The people of Zheng cast the text of the Criminal Code in bronze. Shuxiang sent a message to Zichan saying, 'At first I considered you as my model, now no more.' The former kings gave judgments to deal with particular cases and did not do so to satisfy laws, fearing the contentious hearts among the common

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[26] *Zuo zhuan*, "Ai" 17, trans. James Legge, in *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 850.

people. Still, they could not prevent them [from criminal behavior]; therefore, they guarded them with righteousness, ruled them with administration, led them with ritual, kept them with trustworthiness, and served them with benevolence. They instituted emoluments and posts to encourage them to be obedient, laid down strict punishments and penalties to scare them from vice. Fearing that this would not be enough, they therefore instructed them in the principle of 'always doing one's best' and inspired them with examples of good conduct; they trained them in their tasks, employed them with harmony; they approached them with respect, supervised them with strength, and commanded them with firmness. Still, they sought wise and intelligent superiors, bright and discriminating bureaucrats, loyal and trustworthy chiefs, and gentle and kind teachers. The people at this point could be given tasks and employment without creating disasters and disorder.

When the people know there are laws and, as a consequence, are not afraid of their superiors, and in addition they have contentious hearts which lead them to dispute the wording so that they may be lucky and win their case, then they cannot be managed anymore.

When the good rule broke down in the Xia Dynasty, The Punishments of Yu were written; when the good rule of Shang broke down, The Punishments of Tang were written; when the good rule of Zhou broke down, The Nine Punishments were written. These three law codes were written in periods of decline. Now, as the chief minister of the state of Zheng, you have instituted the system of boundary, of ditches, you have established a taxation system which brought crisis on your head, you have set up the three law codes, and you have cast the text

of the Criminal Code in bronze, so will it not be difficult to appease the people?[27]

The passage from the Zuozhuan presents the direction of the social and political change taking place in the middle of the first millennium B.C. and the strong reaction of a conservative critic.

Certainly, most of the institutions of this new social organization were already in existence before the reforms of, say, Zichan, but he made these norms explicit, open to debate and to the objections of the common people, who did not belong to the aristocracy. It is possible to recognize these "people with contentious hearts" as the members of the lower orders fighting to reach the forefront of the political scene.

It was a movement from a patriarchal, hereditary, ritual organization of society towards a formalized, bureaucratized, "efficient" state. All these changes were in the direction of greater explicitness and rationalization. The newly rising states had to come to grips with these new threats, and the development of discourse and thought was not immune to these upheavals.

Worldview (B.C.): Rationalization in Discourse

A process of rationalizing discourse and political ideas to suit changing times began. In a sense, in responding to the challenge of changing times, both the conservative and the reformer were rationalizing: they had to convince their audience of their good reasons and thus persuade the state leadership to move in one direction or another. Zichan's opponent, as we have seen,

[27] Zuo zhuan, "Zhao" 6, trans. James Legge, in The Chinese Classics, vol. 5, The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 609, with modifications.

rationalizes his dissent and anticipates future disasters he believes will be brought about by the reforms, and, by doing so, also presents a more coherent set of ancient rules.

Confucius himself was moving along these lines. Feeling that his world of ideas was being threatened, he reorganized it and first attempted to make it explicit as well by explaining its reasons. Why should one follow the rituals? How can one be ren? He was trying to answer similar questions. He was giving reasons and reordering norms and institutions that already existed, but were fading away. The old art of war, that of the refined nobleman, archery, was an integral part of this tradition.

Other processes of rationalization[28] followed the changing times or prompted them. There were new ideas and new ways of presenting them. The Mohists appeared to challenge the tradition that Confucius wanted to uphold. The early Mohists were at the beginning of a trend that culminated in the political philosophy of Han Feizi, whose theory helped in shaping the strictly ordered state of Qin, which, in due time, swallowed all the other states and imposed its rule over the entire central plain. The development of the new Chinese state needed ideas provided by new thinkers. These ideas had to persuade their audience and be effective to be adopted by the sovereigns, and possibly by one of the new classes.

The question of being effective in a sense implies the content of the idea: Some thinkers, the Confucians, for instance, appealed to the moral virtues, while others, like the Mohists, hinged their proposal on the question of "utility." Similarly, the question of "persuasion" implies the discourse: How can you draw the

[28] Here 'rationalization' will be used only in this second sense, as an effort to make ideas explicit.

attention of the public? Is it through a detailed exposition or through dialogues? And how do you judge the effectiveness of a theory?

The long shot for judging effectiveness is to make the state strong and thus win wars against its enemies. But it takes a long time to make a state strong, and it is difficult to gauge the use of reforms over a long period of time. A shortcut to judge the effect is a battle: If a reformer wins a war, he is right. But even before reaching this shortcut, not every ruler would be willing to lend his army to a general for experiments. The new competing thinkers were vying for the attention of the ruler, who had to be convinced first.

These issues pushed for more articulated ways of presentation of thought and more thoroughly designed political ideas. This trend helped advance research on the logic of the later Mohists. The early Mohists proposed a new statecraft with the logical sophistication necessary to prescribe it. The state structure described in the Shangtong pian was probably already at least partly in existence, but the Mohists went to great lengths to spell it out. In Confucius, we do not find detailed and argued descriptions of the structure of the state. The Mohists' language is heavy, but they strive to be extremely clear and provide evidence for each stage.

Their idea of state is simple: it starts from the beginning of time in the Conforming Upwards chapters, and it explains why the supreme chief of the social organization was chosen, and then, step by step, it illustrates the whole social body and the way to make the lesser people unquestioningly obey their lords. Here, almost at the beginning of this philosophical period, the rigor of discourse and the ideology of the authoritative state are perfectly parallel.

After the works of the early Mohists, we find in the following philosophical writings a keener awareness of the importance of rationalizing discourse for arguing one's point. Shangjun argues in a dreary, pedantic language very much like an early Mohist.

Similarities with the Mohist discourse can be found in a text roughly contemporaneous with Mencius and therefore closer to the early Mohists than Hanfeizi. The "legalist" Shangjun is organized into essays similar to the Mohist ones: each chapter has a title that also serves as the theme to be discussed. Roughly similar structures can be found in the later texts of Guanzi and Xunzi, both with strong legalist nuances.

Even if there was a growing logical sophistication among the thinkers of the pre-Qin period, not all of them shared the Mohist confidence in rigorous logic. Zhuangzi, for instance, uses the tools of the rationalized discourse developed so far to prove it nonsensical. According to him, authentic communication goes beyond the constraints of formalized discourse used by later Mohists and Sophists.

Formally, he uses stories that express his ideas. Such stories were also used by the early Mohists, but they would put them in a different context, embedded in more complex reasoning, whereas in Zhuangzi, they stand alone: the whole responsibility for getting the message through largely rests on those lines that go without explanation.

Mencius also developed a sophisticated way of arguing that is unrelated to the analysis of the later Mohists. He refers to a traditional culture full of concepts that should have been known to all members of an aristocratic class (such as the ideas of yi and ren). Mencius uses these concepts in a method of reasoning that is not strictly explicit or rationalized, but hinges on comparisons

that are not immediately understandable.[29] Yet he extensively employs comparisons, first widely used by the early Mohists.

Furthermore, Mencius and Confucius reshaped some existing traditional ideas (like the concept of ren) in order to convey some new ideas (ren). With Confucius, it is the idea of 'nobility'; with Mencius, it is 'humanity'. Their attempt was quite elaborate: they wanted to present themselves as transmitters of a tradition, but as often happens, when presenting old ideas in a new context, they actually re-elaborated the existing concepts. They presented this effort as if they were almost not there, posing as simple transmitters of an ancient culture to avoid showing that they, like others, were proposing new solutions to the problems of the time.[30] This was also necessary because in China at the time, as in many other periods and places, the support of tradition lent authority to one's ideas. This loyalty to tradition and the necessity to express new ideas implied a complicated discourse.

The Mohists had comparatively fewer difficulties with preexisting tradition:[31] they wanted to get their ideas across as directly as possible.

The Xunzi is even more immediately related to the early Mohists in its essay form, and the Hanfeizi also shows consistent

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[29] *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1983), 235–63.

[30] It is worth noting that if we want to draw attention to our ideas we often had to maintain that we originally invented them; then the philosophers would have to claim to refer to some pre-existing ideas. This trend can be observed among many thinkers but was especially pronounced among Confucians.

[31] Certainly, the Mohists claimed to refer back to the culture of Shang, but this was just to prove that the ideas of Mozi had been effective in a different historical period and that these ideas were not groundlessly made up by Mozi. Chow (see 128-29.) has, anyway, argued that Mozi is linked to an aristocratic clan of Shang origin.

interest in the subtleties of discourse. In On the difficulty of speaking (Nan yan) and On favourite ministers (Ai chen), the legalist writer of these sections of the Hanfeizi analyzes how the ruler should speak or hide his thoughts from his ministers, and conversely how the ministers should win the ruler's confidence without offending his sensitivity. This would be purely the art of sophistry if it were not conceived as the core of governing the state.

Here, it is as though in this research the philosopher has reached a high point of centuries of speculation on discourse. In the Hanfeizi, the devious words have a reason to be (to persuade the audience without offending it) and also had to retain a rock kernel of fact that cannot be missed (the minister or the ruler had to prompt his audience to actually do what he wanted).

In the Hanfeizi, we find methods of reasoning similar to those of the early Mohists, but which the tradition of the time attributed to the legalist school. The Mohist reasoning, in abstract terms, often follows this pattern: statement of the issue, example, and conclusions. The example is integral to the reasoning.

This scheme is largely the same in some chapters of the Hanfeizi, but it is more clearly divided into three parts, in a way that seems more formalized and more consciously used. But in its naked structure, the Hanfeizi's scheme is the same as the one used unconsciously by the early Mohists.

In the following passage, the statement of the issue is itself the theme of the chapter: the fallacy of words, words that do not meet the "content/reality" (shi) and do not examine the "shape/form" (xing). Examples:

Yuqing made a house and told a carpenter, "The house is too high." The carpenter said, "This is a new house, the mud is wet, and the wood of the architrave is fresh." Yuqing replied, "It is not

so—the wet mud is heavy, and the fresh wood of the architrave is bent. The bent architrave cannot sustain the heavy mud; this will be proper when the house is lowered. After a few days, the mud and the architrave will be dry. Dry mud is light, and dried-up architraves are straight. To sustain light mud with a straight architrave, in this way it will be high."

The carpenter obeyed. He made it like that, and the house collapsed.

Someone else said that Yuqing wanted to have a house made, and a carpenter told him, "The wood is fresh, the mud is heavy. If the wood is fresh, it will bend; if the mud is wet, it will be heavy; to sustain the heavy with the bent, even if it works today, in the long run, it will necessarily be a disaster."

Yuqing replied, "When the wood dries, then it will be straight; when the mud dries, it will be light. Now it certainly will become dry, and after a few days it will be light and straight, and even after a long time, necessarily there will be no disaster."

The carpenter obeyed, made it, finished, and after a while, the house, as expected, collapsed.

Fanqie said, "In the case of the breaking of a crossbow, it must be at its completion, not at its beginning. When an artisan bends the crossbow, he has to keep it in the bow-last three nights and then put the string on, wait for a day, and then start the trigger. This is having rules at the beginning and being violent at the completion. Then it will not break."

Fanqie said, "It is not so. Place it in the bow last for a day, and then put the string on. Wait for three nights and then start the trigger. This is being violent at the beginning and having rules at the completion."

The artisan had nothing to say, but when it was used, the crossbow broke.

Fanqie and Yuqing's words are beautiful in debates and make them win, but are against the truth of facts. The lords are persuaded and cannot stop them—this is how they are defeated. When one does not plan an orderly and strong result but revels in the sound of hairsplitting discussions and beautiful speeches, then one will turn down the gentlemen who have the art and trust to the ones who make houses collapse and crossbows break. Thus, in dealing with the affairs of the state, the lords do not even reach artisans and craftsmen building houses and bending crossbows. Being so, the gentlemen are limited to the cases of Fanqie and Yuqing: make up empty talk which is useless and win; the truth of facts, which does not change, is confined. The lords thrive in useless debates and have few unchanging words—this is how there is disorder. Today, the ones who act like Fanqie and Yuqing are not stopped, and the edicts of the lords do not stop—this is the category of why aristocracy is defeated, and artisans and craftsmen are considered the ones who know the techniques. They cannot practice their skills, thus houses break down and crossbows break. The ones who know how to rule cannot perform their method and art, so the state is in chaos and the lord in peril.[32]

This kind of reasoning is extremely important for the development of ideas on war. Where else but in war must ideas about strategy and tactics be convincing before proving effective and standing the test of a hard-fought battle?

[32] Han Feizi, *Hanfeizi*, "Wai chu shuo zuo shang" 外儲說左上 [Upper Left Collection of Illustrations].

Military/Governance (400s–200s B.C.): Ancient Chinese Politics and Warfare

In the classics, before the Qin unification in 221 B.C., we have records of two grand strategies competing with one another. We have the theories of horizontal or vertical alliances—that is, states aligning on the vertical or horizontal axis to maintain a balance of power.

However, there were two other grand strategies underlying the theories of alliances—one first expressed by Shangjun and the other by Mozi, both philosophers active in the 5th- and 4th-centuries B.C.

The strategy expressed by Shangjun, a leading prime minister of the Qin state in the 5th century B.C., was fitting for the newly large and expanding state. He explained that the state must be well-organized. Organization means wealth, more population, more peasants, and higher agricultural production. Peasants mean soldiers, and grain means logistics provision.

Therefore, more land was understood to mean wealth, children, and soldiers. If that could be well organized, the state would be powerful and could expand. With the expansion came new land, new wealth, and new people.

The second theory, that of Mozi, emphasizes the interests of small states and the importance of maintaining the balance of power. It could be attained by giving power to the Son of Heaven, who at the time of Mozi was a figurehead with no real power.

But Mozi wanted to preserve the small states, which were often fighting the larger states and were annihilated (mie 滅) by them. An annihilation at the time was understood to mean that all males would be killed, children and women were incorporated

into the families of the invaders, and original cultures, temples, and cults would be banished and destroyed.

Mozi argued, based on moral grounds, that invading a smaller state was like thievery and that a better order in which everyone would respect one another should be maintained.

This reflected a long-term view of self-interest: If one after the other all states but one were destroyed, only the last survivor had an interest in the continuous wars. The majority of states that would be destroyed this way had an interest in a balance of power.

Moreover, states could thrive on intensive labor, intensive farming, thrifty expenditures, and strong defense, making conquest unbearably harsh even for large states. That is: with better internal organization, a state could thrive even with little land, removing the need to expand its territory. Both stressed the importance of state organization.

Eventually, the Mohist suggestion did not prevail, and Shangjun's came to dominate. But in this, we can also see a pattern underlying some of the Chinese thinking.

From the stories preserved about the Mohists in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, we know that the Mohist masters and practitioners were fighters, not abstract philosophers. They helped ailing states and died fighting for them.

However, they were also the exception in the Chinese system. In the rest of Chinese philosophy, we see a clear distinction in the state order.

There is the ruler and his officials, the generals, and the troops who were originally farmers—the ordinary people. We can see from the words that came back to us that they were pretty different in their order.

The ren 人 (from the pictogram of someone bowing to a master, it is the profile of a man bowing to the right with his hands on the floor) were actually the people who obeyed and bowed to others. The min 民 were possibly semi-slaves as the ancient version of the pictogram indicates someone blinded in one eye by a sharp object as a punishment, therefore making it difficult for them to run away. The baixing 百姓, the hundred surnames, were people privileged with having a surname, and therefore, they were higher up in the social ladder. The jun 君 were people who gave orders, as the pictogram indicates a mouth with two hands stretching before it. And lastly, the wang 王, the king, was a semi-religious figure who put heaven, nature, and society in order, the three horizontal lines connected with one straight vertical line.

It was a clear distinction of roles, and we also find in Chinese history different military formations, each with its value, but none of which proved decisively superior to the others.[33]

Each military formation had its pros and cons, military strategists reasoned. The word for military formation 陳 indicates chariots with a hill behind. Thus protected, it can therefore advance unhindered.

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[33] See the following passage in *Wuzi* (吳子), trans. Ralph D. Sawyer, in *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 191–93.

臣請論六國之俗：夫齊陳重而不堅，秦陳散而自鬬，楚陳整而不久，燕陳守而不走，三晉陳治而不用。

夫齊性剛，其國富，君臣驕奢而簡於細民，其政寬而祿不均，一陳兩心，前重後輕，故重而不堅。擊此之道，必三分之，獵其左右，脅而從之，其陳可壞。秦性強，其地險，其政嚴，其賞罰信，其人不讓，皆有鬬心，故散而自戰。擊此之道，必先示之以利而引去之，士貪於得而離其將，乘乖獵散，設伏投機，其將可取。楚性弱，其地廣，其政騷，其民疲，故整而不久。擊此之道，襲亂其屯，先奪其氣。輕進速退，弊而勞之，勿與戰爭，其軍可敗。燕性慤，其民愼，好勇義，寡詐謀，故守而不走。擊此之道，觸而迫之，陵而遠之，馳而後之，則上疑而下懼，謹我車騎必避之路，其將可虜。三晉者，中國也，其性和，其政平，其民疲於戰，習於兵，輕其將，薄其祿，士無死志，故治而不用。擊此之道，阻陳而壓之，眾來則拒之，去則追之，以倦其師。此其勢也。

Another military formation is reflected in the word zhan 戰, which later came to mean war, zhan 戰, and which indicates holding spikes and halberds in no specific order.

Governance and Strategy (500–300 B.C.): Greek Order

This is a very different situation from ancient Greece. The Greeks confronting the Persians had a unique advantage: the phalanx, a very organized formation of shields and spears in which all free citizens fought side by side. The kings in Sparta were generals and fought in the phalanx. They were not far behind their fellow citizen soldiers.

The general, the king, and the soldier were in fact the same person. Socially, below this group of soldiers were the slaves, people deprived of any rights; therefore, society was bitterly divided into two.

But within the military oligarchy, there was an equality that was otherwise unseen in China. The idea of the equality of the phalanx was passed on to the Roman legion, where roughly the thrust of the spear was replaced with that of the defensive-offensive shield, and the wall of spears was replaced by different groups of shielded soldiers that could move according to orders.

But in all these divisions, there was also a social organization: soldiers were farmers defending their farmland, obeying the orders of the general, who was one of them and also the political commander. The discipline, the idea of a common cause, could carry the day even against a much larger number of troops, as happened against the Persians, with the Macedonian phalanx and with the Roman legion. Social and military discipline, the idea of a common cause, could carry the day.

Conversely, in the Chinese tradition, the great power was fielding large numbers of well-armed and well-clad soldiers who could defeat smaller numbers of less-equipped soldiers.

But to have large numbers of people and weapons, the state had to be well organized, the farmland had to be well divided, and it had to be able to provide for the majority. Therefore, the state organization, increasingly more efficient thanks to an even better-structured bureaucracy, was the ultimate weapon and offensive tool for a state. The military formation, discipline, and esprit de corps were not as important.

In Rome, farmland was essential, but the empire was based on controlling the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, commerce, raids, and invasions to acquire wealth were the defining characteristics of the Roman Empire, as they were of the Greek city-states.

It was all very different from the Chinese state. This also led to another way of thinking.

Governance (3rd century B.C.–early CE): From Combat to Medicine

If the strength of bureaucracy is the real force behind the state's power, then one can look at different state organizations and gauge who is stronger or weaker. Consciously or unconsciously, modern China, looking at the organization of the American state and the weaknesses manifested by its trade deficit, tends to believe that the U.S. will not be able to bear the brunt of a sustained assault by a better-organized Chinese state.

Is that true? Another difference between the two ways of thinking about war has consequences for medicine, since early on, Greek medicine was focused on surgery.

Why surgery? Because soldiers, kings, and generals were wounded in battle and therefore had to be healed. They had to recover from wounds. Surgery addresses injuries and accidents.

Conversely, Chinese medicine traditionally has little to say about surgery and no real developed surgical tradition. It concentrates on extending life, having a better life, and improving circulation. That is, it was geared not toward the wounded in battle but toward the officials and the kings who, when they were old, wanted to extend their lives. These people did not fight or get hurt in combat. Wounded soldiers were apparently expendable, as we have little or no records of healing them after combat.

In fact, we know from historian Sima Qian that after large, decisive battles, soldiers captured were decapitated on the spot. Ancient Chinese did not even bother to heal and enslave them, as happened in ancient Rome or Greece, where captured enemies were the workforce for large agricultural estates, mines, and rowing battleships.

Wounded soldiers apparently were not treated, their wounds not tended: if you are defeated in a battle, you are dead. If you are wounded in a fight, you are dead. Apparently, in most cases, it was as simple as that.

In other words, an ancient Chinese man had only the duty to serve his ruler; there was a clear-cut hierarchy about who organized and who was organized. The life of the state, and thus his own, depended on this loyalty. His fate was determined by the favor of the ruler.

Conversely, people in the legion or the phalanx were, in theory, all equals. Their life and the life of the general-king depended on this mutual trust of the people on the line. Therefore, they had the right to a portion of the loot or to defend

their farm rights. Their property rights were their first rights altogether.

These rights did not exist in China, but they were the founding elements of Greco-Roman thought. In China, the top ruler had only power, not rights, could grant privileges in a highly discretionary manner, and nobody could claim any better. The Greek philosophers spoke to their fellow people and had to convince them. Socrates did it by asking leading questions. Generals in Greece, but also all through Western history, spoke to soldiers to motivate them for battle.

We do not have records of Chinese generals' speeches to their soldiers.

The Chinese philosophers spoke to the ruler and persuaded him by answering his questions, which were his concerns. Through the different attitudes of the philosophers, we know who was the supreme power in the different systems. In Greece, it was the free people who voted for or against a policy; in China, it was the king. The king was the only really free man, without masters. In Greece or Rome, all citizens were free, but everybody had to serve and consider the others, as in the battle line. There were rights, and there were duties.

There are pros and cons in both systems.

The Chinese way produced a more rational, efficient system. In ancient Rome, the drawback of having many competing rights, as well as rights competing with the supreme leader, was a constant state of confusion, competition, and war.

The drawback of the Chinese system without rights was that it offered peace in return for individual liberty and personal power.

Part II
The Contrast with Western Antiquity

Worldview (early first millennium B.C.): Geopolitical Philosophy

The two unifications that occurred at almost the same time—that of the Roman Empire over the Mediterranean and that of the First Emperor in China—arose from very different physical and cultural environments. The empires that preceded Rome and bequeathed to it their political and cultural legacy were born in the Fertile Crescent, between a corner of North Africa and a strip plunging into the Gulf. Both bordered on the southern Mediterranean.

The space of the ancient Egyptian empire and of the Sumerian-Babylonian civilizations lay between three rivers—the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates—but perhaps even more important was the fact that it was surrounded by seas: the eastern Mediterranean, which ended up being the strongest pole of attraction; the Black Sea; the Red Sea; the Caspian Sea; the Gulf; and the Indian Ocean. These empires, moreover, were born in an environment that today is fairly arid but five or six thousand years ago probably had far richer vegetation, placing them in greater contact and communication with one another.

Both were born with complex, hieroglyphic and cuneiform languages that initially comprised thousands of signs. The process that followed was not one of maintaining these languages but of simplifying them. By the time of the Trojan War—the twelfth and thirteenth centuries BC—when the two civilizations were certainly meeting and clashing, both had given rise to a process of simplification that found in Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan and finally Latin an alphabetic language capable of writing anything with around twenty signs. This occurred, however, while each people preserved its own languages.

The Roman Empire was a bilingual empire—Latin and Greek—unified by two things: Greek culture and law. Before Roman unification, no empire had managed to unify that world. Neither the Egyptians, nor the Hittites, nor the Persians succeeded, and even Alexander the Great's remarkable achievement proved short-lived. But the abstract force of Greek culture, grounded in Plato and Aristotle, and then the autonomous vitality of the Roman legal system, achieved in practice far more than any single emperor ever could.

In China we have an entirely different horizon. The unification process that culminated in the First Chinese Empire was born out of a process of political and cultural elimination and consolidation of the many states that divided the great central plain. The empire was not born multilingual, with many cults and many laws—the Roman emperor, after all, judged his subjects according to their own laws, provided they were not Roman citizens. The Chinese empire, by contrast, unified script, language and culture—and did so, as we largely know, by force.

At this point, a complex and initiatory written language helped concentrate power in the hands of a caste of functionaries in the service of the emperor. In the Mediterranean world, language had been simplified to facilitate exchanges among diverse peoples. In the Yellow River basin, the peoples were simplified and the language concentrated to facilitate unification.

Even when the Mediterranean world was definitively divided by the great Muslim Arab offensive—which for the first time in roughly a millennium managed to overwhelm the Persian Empire—it broke politically and culturally into three main branches. On one side stood the Latin world, pivoting on the papacy of Rome and the Holy Roman Empire; then there was the Byzantine Empire and its legacy in the Slavic world and ultimately in the Russian Empire; and

finally the empires, first Arab and then Turco-Persian. But these great branches retained common roots in the heritage of Greek culture and Roman legal thought. We have, therefore, a world that is very divided yet also connected.

A very different horizon from the Chinese one, where the culture of the Yellow River remains consciously separate from the surrounding world.

The *Iliad*

The *Iliad*—the literary work at the dawn of Western civilization—begins with rage, the fierce, uncontrolled and uncontrollable fury of a warrior Achilles. Out of rage at having been insulted and humiliated by Agamemnon, the king leading the Greek expedition, Achilles refuses to fight and sulks. Agamemnon had seized for himself a Trojan slave girl that Achilles claimed was rightfully his. From this rage and sulking, a sequence of events is unleashed that leads to Achilles' death and the fall of Troy.

We know that possession of a woman is a fundamental matter in the Greek world of the time—indeed, the Greeks went to Troy because a Trojan, Paris, had abducted a Greek queen, Helen, the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and brother of Agamemnon. Agamemnon, despite seeing that his Greeks are losing because of Achilles' sulking, doesn't give in on his loot. It's all irrational.

Patroclus, Achilles's closest friend and lover, takes Achilles's armor and throws himself into the battle. There he encounters Hector, who kills him. Consumed by a new rage, Achilles returns to the fight, finds Hector, kills him, and desecrates his corpse by dragging it around the walls of Troy. Hector's elderly father, Priam, king of Troy, goes out at night to beg Achilles to return his son's body. Moved to tears, Achilles finally calms down and gives the body back.

What we see is a rollercoaster of emotions that drives warriors in pursuit of death or love. This is the central theme that seems to accompany all of Western culture. Around this emotional tempest lie events hinted at and contextual elements we know from other literature. The cunning of the Trojan Horse, the fall of the city at the gateway between the Aegean and the Black Sea—these are not central to the book. The rational motives are not explained there—reasons of state power that set in motion an expedition described as colossal against a city described as enormously powerful. There is nothing 'rational' about the war, we are given to understand; it's just a burst of blood to the head that drives people mad. Life and death depend on love, hatred, insult to honor, friendship. Nothing else.

It is a world of rationality very different from the Chinese one.

The book of Shang (Shang shu) is possibly the oldest work of Chinese literature, dating to the 8th–7th century BC, roughly contemporary with the *Iliad* and recounting events possibly from the 12th–13th century BC (the same as the siege of Troy). It presents a very different environment.

"Canon of Yao: In antiquity, there were Di and Yao, who were clear-sighted and thoughtful, and brilliance lived in the whole under heaven. They renounced to their position giving them up to Yu and Shun and creating the declarations of Yao.

Of Di Yao. He was reverential, intelligent, accomplished, and thoughtful - naturally and without effort. He was sincerely courteous, and capable of (all) complaisance. The bright (influence of these qualities) was felt through the four quarters (of the land), and reached to (heaven) above and (earth) beneath. He made the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of (all in) the nine classes of his kindred, who (thus) became harmonious. He (also) regulated and polished the people nobility

(of his domain), who all became brightly intelligent. (Finally), he united and harmonized the myriad states; and so the black-haired people were transformed. The result was (universal) concord".

Ancient China deemed emperors and practical effects that good rule brought to humanity the most important element.

The same is underlined in another text, roughly contemporary, the Classics of the Rites[34].

"The Rites of Capping for Scholars. Divination was conducted at the Yimen gate. The host wore a black hat, court robes, a black sash, and plain skirts, took his position east of the gate, facing west. The officials in charge wore the same as the host, taking their positions to the west, facing east and arranged from north to south. The divination items, mats, and the hexagram drawn were all prepared with offerings in the western study hall. A mat was spread in the middle of the gate, outside the threshold to the west of the neidi stone, facing west. The diviner held the yarrow stalks, removed the upper shoe cover, and while holding it in one hand, advanced to receive instructions from the host. The zai stepped back slightly from the right side and assisted in giving the command. The diviner nodded in assent, turned to the right, took his seat on the mat, facing west. The hexagram was drawn on the left side. After completing the divination, the hexagram was recorded and presented to the host for viewing. The host received it, looked at it, then turned it over. The diviner returned, faced east, made a journey to consult the oracle, completed his task,

[34] 士冠禮。筮於庿門。主人玄冠，朝服，緇帶，素韠，即位於門東，西面。有司如主人服，即位於西方，東面，北上。筮與席、所卦者，具饌於西塾。布席於門中，闑西閾外，西面。筮人執筴，抽上韇，兼執之，進受命於主人。宰自右少退，贊命。筮人許諾，右還，即席坐，西面。卦者在左。卒筮，書卦，執以示主人。主人受眡，反之。筮人還，東面，旅占，卒，進，告吉。若不吉，則筮遠日，如初儀。徹筮席。宗人告事畢。

advanced, and announced that the omen was auspicious. If it was not auspicious, then divination for a distant day would be conducted following the same initial procedures. The divination mat was removed. The zongren announced that all matters had been completed."

Again, no emotions, but the importance of following the proper ritual in appointing officials who serve the rulers.

We find emotions only in the Classic of Poetry (Shi jing), but they are distilled, rarified, and often expressed obliquely. We don't have the maddening anger and passion of the Greeks. It is as if Chinese people were ashamed of their emotions, and a reasonable environment of power, greed, and survival dominated their world.

It all happened through different drivers. Greeks and Phoenicians rowed across the Mediterranean and colonized it. Local populations were not slaughtered but pushed inland in successive waves that expanded Greek or Phoenician footholds and forced local people to integrate and work with the newcomers. In China, states were annihilated, like the hundreds of statelets gobbled up by larger states. Sometimes states split and disintegrated, like Jin, which split into Han and Zhao.

In Greece, citizens voted to go to war in public and free assemblies and then filled the ranks of the military, thereby earning their right to citizenship and to the spoils of war.

In his *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan introduced the idea that Greek philosophy was the product of seafarers who sailed the seas, whereas Chinese philosophy was the product of farmers who plowed their plots.[35] So, we had mariners versus

[35] Feng Youlan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. 1, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), esp. introduction and early chapters.

farmers, and the two ways of thinking started from these conditions.

Feng's intuition remains persuasive and continues to inform how modern China and Western civilization are often understood. Still, almost a century after Mr. Feng first wrote his famous history, it's time to try to refine this idea and add more substance.

Feng reflected on an idea that later became famous – the hydraulic civilization theory developed by Wittfogel[36] – asserting that managing river waters led to a necessary concentration of power, bureaucracy, and, therefore, highly vertical societies.

Again, this concept has some value, but it requires further refinement, since river civilizations arose in very different environments. For instance, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations emerged geographically and chronologically quite close to one another. However, they seem very different from the river civilizations of China.

The Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations were bordered by deserts next to their river basins. They were confined and constrained by the river floods. They had every interest in expanding the beneficial effects of river floods into the adjacent desert to increase the living area for their people.

[36] Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

Mediterranean and Ancient China

A Comparative Framework

Two paths to unification arising from different physical and cultural environments

	MEDITERRANEAN / ROMAN WORLD	ANCIENT CHINA
Strategic environment	Sea-linked, open and connected. Multiple peoples and rival powers met across the Mediterranean and neighboring seas.	Central plain / Yellow River world. Culturally more separate from surrounding regions; states competed within a shared civilizational space.
Political order	Diverse peoples, languages and laws could remain distinct under Roman rule. Later political division persisted despite shared cultural roots.	Unification came through consolidation and elimination of rival states. The empire unified script, language and culture, largely by force.
Institutions of integration	Greek culture and Roman law supplied integrating forces that could outlast individual rulers.	A complex written language and a caste of imperial functionaries concentrated power in service of the ruler.
Language & communication	Alphabetic simplification facilitated exchange among different peoples while preserving multiple languages.	Written language became a concentrated instrument of political and cultural unification.
Worldview, war & society	The manuscript contrasts an emotional, honor-driven heroic tradition and a maritime civic world in which citizens could vote for war and fight in it.	The manuscript emphasizes good rule, ritual, order and practical effects; it contrasts the farmer-centered world with the seafaring Mediterranean one.

Conceptual summary of the manuscript's Part II comparison — not a claim of uniformity across all periods.

Moreover, the two civilizations were next to two seas. The Sumerians and Babylonians of Mesopotamia were projected into the Indian subcontinent through the Indus River valley on the one

hand. On the other hand, they were projected to the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, the Egyptian civilization was projected to the Mediterranean Sea and, on the other hand, to the rest of Africa and the Red Sea.

In addition, these two civilizations were adjacent to each other, and soon they began interacting, fighting, and striving to dominate the other. In the Mediterranean, contact with the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations gave birth to the Minoan civilization of Crete. Crete was then a bridge between Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, which ultimately laid the foundations of what we have as Western civilization.

On the other hand, we had possible contacts with the Sumerians from the Iranian mountains and the Indus Valley, which may also have triggered the growth of local civilizations. We had a mix of at least two or three main languages that are still with us: the Semitic of ancient Egypt; the Minoan, perhaps wholly lost; and the Indo-European languages of Persia and Greece.

So, there is a world between rivers and seas that later became partially separated and developed independently.

The geography of ancient China is very different. In the beginning, China had one river, the Yellow River basin. However, this river is not surrounded by deserts but is encircled by hostile forests. In fact, at the beginning of Chinese civilization, sometime at the end of the second millennium B.C. and the beginning of the first, China had two concerns: Controlling the water flow from the rivers, its floods, and its river silt. The other was expanding its arable land by clearing fields of forests and their inhabitants: elephants, tigers, and other wild animals.

These two challenges were not what we see in Egypt or Mesopotamia. Besides, the ancient Chinese river valley was fairly isolated from the rest of the cultural exchanges. There were

mountains and jungles in the south and southwest, deserts and steppes in the north and northwest, and the sea, without large continents or landmasses, except for the sparsely populated islands of what is now Japan. It all made Chinese civilization comparatively removed from the rest of the global scene, yet present, unlike the American pre-Columbian civilizations, which were totally separated from the rest of the world.

There were occasional contacts across the deserts and the Himalayan mountains, but these exchanges were rare and not systematic. It created a peculiar environment for China, which thought that managing farming and water was the paramount imperative for the well-being and growth of its people.

Strategy/Worldview (600–300 B.C.): Mediterranean Drift

The environment in the Mediterranean is very different. The Greeks were only partly farmers. They did not have extensive plains to grow grain and produce vast amounts of surplus to finance their growth and expansion. Along with the Phoenicians, they were mariners. The Phoenicians, who originated at the border between Mesopotamia and Egypt, were also the inventors of the first alphabet.

Traders, pirates, and mariners could abandon the complicated scripts of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians for a score of simple symbols that anybody could learn in a few days.

Without much training, this system could be the basis for bookkeeping, recording, and communication. The system was then adopted by the Greeks, who battled the Phoenicians for centuries in the Mediterranean. They had to prevail over one another to dominate the Mediterranean's eastern trade.

The Mediterranean environment is also exceptional. Sailing in the Mediterranean was among the most challenging endeavors in ancient times. There are no constant, reliable winds one can safely harness by unfurling a sail, like in most large oceans.

Winds can change suddenly because of the area's geographic features—mountains, plains, rivers, and coastlines. And unlike smaller lakes, the Mediterranean is very large and leads to a series of adjacent seas: the Atlantic to the west, the Black Sea, and even the Red Sea. It is a system of adjacent water systems defined by sudden winds and sudden lack of winds. One essential cultural cornerstone of Western civilization is the *Odyssey*, in which a hero, Ulysses, Greece's best and cleverest mariner, gets lost at sea for ten years because he has enraged the God of the Sea, and storms cast him about, killing his entire crew of trusted companions. A similar environment can be found in the north, in the Baltic Sea.

In the Mediterranean, before the steam engine, one needed a crew of rowers to avoid the sudden lack of wind and to manage the boats when the wind changed. These rowers needed to be reliable; they could not just be slaves. They have to be people you trust with your life. They're all rowing together, and only the captain is at the rudder, but his work is as tough—or more demanding in physical strength and intelligence-as the rower. In parallel to this group of companions who are all equal and the same, we have the development of a strange, unprecedented army formation, the Greek phalanx.

A row of soldiers with pikes is an early military development; traces of it are found among the Sumerians and the Egyptians. Still, the Greek phalanx appears qualitatively different, and Greek history confirms this. The phalanx is made of men who are all equal, and their strength comes from being one next to another and resisting together with the pressure of knowing that no one can

give up or everybody else will succumb. We have a robust formation in which the general, the head, is part of the phalanx and is not outside of it; he is one of them, a hoplite. The hoplites were a group of equal men who had to train constantly to be effective on the battlefield and thus had to neglect farming.

In this, we have two elements that underscore the equality of a band of people: rowing the boat and the military formation. It is something largely unique to Greece. We are always thinking of Athens, which produced enormous culture; however, the legacy of Sparta is perhaps more significant for practical purposes.

Sparta was the original home of the strongest phalanx and was ruled by a class of nobles whose duty and honor was to serve equally at the same level as hoplites. The hoplites would elect two kings, who would rule together by taking turns: one would rule one day, the other the next day. The Romans, during the republican times, adopted the same tradition. They were to be in battle, so if one died or made mistakes during the war, the other would replace the dead king or correct the errors the day after. It was the rationale for this first limitation of power.

The system was geared to address a practical need in a battle for the top commander. Below the nobles, who were occupied the whole time in warfare, was a class of slaves farming the land. We have a particular social environment here and a definite historical precedent. In the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., the vast Persian Empire, after having conquered both Mesopotamia and Egypt with a gigantic, unprecedented army, attempted to invade Greece. The Greeks, though fewer in number, with their phalanx and fleet, beat the numerically stronger Persian army.

The same performance was repeated when Alexander conquered the Persian world with his Macedonian phalanx and went to India and Central Asia.

These experiences proved that it was not the number of soldiers or their equipment that mattered; it was their organization and training. A better organization of soldiers, all equal, training all the time, with the generals and kings taking part in the battle, as Alexander did, could defeat armies and countries that were, in theory, much more significant.

The same experience was then passed on to the Roman Empire. The phalanx was reorganized into the legion; the Romans traded the long spear and smaller shield, the phalanx's primary weapons, for larger, heavier shields and a sword, the gladius.

They divided the extensive formation of the phalanx into smaller, more agile units that could move differently. But the principles were maintained. There was little institutional difference between the soldier, the general, and the political leader. They were all one person. And the idea was that the army was as strong as its weakest legionnaire.

We have a tradition of kings and generals speaking to their troops before battle. We also have an apparent tradition since the early times of the division of loot and plunder, and everybody was rewarded according to their rank. War functioned as a business enterprise for everybody.

Everybody could become rich and advance their social status based on their performance in battle. It was like an investment company; rather than putting money into trade, they were putting money into wars of conquest. The main goal of this conquest from the Phoenicians to the Greeks and the Romans was control of the Mediterranean.

The Weapons, The War

China

The ge (戈) was an ancient Chinese weapon used from the Longshan culture period through the Shang, Zhou (second millennium BC), and up to the Han dynasty, roughly from 221 BC to about 25 AD. The word for state has in its etymology the ge, plus common people (mouths) within a walled compound 國.

It is a type of polearm or dagger-axe consisting of a long wooden shaft with a horizontal blade mounted at right angles, often made of bronze during the Bronze Age. The ge was primarily a weapon for slashing and hooking rather than thrusting, requiring open space to swing its long shaft effectively. It was one of the first weapons designed explicitly for warfare in China, distinct from prior tools that were multipurpose for both agriculture and combat, like a long-shafted axe.

The weapon was a dominant infantry weapon during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE) and into the Zhou dynasty, where it was gradually replaced by the ji, a halberd that allowed both swinging and thrusting attacks. The ge was used by soldiers on foot and sometimes mounted on chariots, and was also a ceremonial symbol of power when elaborately decorated.

The ge apparently represented an evolution from the ax used to cut down trees in forests. It allowed strong but poorly trained peasant infantry to cut down the horses of better-trained charioteers or cavalry forces while they were still running. Numerous enough, with well-made, robust ge, without strict formations, throwing a lot of people with a lot of dagger axes could turn the tide of a battle against more expensive, better-trained professional soldiers/nobility.

The ge needed ample spaces, extensive plains, which had been claimed from forests (cut), swamps (drained), and hills (flattened) in a circular effort that took many centuries. The wood gave the tools to move the earth from the hills to fill the swamps and embank the

rivers. This concerted effort transformed a highly inhospitable environment into a rich and fertile land. It was a social promotion: the peasants were becoming semi-independent farmers, no longer semi-slaves of antiquity. They could fight for their survival and cut down aristocrats from a different state.

Greece

It was a very different context compared to ancient Greece, trapped on slips of land between rugged mountains, rocks, and a treacherous sea.

Here, the weapons of choice were the spear and the shield, aided by a small dagger if either weapon were lost. In the *Iliad* (circa 2nd millennium BC), we see that the heroes on both sides dueled using these weapons. They were singular efforts by highly trained and gifted warriors, almost like martial artists in kung-fu movies.

Space was limited and could not be changed. Hills were made of rock, not fertile earth; flattening them would produce more rocks sitting on the little arable land available. The sea could be crossed; it could host ports, but it could not be tamed like a river. It remained there, as treacherous as ever.

In these small spaces, the new polis, towns, organized better defenses, not around singular kings who, as both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tell us, piled up mistakes on mistakes, leading almost always to their eventual tragic demise. As the end of the *Odyssey* tells us, in the absence of their king, Ulysses, a crowd of pretenders came up ready to replace him. Ulysses, thanks to one of his ruses and his fighting abilities, kills them all. But then they didn't fight together.

Sometimes, maybe in the middle of the 8th century BC, more of them could afford the expensive outfit, heavy armor, and

weapons. They already knew how to coordinate, thanks to their experience as oarsmen on the sea, and then they replaced the larger, singular handle shield with a smaller, two-straps shield. Early influences may include similar spear and shield formations found in older civilizations, such as the Sumerians and Egyptians. In fact, all civilizations had their formations using spears or other weapons. But the eight ranks deep, rectangular mass formation was a Greek invention. It was designed to present a frightening hedge of spear points to the enemy.

The weak point of the phalanx was its limited mobility, especially when battles had to maneuver over time, and the terrain was particularly rugged.

The Roman legion devised two solutions to improve upon the original phalanx's design. It replaced the long spear with an offensive/defensive shield (scutum) supported by a dagger for stabbing at close range. Additionally, the legion was divided into smaller units that could move across the battlefield independently. The legion and its structure defined traditional warfare until now, even considering the change of weaponry.

Strategy (8th–3rd centuries B.C.): Socii and Looser Allies

Control was achieved by structuring a system of alliances around one city, Athens, Sparta, or Rome. The Roman Republic and later the Empire were not "bureaucratically" structured from top to bottom. Rather, it was a cluster of bonds, alliances, and socii (autonomous cities and states), bound to Rome, the capital city, by looser or closer connections. The legion itself was made of Roman legionnaires and auxiliaries supplied by allies. Even the mighty Persian Empire, more vertically organized than the federation of Greek cities, called on allies when marching against its enemies.

In other words, building and maintaining alliances was fundamental to Western civilizations. And there were two kinds of allies: those with reliable long-term bonds and fair-weather friends.

This was a very different environment from ancient China. In earlier times, we know that the Zhou dynasty's Son of Heaven called on its fiefdoms to launch punitive attacks against insubordinate fiefdoms. This got transformed after the Son of Heaven was defeated in 771 B.C.

> Following the sacking of the Zhou capital in 771 B.C. and the subsequent flight of the Zhou rulers to their eastern capital at Luoyang, there was no longer any predominant ruler who could command general respect and loyalties. States that had hitherto maintained allegiance to the Zhou kings now became fully independent; new leaders seized control of these states and established new forms of government; men came to be valued for their professional abilities rather than for the circumstances of their birth; and ties of kinship lost their power within society […] Political rivalries now show through the cracks of the monolithic textual tradition, suggesting the first conflict between royal rule ordained by Heaven and government by worthy administrators. This conflict would long beset China's rulers.[37]

Then, beginning in the 8th century B.C. (770–476 B.C.), when the emerging powerful states dropped their obedience to the Zhou Son of Heaven, they formed alliances to become "hegemons" (ba 霸). In successive periods, various lords became hegemons, and

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[37] Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47.

they kept their power thanks to the strength of their states and the alliances they set up.[38]

There is a later conceptual approach of horizontal and vertical alliances to stop the growing power of Qin in the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. In Mozi, one finds a comprehensive conceptual construct pertaining to the system of all under Heaven, tianxia, that calls on all states to rally around the then-dimming figure of the Son of Heaven to punish the states that were guilty of trying to use superior forces to attack (gong 攻) smaller states.

However, starting in the 5th century B.C., the role of alliances became weaker. States abandoned armies with a large number of military chariots, driven by "professional warriors," and started fielding instead large numbers of infantry composed of farmers called to pay their dues to the state by serving part-time, on call, as soldiers. These new armies defeated the chariot warriors, and the number mustered by a single state increasingly made alliances less advantageous.

In China and in Greece, at about the same period, there was a military and political revolution, but the two moved in different directions.

We do not find the same political atmosphere as in ancient Greece and Rome.

The classical idea of an alliance in China became that depicted in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, a 14th-century historical novel about the 3rd-century A.D. implosion of the post-Han empire. The plot centers around how the weakest kingdom induces the two larger kingdoms to fight one another until the weakest emerges victorious.

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[38] Different lists of hegemons appear in the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Shiji*, and, to a lesser extent, in the *Xunzi*.

The main idea was to hold on to the unity of all under Heaven (tianxia).

Governance (ca. 500–200 B.C.): Division of the Sea

While the idea of unity repeatedly returned in China, the Mediterranean was barely unified for a couple of centuries. Even after the conquests of the late Roman Republic, which managed to defeat both the Phoenicians and the Hellenistic kingdoms, the Mediterranean world remained divided for centuries. In the west, the Mediterranean spoke Latin; in the east, it spoke Greek. Although they recognized the authority of Rome, the empire had difficulty managing a truly unified "state" because of many gaps, including the language distinction.

There was no unification of language; Greek and Latin coexisted with equal status. There was no compulsory unification of customs and culture; every conquered people retained the right to keep its own habits. There was no unification of laws; every people had the right to be judged according to their own rules. So, laws followed people; they did not follow the land.

In China, by contrast, laws followed the land administered by the emperor. Customs, language, gauges, and measurements were all unified. The unification of norms was the primary instrument for running the kingdom, managed by a system of bureaucrats selected based on their cultural attainment – scholarship -- and ability to rule peacefully according to their skill and understanding of their duties in light of precedent and contemporary requirements.

Two levers controlled the Roman empire instead: the threat of brutal force and the lure of great culture and refinement, all in the

hands of highly educated generals who proved their valor by winning battles and wars.

All this presents a very different picture from what was witnessed in China during comparable periods.

There appears to have been a degree of unity during the Zhou or Shang periods, around the turn of the first and second millennia B.C., including a generally consistent language. Although new characters continue to emerge from archaeological discoveries, there is no evidence of an alphabet or a drastic departure from the style of Chinese characters that molded Chinese civilization. They all used 文字, and philosophers roamed the different kingdoms without mention of different languages or significantly different cultures. Perhaps it was comparable to the Greek koiné (the shared and simplified Greek that was commonly used throughout the eastern Mediterranean). Although every city was politically independent, all were admitted to the same cultural community.

The variances in China converged in the Spring and Autumn period in massive wars between states. The main concerns of the states were to gain and conquer more land and more people because more land and people meant more resources available for survival and to withstand a war.

There were two ways to expand power in the earliest periods: (1) conquering and absorbing the land of one's enemy, or (2) clearing the forests and flattening mounds and hills within one's own territory. Possibly for most, it was a mix of both approaches.

However, in the West in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., when the massive Persian army tried to vanquish the Greeks, the outcome was very different from that in China.

Some Chinese thinkers supported small countries' defense against big countries and even theorized about them. Mozi theorized about the defense of small countries and opposed

"gong" 攻, attacking with vastly superior forces. This was what the Persians were doing against the Greeks.

Mozi opposed "gong" on moral and intellectual grounds, but also for practical reasons, explaining measures of defense against siege and how to withstand an attacking army. The result, however, was the opposite of the Greek situation: the small states were beaten and overwhelmed by larger states, which attacked them with crushing force.

The natural conclusion was that what mattered was not organization and defense so much as amassing forces and resources, people, to fill a greater army.

In Greece, we have a society split into two: free men and slaves. Free men fight full-time as equals, and slaves farm the land. In China, soldiers were part-time fighters, without the constant training of the legionnaires, and full-time farmers.

At this scale, the decisive factor was the organization of the state to supply people and equipment. There was no strongly horizontal organization; instead, a three-tiered organization existed from early on. China had its ruler, who was a quasi-religious figure setting the direction of the country; it had its bureaucrats, who were in charge of implementing instructions and advising the king; and it had its commoners, who were obliged to follow orders.

The commoners fought because their livelihood depended on it; if they were defeated, they would be killed, their lands would be taken away, and their families and children would be enslaved. They fought for their survival. Survival was also crucial in Greek, Phoenician, and Roman societies, but warriors were stakeholders of the "war enterprise." They were full-time trained fighters. Plunder, conquest, and looting were also elements of winning the battle.

In China, winning and conquering belonged to the bureaucrats who organized the state and the king as the top guarantor; the three levels were clearly delineated. It was very different.

In China, this organization enabled victory in wars because it provided large numbers of people and supplies, ultimately making a difference on the battlefield. It was not an organization, training together, rowing next to one another, and holding the shields together.

These distinct societal organizations and concomitant social realities remained the hallmark of Western and Chinese civilizations for centuries.

In the West, the land belonged to the soldier, the hoplite, the legionnaire who, by defending his own home, family, estate, and his right of property, upheld the state, which was res publica, the public thing.

Moreover, the difficulty in holding together a Mediterranean empire after a few short centuries led Rome/Byzantium to develop a theory of a balance of power, holding tight to socii and juggling fair-weather allies that could become enemies and thus needed careful handling. Byzantium was more powerful at its height than any ally alone, but perhaps weaker if the allies joined together to attack Byzantium.

China was different. Tianxia, All Under Heaven, when unified, was larger and more prosperous than all its neighbors put together. The key to holding power was then to hold Tianxia together.

In China, victory was managed through state control of resources, productive land, and large populations filling the army. Therefore, all the spoils of victory belonged to the top king. And if mistakes were made, they were defined as errors in applying the king's commands correctly. The bureaucrats could be replaced for

mismanagement or for giving bad advice to the king, or they could be rewarded, but they had no "rights."

Nobody had a right to anything; the sovereign bestowed everything according to his judgment, and any gift could thus be withdrawn by the sovereign at will. Challenging the king was challenging the dynasty and the power system itself. One either toppled the dynasty or was destroyed.

Strategy (600–200 B.C.): Wars in Different Contexts

In fact, according to one of the founders of Western thought, Heraclitus (end of 6th century B.C.), war (Polemos) is "both the king and father of all," with the capacity to bring all into existence and to destroy. War is considered somehow a permanent state of affairs in the West. Yet it doesn't entail the total destruction or annihilation of the enemy. It can be a positive competition that keeps you on your toes and helps you be better than others and than yourself.

The ancient destruction of Carthage was the exception. It was razed to the ground, and salt was poured over it to make its return impossible. Still, the memory of the city and its formidable general Hannibal haunted the Roman Empire and the Western world forever.

After that, we see that Roman expansion took a different turn. Representatives of the Gauls, whom Caesar defeated, were invited to join the Roman Senate; the Hellenistic empires of the east were won over, but the Romans converted themselves to Greek culture, so much so that the Roman Empire became bilingual. Even the Byzantines, fighting for centuries with the daunting Persian Sassanid Empire, never crushed it.

The Byzantines famously intervened in Persian court disputes with the Persian pretender, Chosroes II, in the early 7th century AD. When Chosroes II was overthrown by his son, Kavadh II, he sought refuge with the Byzantines and received support from Emperor Maurice. The balance of power with the neighbor secured the Byzantine eastern border until the Arabs toppled the Sassanid Empire. Moreover, in ancient Rome, each conquered people was ruled according to its law and kept its religion. Rome was a cultural sponge that boasted of preserving other cultures. It admired Egypt and imported cults from Persia, like Mithra, or Judaea, like Christianity.

In China, it was a very different situation. Well before the unified empire, sometime during the Spring and Autumn period, in the first half of the first millennium B.C., powerful new states emerged by annihilating other states (mie guo 滅國). The process of annihilation was systematic. All males of fighting age were killed, women and children were given to men of the winning state and temples, and records were destroyed. The annihilation process grew in size and organization, so the Qin state, which unified all under heaven in the 3rd century B.C., largely annihilated all previous local cultures and peoples.

The Han-era *Shiji* records that the first emperor of Qin accomplished the unification of standards, words, and a writing system. It was a clear testimony that there was more than one standard language or writing system before that. We now find archaeological evidence in the newly unearthed documents written with some characters that have long been erased from the language.

This unification process apparently aimed to erase the idea of a constant state of war in the central plains, surrounded by sparsely populated deserts or mountainous forests.

It was believed for centuries that if power and wealth were maintained in the inner plain, the threats from neighboring peoples could be bought for little money.

Then war disrupted something very concrete, the well-being, stability, and peace, or an 安, home, as it represents a woman under a roof. The disruption of peace is the destruction of one's home; it is the threat of being annihilated. A home/peace cannot be constantly threatened by permanent competition.

As for war, we do not have an all-encompassing mythological term like the Greek one. We have bing 兵, coming from a pictograph of two hands holding a short ax; it indicates a weapon. It actually is military affairs, affairs of bearing arms. Then there are words meaning war zhan 戰, indicating a formation of spears and some form of double-headed lances; we have wu 武 showing people standing firm holding halberds.

They are connected with the action of fighting a battle, not to the large concept of warring. Peace, conversely, is a much broader and more meaningful concept. Conversely, in Greece, the idea of Eirene was a distant, almost unattainable, hope -- against the dire reality of permanent wars.

In China, wars were practical, of relatively short duration, and historically of two kinds. One was staving off border enemies or internal bandits. These roughly amounted to police actions. The second kind was existential, for the very survival of the dynasty. If the dynasty succumbed, it would be erased from history as in the term mie guo. From this, we have the classical idea of harmony, he 和, which is etymologically mouths eating grain, i.e., having enough to eat is being content.

Peace is stability; it entails total control, nipping every possible threat to stability in the bud. If the danger to stability cannot be bought off, it must be eradicated. From this, peace and stability

are the supreme values to be pursued by buying off or eliminating the threat.

Peace far supersedes justice; victory proves righteousness, and attainment or preservation of peace are wholly independent of any abstract concept of justice. Survival becomes paramount for people, fearing – as taught by experience – that the victor will exterminate the vanquished. The succession of dynasties proves that those who yield, without protracted armed struggle, to the winning side will survive and keep their peace, stability, and home/an.

This implies that, according to classical thinking, when assured victory/peace is not easily attained and assured, the Chinese are prone to surrender to survive.

In the European tradition, with the constant state of war reinforced by dogged religious beliefs that drove the Mediterranean apart for over a millennium, it is harder to set apart justice and peace. People are not prone to surrender; historically, many were prepared to die before conceding error or bowing to an alien system of thought and social organization.

Worldview (Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century): China—A State for a Name

Nomen omen: the name is destiny, and few countries believe in it as strongly as China, where 名就是命.

In the late nineteenth century, at the end of the empire, the reformer Liang Qichao lamented that "our greatest shame is that our country has no name. The names that people ordinarily think of, such as Xia, Han, or Tang, are all the titles of bygone dynasties." He argued that the other countries of the world "all boast of their own state names, such as England and France, the only exception

being the Central States." [39] Liang had recently botched his attempt to reform the dying empire and was ruminating on the deep reasons for his and his country's failings.

True enough, there is a host of names for the country. These include *Zhongguo* (中國, "central state/states"), *Zhonghua* (中華, "central beauty"), *Huaxia* (華夏, "beautiful grandness"), *Shenzhou* (神州, "divine state"), and *Jiuzhou* (九州, "nine states"). *Han* (漢, from the Han dynasty, 202 BC–AD 9 and AD 25–220) and *Tang* (唐, from the Tang dynasty, 618–907) are also used. There is *Tianchao* (天朝, "the heavenly court"), *Tianxia* (天下, "all under heaven"), and *Sihai* (四海, "within the four seas"). Each has its history and specific meaning, which do not totally overlap. Then, too many names, too many meanings, is equal to no name, no meaning.

Plus, there is a common name used by foreigners: China.

The term likely came from the Sanskrit word *Cīna* (चीन), passing through Persian and into ancient Greek forms. Many scholars believe it ultimately came from the old state of Qin, although the etymology remains debated. The Tang dynasty called the Roman Empire *Da Qin* (大秦, "Great Qin"), suggesting that they may have been aware that their country was known differently abroad. Here, an early tension emerges. The ruling Tang dynasty wanted to impose its name as a political statement on a country they knew was called differently abroad.

The Romans called it Seres, the land of silk; in the Middle Ages, it was Cathay, from the name of the then-ruling Mongol empire, Khitan. The foreigners accepted the political definition of

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[39] Liang Qichao 梁啟超, "Zhongguo shi xulun" 中國史敘論, in *Yinbingshi heji* 飲冰室合集, wenji zhi liu 文集之六 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1989), quoted in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, eds., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 235.

the empire of the time. The word China was brought back by the first Portuguese mariners, who may have picked it up again from India in the 16th century. The name endured abroad, perhaps because foreign observers required a stable designation that would endure notwithstanding the rise and fall of dynasties and their dynastic names. A few decades after establishing contact with the Europeans, the country's name went from Da Ming Guo (the Great Ming kingdom) to Da Qing Guo (the Great Qing kingdom)

Worldview (1900s): PRC or China?

Each different name marked a solid political statement: the rule of a specific dynasty that had replaced a previous one perceived as rotten. Changing names was fundamental because it justified the invasion, coup, or revolution as a means of bringing the new elite to power, toppling the previous one. But each dynasty marked a break with history and, thus, the continuity of territorial and political claims.

Those historical breaks did not matter in the past. The ruling dynasty took control of the river basins, and the surrounding areas were too weak to mount any significant challenge to the central power's wishes or intentions.

But after the 1911 fall of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China (ROC) and even its successor, the communist People's Republic of China (PRC), were too weak to simply impose their territorial wishes abroad. Therefore, the PRC had to try to grapple with the issue of names and legacy in a territory they had inherited from the Manchus, over half of which was the ancestral home of peoples ethnically different from the majority of the PRC population.

History and name had to align in order to justify control of territory. Historical continuity becomes a problem when the country

changes names every couple of centuries and when different names refer to similar, overlapping domains, all centered on the plains around the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. This is particularly true when power is no longer sufficient to impose one's vision of history on the world. The world now operates under conditions different from those of China's past, creating friction between competing narratives.

Here is a problem within a problem. Not only does the country have no name, but also the people are nameless. The "Chinese" call themselves huaren 華人, tangren 唐人, or hanren 漢人. Again, each word has its history and no totally overlapping meaning. Plus, domestically, following Russian advice in the 1950s, the PRC identified 55 national minorities, of which three (the Mongols, the Uyghurs, and the Tibetans) sat on half of the national territory. Possibly, it was an early design to weaken the PRC in its infancy and forestall the strong nationalist sentiments coming from the ROC, whose government moved to Taiwan, or at least some academics thought so in the late 1980s.

Meanwhile, ethnic Chinese lived on Taiwan's de facto independent island and were conspicuous minorities in many Southeast Asian countries and the U.S. The PRC did not want to relinquish its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan, wanted to reach out to "Chinese" huaren living in other countries, and also needed to control, ideally in due course assimilate, PRC citizens such as Mongols, Uyghurs, and Tibetans who were not huaren. So, the PRC was confronted with a series of interlocking political and logical paradoxes.

If it stresses the transnational huaren connection, it loses its ethnic minorities, and vice versa. Of course, huaren are the dominant ethnic group of the PRC and a potentially potent source of influence in the foreign countries where they are citizens;

therefore, the so-called national minorities within China tended historically to be given lip service but no meaningful autonomy. But this can – and did -- generate the phenomena of excessive nationalism and racism against internal or external non-huaren.

Worldview (B.C. to 1900s): Romanizing China

This is a very different landscape from that encountered throughout Western history. The Greeks had, similar to China, many names for themselves. They were Graeci, Hellenes, Danai, or Argives, and there were the Ionians, Aeolians, and Dorians, all with different meanings reflecting the perceived differences of a people deeply divided. It was unlike the tradition hailing from the Roman Empire. Here we have the opposite of "China." The Americans, the British, the Russians, the Ottomans, and everything that stood between them all claimed to be part of a Roman legacy.

The American symbol, the eagle, comes from the Roman tradition, and so does the Washington city plan with its obelisk and the definition of the U.S., e pluribus unum (from many one). With the British, Gibbon's history of Rome and classical education in its schools was set to remold and revamp ancient Roman imperial ambitions. Imperial Russia saw Moscow as the third Rome; its two-headed eagle symbolized Constantinople, and its ruler was a Russified variant of the term Caesar, the Czar (Kaiser in German). The Ottomans were no different. After conquering Constantinople, the sultan took the title of emperor of the Romans, claiming to be the true heir of that tradition and turning the oriental Roman cathedral of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

In the West, very broadly defined from the U.S. to Russia, to the Turkish Empire, and whatever was between them, we have one name, Rome. It was applied to very different historical periods and states stretching over foreign lands, mostly not overlapping.

While the origins of the different names for China are complicated, it is comparatively straightforward for Rome. The city took the name from its founder, Romulus, while the place became Roma. Then anybody and any place can also become heir to the Roman tradition—why not China?

China has the opposite daunting problem. It has to reconcile and realign present politics with its past and current borders and its present people with the history of different dynasties, boasting other names, foreign politics, and not entirely identical boundaries.

Plus, there is the shifting problem of identity. The hanren were second-class citizens under the Mongols and Manchus; ethnic identity was arguably milder with the ruling semi-Turkic Tang dynasty.

It all leaves the country and its people with what can appear as a form of conceptual schizophrenia. The place is something inside and something outside. From the outside, there is one name (China). From the inside, it has many names (Zhongguo, Zhonghua, Tianxia, et cetera). From the inside, one looks outside and claims to be one thing for that name (China); from the outside, one can see many things for those many names (Zhongguo, Zhonghua, Tianxia, et cetera).

The most direct shortcut for this would be what Liang Qichao saw a century ago: Adopt the name China/Shina from abroad and drive to become some kind of the latest incarnation of Roman history. It wouldn't be easy. After long deliberation, even past-century revolutionaries quit naming their country "China." But is there any other way, especially in the present international situation and with the persisting narrative schizophrenia? The alternative can be a nerve-wracking struggle with naming schizophrenia, with a very uncertain outcome.

Whatever the thing, the state, it starts its "use" and knowledge with a name, itsname as ancient Chinese logic already recognized. As Confucius put it: 名正言顺, with correct names, the communication flows.

Part III
United China through the Opium Wars

Worldview (Early A.D.)

There was a historical change after the Qin-Han unification in the third century B.C. There was no more usable land to conquer: cold desert in the north and west, sea on the east, mountainous jungles in the south and west. No further useful conquest was possible.

Land could not be really claimed and put under the strict administrative system conceived by Mozi, Shangjun, and the Warring States thinkers.

There could have been intimidating raids conducted against the northern barbarians, but they could not be incorporated into the tight territorial administration.

Conversely, hungry barbarian raiders from the north, moving fast on horses (not from the south, where populations were horseless and not driven by scarcity), could have been tempted to break China's order. Therefore, China had to defend itself from the northern raiders. As China could not invade and incorporate them, it had to take a defensive posture that was basically that of Mozi's Feigong chapters.

Yet in the Tang dynasty, a semi-Turkic population "reunified" the empire again in the 7-8th century for the first time. It was a seminal experience, as the empire had been divided by wars for some four centuries, longer than it had been united under the Han.

The Tang gave the sense that the unity of China, tianxia, could be restored. They also gave a sense that non-farming people, the Tujue aided by Uyghur allies, could take over the rich Chinese plains.

This, in turn, also gave rise to the idea that China's main threat would always come from the northern raiding barbarians. This reinforced the general Han grand strategy derived from the elaboration of Mozi's Feigong chapters: defensive war, as wealth

and power came only from within. Similarly, the main cause for the demise of the Han dynasty and all other dynasties was internal Chinese problems, not external threats. The careful preservation of the internal order was considered paramount in the Chinese grand strategy.

This stress on preservation, and the fact that wealth came from China rather than from limited tributes from abroad, put the conquests on the back burner. Conquests were considered economically unviable, expensive, and dangerous because of the political, economic, and social stress they would bring to Chinese society, in a way that modern wars (whether won or lost) put on modern complex societies.

Song Miracle

If we look at Chinese history around the year 1000 and compare it to Western history, we see that in our case, the Roman Empire actually was born around the third century BC, with the Second Punic War, the defeat of Carthage, Roman control; the Western Roman Empire remains very strong until the 5th century. Instead, the Han Empire—which arose from Qin's 11-year unification—lasted just 400 years, against the Romans' already 700.

But if we shift and don't think of Europe but of the Mediterranean world—because Rome unified not Europe but the Mediterranean—we see that in the year 1000 there was still the Roman Empire, and what an Empire, because Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire, was still the dominant power in the Mediterranean; the Arabs had tried to destroy it, but Byzantium was in full swing; there was a Renaissance of the Eastern Roman Empire; it was very strong; to the west around Rome there was a Western Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire Germanic then in 1000, which had an axis between Rome which was a papal state

and Europe—France, Germany what it was; Sicily had been conquered from the Arabs, the Christian reconquest of Spain was beginning.

So around 1000, Europe was still Roman, or the European Mediterranean world. So we have 12 centuries of continuous Roman Empire history. And actually, the Roman Empire ended only in 1453. On the other side, in China, we have a completely different picture. We have these 400 years of the Han. Before that, there were the Warring States, and before that, 200-300 small statelets warring with each other. After the third century AD, there were about 500 years of war between various states. It was chaos; there was really no unity. The Sui and then the Tang unified roughly what is now China in the 7th century AD. But the Tang were a semi-Turkic people who had Sinicized and had restored a unity. But this unity shattered again at the end of the Tang, around the 10th century, so much so that the first Song emperor was a general of one of the statelets that emerged from the shattering of the Tang Empire, and he, Taizong took 30 years to reunify China; took 30 years to unify China, and his brother Gaozong killed his brother, took power, and at that moment around 1064 the Song unity was found again. We have a very shaky Chinese empire. Incidentally, almost simultaneously with the Battle of Manzikert, the Seljuks assert themselves in Anatolia for the first time and truly begin to threaten the Byzantine Empire.

That is, the Song performed a miracle: what they set up, the examination system which is a novelty even if somehow borrowed from the past, the clan system also theoretically borrowed from the past but very interesting—rightly Two Paths to Prosperity cites this

fundamental book by Zhang Taisu [40] that reports how 70% of Chinese surnames derive from that period, not from elsewhere; paradoxically ancient surnames disappeared—there were the 100 surnames or whatever, ancient surnames are no longer seen; they were killed or exterminated or people to affiliate with the new clans that had subjugated mandarins part of local government, affiliated.

So around 1000–1100, a unique, formidable structure was created that saved the Chinese from continuous war and massacre, and is treasured and absolutely important. This thing, as the book [41] rightly says, in my opinion, is the real obstacle to embracing what was, instead, the liberal reform born contemporaneously in the Mediterranean world, where the dynamics were very different. The Roman world, in fact, remains a cultural and political model to this day. It established a cultural model and a social-administrative structure that works.

Worldview (B.C. to 2020s): Different World, Different Culture

Despite the widely perceived social and economic difficulties of the U.S., the world remains geared toward Western culture. But this Western culture is not what China now seemingly wants. It wants something different.

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[40] Taisu Zhang, *The Ideological Foundations of Qing Taxation: Belief Systems, Politics, and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Taisu Zhang, *The Laws and Economics of Confucianism: Kinship and Property in Pre-Industrial China and England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[41] Avner Greif, Joel Mokyr, and Guido Tabellini, *Two Paths to Prosperity: Culture and Institutions in Europe and China, 1000–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025).

Two books written over a decade ago outline what China may look like in the future. One is *The New Warring States Period* (Xin Zhanguo Shidai) by Qiao Liang, Wang Xiangsui, Wang Jian, and Li Xiaoning.[42] The four envision a world where a few states compete with one another, but it is fairly stable despite the name.

At first, the book was supposed to be titled *The Time of the Springs and Autumns*. Still, after some thinking, the authors changed it because they did not wish to invite controversy: in the Spring and Autumn period, between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C., hundreds of states were destroyed. In contrast, in the following period, the Warring States period, the situation remained fairly stable until the unification by the Qin emperor.

The second book, *The System of All Under Heaven* by Zhao Tingyang (Tianxia Tizhi),[43] tries to explain and present a worldview where everybody has to agree to a common global interest and preserve it. The different balance of power can be maintained thanks to a common interest in joint development.

These two views hark back to the time before the Qin unification, when the Yellow River Basin was divided into many states competing with one another. This provided a pattern to interpret, read, and project a Chinese-style worldview based on its history and culture.

A traditional worldview, emerging after the Qin unification, held China together for roughly 2,000 years through centuries of

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[42] Wang Jian 王建, Li Xiaoning 李晓宁, Qiao Liang 乔良, and Wang Xiangsui 王湘穗, *Xin Zhanguo shidai* 新战国时代 [*The New Warring States Period*] (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 2004).

[43] Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳, *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* 天下体系：世界制度哲学导论 [*The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005).

occasional turmoil and uprisings that all ended in a renewed unification.

Until the 19th century, for roughly two millennia, China largely had a very simple worldview: The empire's unity was expected to be preserved above all other considerations. Once the central state is strong, everything will fall into order, and no external challenges will be strong enough to topple the system.

This worldview was based on China's geographical position and its political history. The geographic position was the semi-isolation of China. That is, China did not border any major powers with which it had to balance its territorial clout.

Its only major challenge would be the internal order that could give rise to rebellions, and threats from people from the north of China, Siberia, and Mongolia, who lived in a land deprived of most sources of reliable income but had the horses necessary for the Chinese war efforts and economy.

Besides this external pressure, there was the risk of an internal uprising triggered by a financial/tax crisis that impoverished farmers. People from the north could take advantage of a crisis and overthrow the internal order.

It happened with the Tang dynasty (618–907), when semi-Turkic peoples from the border of the empire took power; it was identical with the Mongols (1271–1368) and with the Manchu (1644–1911). In some cases, as with the Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) or the Ming (1368–1644), a peasants' uprising was successful and established a new domestic dynasty. With the Qin (221–207 B.C.), the Sui (581–619), and the Song (960–1279), the new empire emerged from the factional fights among rival kingdoms.

Then, in broad terms, China's grand strategy was fairly simple. Keep order within the state and keep foreigners at bay.

However, this pattern was broken by the Opium Wars beginning in 1839 when the English, the French, and other Western powers challenged the Qing power. Then, unlike the past northern invaders, these foreigners did not depose and replace the Manchu emperor with a new dynasty. The new foreigners instead tried to change and bend the existing rules of the Chinese empire.

It was a double challenge. First, for the first time, the crisis came from the sea; it came from the south and not from the land and the north. Then, a military defeat and a different balance of payment created by the import of opium and the sudden outflow of silver triggered the massive internal uprising of the 1850–1864 Taiping Rebellion. In the past, it was the other way around; there was first an economic crisis and an uprising, and then a military defeat and an invasion. This time it was first a defeat, then an uprising.

The second element was the foreign invaders. British and French expeditionary forces took Beijing in October 1860, amidst the Second Opium War, and ransacked the old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan); they did not aim to overthrow the Qing and establish a new dynasty in Beijing, but instead tried to deal with the existing dynasty and its government officials.

Of course, they pushed the existing government, but the foreigners did not establish their own government in China, unlike past northern invaders.



China was seeing a world that was very different from the past, but often did not quite compute, as Mao Zedong retook power,

rehearsing the past pattern of the Chinese peasant rebellions with some alliance with a northern power, that is, Russia in this case.

The Communist Party came to power by re-purposing the old imperial pattern, at least for ordinary Chinese people, who usually saw Mao as the new emperor and the Communist Party as the new dynasty.

Now, can this imperial pattern be a way to think about the present? The two books (*The New Warring States Period* and *The System of All Under Heaven*) seem to disagree and tend to believe that a time when China was divided can provide a better paradigm for thinking about the world and its future.

Strategy (1600s and 1700s): China's Politics: A Continuation of War by Other Means

For centuries, arguably since its unification under the first emperor, Qinshi Huangdi, China's rulers operated under the assumption that, as far as external threats were considered, the paramount concern was to ensure that its internal conditions remained solid and stable. If China had no rebellions, no domestic rifts, and no toxic power struggles, then external powers were unlikely to be strong enough to challenge and defeat it.

China set a clear pattern of priorities in its strategic thinking: internal issues always had primacy over external issues, to the point that external issues were largely negligible once the home front was secured. This mindset was applied to withstanding the main external threats, which were generally understood to come from Central Asia and the north. There, relatively small groups of fast-moving and battle-hardened nomads or semi-nomadic populations could plunge into China and pillage and pull the whole country apart because the local farmers and peasants were used to

a life of toil and were no challenge to the northerners, even if they were divided and not well coordinated.

However, if these farmers were molded into stable cohorts and hardened with great discipline, efficient tactics, good weapons, and plenty of food, they would create a largely unbreachable great wall against foreign invasions.

The mainstay then was that China was too extensive, too populous, and too rich for any foreign country to pose a real threat, provided China stayed united. This security pattern was based on a worldview defined by China's geographic position. That is, China was comparatively isolated from the rest of the planet. Not isolated like the cultures in the Americas, which were totally out of touch, but far enough removed so that actual threats were minimal or manageable given its size. Dynasties collapsed when internal pressure lent an opportunity to bandits (like the Han, the Ming, or the Communists) or foreigners (like the Tang or the Manchu)—or so was the story told in official histories.

Central Asia and Tibet created a significant barrier in the west. The Central Asian steppes and deserts in the north were also formidable barriers. Then there were jungles and mountains in the south and the oceans in the east.

However, this geographic situation began to alter gradually following the European "discovery" of the American continent and the success of skilled European mariners in sailing to Asia. This put the Indies and China in contact with an energetic European political and commercial world, and this represented a challenge arising from the ocean rather than from the Asian land gateway.

On two occasions[44], China failed to grasp where and what the great challenge and threat lay. The first time was between the late 16th and early 17th centuries when the Spanish reached China from Macao. The other time was 200 years later, when the English came to China from the south, near Macao, in Hong Kong. In both cases, China lacked any understanding and appreciation of the prevailing European rules of global trade. Failing to adjust to and master those rules contributed to the emergence of economic crises that spilled over into social and political discontent that, taken together, led to the demise of the Ming dynasty and then the Qing dynasty.

Is the contemporary period any different for China?

Before going into this, we should look at the genesis of the present imperial power – the U.S.. "From the beginning of its existence, the U.S. was engaged in diplomacy, power politics, wars, and every foreign entanglement imaginable. That was inevitable. Nations rarely last long if they aren't aware of foreign threats and

[44]See, for example, "False Beliefs of the Inevitable Chinese Rise," *SettimanaNews*, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/false-beliefs-of-the-inevitable-chinese-rise/; "200 Years' Crisis and Its Knowledge," *SettimanaNews*, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/200-years-crisis-and-its-knowledge/; and "The Visions of China," *SettimanaNews*, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.settimananews.it/italia-europa-mondo/the-visions-of-chinas/.

opportunities," argues George Friedman.[45] The thirteen American colonies were adept in leveraging the existing rivalry between England and France, offering France an opportunity to regain what it had lost to England a couple of decades earlier on the American continent. All great powers in the West emerged by skillfully managing foreign affairs with a mix of diplomacy and war, evolving strategies and tactics geared to domestic strengths and foreign vulnerabilities.

The change of political geography around China in the past century should have forced China once and for all out of its old thinking and into a new mindset. Nevertheless, despite abundant evidence that China was no longer as isolated and hence protected from outside challenges as during the dynastic period, many in Beijing still seem hostage to thought processes akin to imperial patterns.

Xi Jinping is often described as the first Chinese "emperor" to wake up to a different reality, and he is reacting to it and trying to integrate into the world.

At Davos, he said, "Zero-sum game or winner-takes-all is not the guiding philosophy of the Chinese people. As a staunch proponent of an independent foreign policy of peace, China aims to bridge differences through dialogue and resolve disputes through negotiation and to pursue friendly and cooperative

[45] George Friedman, *The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, the Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

relations with other countries based on mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit."[46]

The BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is illustrative of a Chinese initiative emerging from the worldview articulated by Xi Jinping and others. The problem is that the BRI emerged as something seemingly antagonistic to the existing world order. From the outset, it was presented and, in a sense, marketed as a distinctively Chinese approach, one undertaken without any effort at prior discussion, much less cooperation with the United States. Hence, it was widely perceived outside China as a thinly veiled scheme intended to replace the U.S. and a direct challenge to the existing global order.

The Origin of the BRI

Before the launch of the BRI, the situation for China seemed dire. China was boxed in, and the BRI tried to turn this difficulty into an advantage, projecting national development along the Eurasian continent. But we should first look at the Chinese situation around 2007.

The simple list of countries directly bordering China exposes Beijing's difficult geographic position. Starting from the Northeast and moving counterclockwise, are North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. Then, there are the sea neighbors all quarreling over the disputed Spratly and Paracel islands. China claims all of them, while Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei each claim parts of them. In

[46] Xi Jinping, remarks at the World Economic Forum, Davos, January 25, 2021, Xinhua News Agency, accessed February 1, 2026, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/25/c_139696610.htm.

addition, we have Taiwan, which is the largest problem of all, primarily because it is considered part of China, awaiting "reunification" and is not a "neighboring country." Finally, there are Japan and South Korea.

In all, China is surrounded—almost besieged—by 21 states or territories. Of these, at least three are giants: Japan, whose economy was larger than China's until two decades ago, India, with a fast-growing economy and rapidly growing population that has already exceeded China's population, and Russia, the old military superpower seeking to become an energy superpower while reclaiming its lost status as an acknowledged world superpower. None of them has governments as friendly to China as those of Canada or Mexico have traditionally been toward the U.S.

Beijing presently controls none of its neighbors in the way Moscow used to run its satellites in the Soviet empire. The only two governments often described as "friendly" to China, North Korea and Burma, have proved time and again to be far less obedient than Beijing might have wished. The former has tried to stir up a regional fuss in the past decades by demanding aid in exchange for giving up a part of its nuclear weapons program; Now the third Kim to rule the hermit country wants full recognition of his nuclear capabilities in return for "getting along" with the United States. The latter has resisted demands to move toward economic reforms and check drug trafficking.

Yet these two neighbors are but a small nuisance compared with the greater threat posed by giants like Japan, India, and Russia, or even by smaller but no less ambitious countries like Vietnam, which had its last border clash with China as late as 1988. In that small naval skirmish, approximately 80 Vietnamese sailors were killed by Chinese battleships, which were trying to enforce Beijing's claim on some remote South China Sea reefs.

Friends like Pakistan can also be troublesome. In 1998, Pakistan exploded six nuclear devices against Beijing's wishes, as China has consistently argued. The following year, Islamabad started a border war with India in Kargil that quickly escalated, arousing concerns in China that an all-out conflict might erupt at its southwestern border. Pakistan and India are in fact rival, neighboring nuclear states. Pakistan, for decades, has been closer to China, while India feels that China wants to exert pressure on it through Pakistan. A war between these two countries could spin out of control and endanger China's security near its soft underbelly: the restive region of Tibet.

A large dispute could emerge between China and Japan as well over the control of some islands that the Chinese call Diaoyu and the Japanese Senkaku. In the sea around those islands, which are little more than rocks, there are significant gas fields, and energy-starved Japan and China are both keen on claiming them. Moreover, old issues of history (i.e., Japan's invasion of China in 1937), national ambition, and pride in both countries make for a potentially lethal combination.

Beyond these are a handful of smaller strategic issues. Self-identified Maoist guerrillas, ravaging the Chinese border with Nepal, have spilled into India and Bangladesh, destabilizing the countryside in both places.

Geography as Constraint and Advantage

Geography is a formidable obstacle to Beijing's ambition in Asia and turns its position into an advantage for all. Geography is often destiny—perhaps the most inevitable of all. America's power projection throughout the world in the 20th century, after a period of splendid isolation, was first possible because of its borders. It had no enemies pressing upon her. She was, and is,

sandwiched between two geographically large countries whose economies and populations are tiny compared to those of the U.S. Both of them, Canada to the north and Mexico to the south, have traditionally been America's allies, integrated through a trade agreement, NAFTA, and bound by security treaties guaranteeing Washington's safety. They are de facto buffer states, shielding the U.S. from direct threats. During the Cold War, the USSR shared a small maritime boundary line with the U.S., but it consisted of a sparsely populated area, Alaska, far removed from the American heartland. The only true hemispheric threat to the U.S. came from Cuba, since Castro had aligned with the Soviet Union, and the Havana-Moscow tie in the early 1960s almost plunged the U.S. and the USSR into a world war.

However, China is in a very different predicament. Embedded in the heart of Asia, it is bounded by nearly every other country on the continent, large and small. In fact, it is the Asian country with the greatest number of bordering neighbors. China has less than idyllic relations with many of them; it has open border disputes or only recently resolved ones with others. Many are unstable countries; others are ambitious ones eyeing China's economic and political growth with fear and suspicion. Most have a history of vassalage to China, from which they have freed themselves only in the past century because of China's misfortunes. They worry that China, once again a superpower, will try to force them back into their previous status of satrapies.

Besides the countries bordering China directly, many other states remain heavily influenced by it. Thailand and Bangladesh, for instance, feel the Chinese presence breathing down their necks, despite a safe distance of a few hundred kilometers from the nearest Chinese frontier. Even Cambodia, more than 1,000 km away from the closest Chinese border, remembers well that

from 1979 to 1991 it hosted a proxy war between Vietnam and China.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the situation was as follows. Slowly aft Obama's pivot to Asia and rapidly after COVID many things changed.

Merciless pirates infested the South China Sea, disrupting the world's busiest supply lines. Heavily armed drug traffickers operate on the border with Burma, providing cash and all kinds of smuggled goods to Triads infiltrating Chinese society.

In this environment, the dramatic change of the status quo, brought on by Chinese economic development, might have been sufficient to trigger a gigantic arms race. The resources spent on arms could, under other circumstances, easily outpace economic performance and soon drain national wealth.

That this had not happened was due to China's communication of its peaceful intentions and concentration on economic development. It had learned from the USSR's lesson: butter before guns. Too much expenditure on arms would lead to economic, social, and political collapse. If Beijing were to start a real arms race, its economy could have imploded in no time, even without any real pressure from abroad.

But, perhaps more importantly, such an arms race was not taking place in Asia because the U.S. had provided a security umbrella to its allies and tacitly to friends, so everyone else can put money to better use.

The case of the American alliance with Japan nicely illustrated this state of affairs. Washington's commitment to Tokyo is theoretically considered a threat by Beijing. But Beijing is not overly concerned about it and, in fact, welcomes it up to a point. The U.S. nuclear umbrella prevents Japan's rearmament, and, for many reasons, China prefers the "American threat" to the

Japanese one. Without America, Japan would have to secure its own defense, and all manner of prejudice and miscalculation could push Tokyo to deploy more weapons than Beijing would be comfortable with. After all, Japan has invaded China; America hasn't. China feels that America's alliance with Japan helps to allay Japan's concerns over China, thus holding Japan's own military spending in check.

The case of Japan also held true for India. China had not overreacted to the American deal to supply nuclear technology to India in 2006, despite the fact that in 1998 India exploded six nuclear devices, while openly presenting it as a move against the Chinese threat. In the early 2000s, Beijing might have felt that closer military ties between the U.S. and India could help restrain New Delhi's military ambitions. Now, of course, the angle is completely reversed, as India is inching closer to the US, trying to contain China.

This pattern is no less true vis-à-vis those countries with which China has friendly relations. For example, South Korea was tempted to become a nuclear power—a temptation that would be stronger without an American presence in the country. Singapore, again a friend of China, would otherwise find its proximity to Malaysia or Indonesia far more worrisome, potentially spreading instability across the South China Sea.

It was hard to believe that in the short term, China would be able to manage its own security in Asia—which is to say the security of the region as a whole—among its motley collection of distrusting neighbors.

On the other hand, the U.S. cordoned off China's periphery. Besides basing troops in South Korea and Japan, America pursued close ties with the Thai military, maintains a large naval base in Singapore, and had garrisons scattered throughout

Central Asia. Yet its troops were combating fundamentalist Muslim militants who, besides being enemies of the U.S., were also eager to support their brethren who remain active in the Chinese region of Xinjiang.

America's forward basing might pose a threat to China if Beijing desired to militarily project itself beyond its boundaries. But if Beijing did not want it, this presence could be seen just as a form of savings for Chinese military expenditures. Deng's old tenet that China must think first of the economy has benefited thanks to the U.S. presence, but Xi's military ambitions in the last 15 years have completely reversed the old stand

The same principle works in reverse: The American presence saves the other Asian countries the trouble of worrying about managing China's growth. If one thinks of Asia as a kind of vast engine, with China at its hub, America then acts as a kind of engine oil in the geopolitical machinery, helping relations to run smoothly throughout. Without America, China would have to deal with at least 21 hostile or semi-hostile neighbors, devoid of the old pattern of vassal ties and lacking a cultural mold for new interactions. Similarly, without America, all of Asia would have to conceive a new way of coping with rising China, with no established multilateral institutions for the purpose, and each country too weak to treat with China on a bilateral basis.

America, then, is good for China and the other Asian countries. But the opposite holds true as well: China's rise is good for the American presence in Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, the U.S. should have pulled out or greatly reduced its presence in Asia.

Without China's ebullient economic and political development, America would have far less cause to maintain a presence in Asia. Asian countries could more easily manage their

affairs by themselves, and the U.S. government and businesses would have less reason to be involved on the continent. China's "threat" then is a blessing for all countries involved; it can be seen as the reason for the peaceful development of the Asia-Pacific region.

This blessing, however, hinges on a delicate balance: A carefully managed distance between China, the U.S., and the other Asian countries. Any imbalance between any two countries can cast a shadow over the entire regional equilibrium. It is not unlike the challenge of keeping the peace of Europe after the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, but on a much larger scale. Then add several active nuclear states, several failing states, growing religious fundamentalism, nationalistic movements, exploding wealth, mounting social inequality, rising criminality, etc.

In this situation, a thriving China could be the best possible scenario. However, it is an extremely volatile state of affairs, made all the more so because of China's continuing growth, and this environment cannot last forever.

Therefore, China needed to take a more active role in the strategic security of the region by building a new culture of political relations in Asia and fostering new ties in the region.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's April 11–13, 2007, visit to Japan set a new tone for relations with the most sensitive and powerful of China's neighbors. Wen stressed that friendly relations had existed between China and Japan for 2,000 years,[47] and said that there have been problems between the two countries only in the past 50 years.

[47] Wen Jiabao, "Speech to the Japanese Diet," address to the Japanese Diet, Tokyo, April 12, 2007.

Whether or not this was historically accurate, it was politically momentous. The speech was broadcast live in China so that the Chinese public could take note of the new official line and learn that anti-Japanese chauvinism was no longer encouraged in Beijing. The Japanese parliamentarians applauded, demonstrating Japanese domestic endorsement for the new line of harmonious relations between the two neighbors.

However, in recent years, China-Japan dynamics have completely changed. In 2025, Japan elected its first woman prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, who openly asserted that Taiwan's security was a matter of national security. The PRC reacted with economic retaliation, Takaichi called for snap elections, and they won with an extraordinary majority. Japanese people were not intimidated by the economic costs of confrontation with China; they chose national interests rather than economic rewards. This changed bilateral and regional dynamics as other countries in the area may choose to follow Japan's example rather than China.

These events had consequences throughout the world.

The growth of China and the Pacific region, and the U.S. political involvement therein, increasingly render the European Union superfluous. Political and economic growth is concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region, while the EU flounders on the periphery. Europeans would need to assess, in light of their geopolitical marginalization, whether the Union really serves their interests, or whether they would be better off as separate states. This dynamic was reversed with the war in Ukraine, which, contrary to Russia's expectations, brought European countries closer together, including the UK, no longer part of the EU.

One perspective 15 years ago was that, in time, perhaps around 2040, a best possible scenario could emerge in this way: China has managed to develop a new approach of regional ties

without vassalage, and Asian affairs are more integrated, both politically and economically. Even then, it was hard to imagine that the U.S. would be totally out of the picture. However, it may have eased the cordon around China, scaling down its military presence in the area, and it may have developed better relations with China, thanks to the integration of Taiwan into a Greater China.

Thanks to the due revaluation of the RMB, China may well be the largest economy, but the U.S. will still possess the most sophisticated military in the world. Furthermore, because of its complicated geopolitical situation, it was difficult to imagine that China could greatly build up its military without suffering regional blowback. This would void what would by then be decades of efforts at political easement. In fact, it did happen. China, overestimating its power, irked most neighboring countries. Therefore, despite the fact that in 2025, the new President Donald Trump administration gave signs of pulling out of its treaty obligations, Asian countries didn't bow to China but stood up to it, starting with Japan.

Meanwhile, as America's political capital in Asia was rising in the past decades, and even if the Trump administration may have squandered a part of it, the waste didn't build up China's power; it created a third pole in the region, further complicating political dynamics. US political capital had been squandered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

An analysis written by Wang Xiangsui[48] highlights this concern. In Key Points of Chinese National Security Strategy,[49] he explains that China worries about "power politics as the root threat to world peace and stability." He argues that the U.S. wants to use weapons and military tactics to fight terrorism, while China wants to advance economic and social development "to eliminate the soil for terrorism." The U.S. is worried about "failed or autocratic states"; China wants to develop Asian security agreements between countries to oppose terrorism.

Wang was worried that in so doing, the U.S. would fail to restrain terrorism. But the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was somehow made up for by Russian failures in Ukraine and Iran's proxy defeats in the Middle East. America's massive change of heart could awaken thousands of ghosts throughout Asia, with each nation attending more closely to its security, resulting in an arms race and a loss of economic growth throughout the region.

So, while treading deftly on a new path of political relations among Asian countries, China and other states must pay special attention to developments in the Middle East. If America does not make major progress there in the next year, then perhaps a new Saddam—kept on a shorter leash—would be brought in to salvage the operation. Yet if the fight against Saddam were to result in bringing in a new Saddam, then the U.S. should perhaps review its quasi-ideological fear of "autocratic regimes." In fact, this is already happening. The Arab world is full of autocrats who rule their countries by oppressing their people with America's

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[48] Wang Xiangsui, a retired senior colonel of the People's Liberation Army and coauthor with Qiao Liang of *Chao xian zhan* [*War Beyond Limits*].

[49] Wang Xiangsui, "Key Points of Chinese National Security Strategy," *ISPI Papers*, December 2006.

blessing. But the U.S.'s blatant abandonment of former democratic ideals could further convince Islamic terrorists that its interests in the Middle East have only to do with oil. This, and the oppressive behavior of the region's U.S.-sponsored dictators, could in turn boost anti-American sentiments. Of course, the U.S. can't be unrealistic and try to promote democracy where democracy has no seed, no soil. But by abandoning altogether its ideals U.S. does itself a disservice.

If, in the Middle East, America remains caught between the Scylla of the autocrats and the Charybdis of the terrorists, the Asian countries could soon start thinking of new security arrangements without America. This is a path fraught with risks for all involved: For the U.S., for China, and for the whole of Asia.

Worldview (1500s to 1800s): After the Discovery of America

The Chinese system held together well until the late 16th century. In 1571, the Christian alliance led by Spain stopped the Turkish advance in the Mediterranean. A few months apart, there was a watershed in Asia, too. At the time, the Spanish and the Portuguese conquered Manila in the Philippines. They expelled the local Chinese traders with the blessing of the Ming court, which did not like these Chinese traders doing business outside the authority of the Chinese state.

Then, from Manila and Macau, the Spanish Portuguese established essential trade with China that changed the economy of the Ming dynasty at the time. They used silver coming from Mexico to buy porcelain and brocade from China and shipped it back to Spain and Europe. These were primary luxury goods.

The massive inflow of silver boosted the economy of the Ming state; however, the flow of silver gradually stopped with the beginning of the Thirty Years' War in Europe around 1620. Spain did not have money for Chinese silk anymore; it had to spend it on the war in Europe.

Stopping the supply of silver created massive inflation in China. In some ten years, there was a vast difference between copper coins farmers used in their local economy and the value of silver, the metal used to pay taxes to the state. The difference between copper and silver rose nearly tenfold in just over a decade. As a result, the farmers grew poor; they rebelled and joined Li Zicheng's uprising, which toppled the empire.

Ming loyalists called on the Manchu to quell the rebellion. The Manchu quelled the rebellion, then established their Qing dynasty and ruled China. The new dynasty was established in 1648, the year of the Peace of Westphalia, which set up the political rules for modern Europe and the modern world.

For the first time, China's economy was drawn into the global economy, something very different from its order. Even if the Spaniards did not try to invade China and did not start a war against China, the significant impact of grand economic forces shook China and ultimately set in motion energies that brought down the Ming dynasty.

We have a similar pattern two centuries later.

From the late 16th century, China was an example of high civilization and culture in the Western world. Every European thinker tried to understand Chinese texts, and Chinese texts were an inspiration for many new concepts coming into Europe. The Taoist idea of wuwei 无为 inspired the notion that knowledge should not be concentrated in a few people's heads. It may have

helped spark a cultural revolution that led to the birth of capitalism and the capitalist market[50].

Markets have always existed. However, capitalist markets are different from ancient markets. Ancient markets mixed exchange with trickery and trade with cheating. Trade was not fair because the idea was that one party knew more than the other party; therefore, from the start, trade was uneven.

However, through Hume and Adam Smith in the West, we have, for the first time, the idea that trade should be fair. It's a fair exchange of values, and extra value is created in the creative effort of entrepreneurs who start new businesses, factories, or something else. The extra value created comes from capitalist innovation, not cheating in an exchange or plunder.

And the idea that knowledge is fairly distributed and underpinned by fair trade was likely inspired by China through wuwei and Buddhist translations from Tibet[51].

What came to Europe then, besides the idea of fair markets, was the idea of land administration, which led to vast boosts in agricultural productivity in France and considerable boosts in people's fertility rate. There were more people; there was a population boom in France. We have an administration coming from China, the idea of revolution, changes of dynasties, and some scientific ideas coming from the Yi Jing 易經 to Leibniz.

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[50] Karl Stickler, "The Wu-Wei and the Invisible Hand," *Academia.edu*, accessed September 7, 2026; Francesco Sisci, "Basic Hurdles for a Chinese World Order," *Appia Institute*, September 10, 2023.

[51] Alison Gopnik, "How an 18th-Century Philosopher Helped Solve My Midlife Crisis: David Hume, the Buddha, and a Search for the Eastern Roots of the Western Enlightenment," *The Atlantic*, October 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/how-david-hume-helped-me-solve-my-midlife-crisis/403195/; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), bk. 4, chap. 2.

China inspired some significant changes in Europe at the time. The idea of the invisible hand and distribution of knowledge, the bureaucracy, the idea of the state as an entity with its own logic, almost independently of its ruler. Thinkers like Voltaire and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz regarded China as a "Kingdom of Rationality". They admired the Chinese imperial system, which they perceived as being based on meritocracy rather than hereditary aristocracy.

- Meritocracy and the Civil Service: The Chinese imperial examination system (Keju) was praised by European thinkers, including the French Physiocrats, as a paragon of "equality of opportunity" and an advanced method of bureaucratic selection.
- Critique of European Religion and State: Philosophers used reports from Jesuit missionaries to argue that China had developed a stable, ethical society without the need for a dominant Christian church. This provided ammunition for proponents of secularism and those looking to limit the power of the church-state alliance in Europe.

Then, possibly, we have a few elements that produced a leap forward between the 16th and 19th centuries in Europe.

There was trade worldwide, and with the discovery of America, the agricultural revolution brought on by American plants moved everywhere. There were the old ideas of political fairness, equality, and property rights. Still, there were new ideas of the equal spread of knowledge, public service, and administration of the land brought from China.

In a nutshell, the massive changes in Europe from the 18th and 19th centuries were made of three elements: One was its old tradition coming from the Mediterranean, the second was the discovery of America and the discovery of trade routes with every

part of the world, and the third was inspiration from China through the Jesuits and their translations of new ideas of the state and society.

This new Europe looked up to China and traded with China, and there was one essential product that China was providing to the West: tea leaves.

European and North American towns and cities undergoing the Industrial Revolution had highly adulterated water. The water was foul. It had to be boiled to be potable, but the water tasted foul even after boiling. Tea made the water more palatable. The tea trade became extremely important; in some ways, we can see it as similar to the trade in potable water. It made life easier and more sustainable for citizens of big European cities and elsewhere.

All these tea leaves were paid for with silver. Around 1827-1830, China hoarded about 70% of the world's silver; it had an economy that was nearly half of the global economy. Yet ten short years later, it lost the first Opium War with England in 1841. Trade was pried open, inflation set in, and a new peasant rebellion began soon thereafter: the Taiping. There was a second Opium War; this time, the opponents were the English, the French, and the Americans. Then China lost everything.

In these two examples, with the Ming and the Qing, we have somehow a counterexample of what ancient Chinese history would tell: If you are big and strong enough in your borders, you can withstand all foreign challenges.

With both the Ming and Qing dynasties, we see that the Ming and Qing did not manage to understand and fully control the forces at play at the time.

The Ming dynasty was mighty in the late 16th century; it could have sent people to study in Europe and tried to find ways for the

emperor to bond with the Chinese traders dominating Southeast Asian trade. They could have sent military forces to America to root out the Spanish and conquer Mexico.

It did not do anything because this thinking was beyond the imagination of the Chinese of the era.

Similarly, when confronted with the English challenge in the early 19th century, China of the Qing dynasty failed to grasp the perspective of others that hoarding 70% of all global silver was choking all international trade and raising impossible barriers to the flow of international commerce. Global trade would grind to a halt if this hoarding of silver were not discontinued. It should have been done as early as the late 18th century when Western merchants insisted on knocking at their doors.

At the same time, the Qing dynasty could have opted to send scholars and officials to study what England was about; it should have sent people to organize trade in a new way. With its strength, it could have managed to root out Western colonies from Asia, replace them, and start trading on its own terms with England and France.

Still, this was beyond China's imagination; it did not do it. For many years, it was distracted, thinking along traditional lines that the main threat to its survival was enemies from the north: Russia and the farmers' uprising. It failed to see the linkages in all that, and when it saw it, it could not act on it.

These two instances are a rebuttal of the old Chinese principle that the organization and control of the land would be sufficient to withstand and prevail over any challenge. Quite the opposite, a small force, in the case of the Opium Wars, managed to defeat much greater Chinese troops, just like the Macedonians prevailed 2,000 years before over the much stronger Persians.

The Communist Party and the 1919 May 4th demonstrations are all parts of this extensive reassessment of Chinese history.

China's political environment today is in no way similar to that of the 1st millennium B.C. around the Yellow River. It is more similar to the environment around the Mediterranean Sea. The experience of the past 400 years has shown that small forces, well-guided and well-organized, can prevail over larger forces.

It is not about morals, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly; it is about what can work and what cannot. It is what works better and what does not work well.

In the formula we see from the 18th and 19th centuries, there are three elements: international trade, Chinese inspiration for the ideas of fairness and equal distribution of knowledge, and a Western tradition of equal rights.

Worldview (1800s to 2000s): Shocked China

The past two centuries for China have been an immense shock. It is the shock of massive exposure to Western culture. Its approach has often been very political and sentimental, and the response has been to periodically resurrect and refurbish Chinese traditions.

Yet perhaps the history of the past two centuries is the history of the slow intermingling of Chinese traditional history and Western history. Therefore, it is correct to understand and study Chinese history. It is China's roots, and one cannot live without roots. However, since the world around China, which is pressing China, is vastly Western, it may be complicated to understand it and understand what China should do without a deep understanding of Western history.

The Communist Party of China and Xi Jinping's efforts in the new management of China and the new Chinese law on foreign affairs were all responses to the necessity of dealing with

pressures from Western history with a Chinese understanding. The balance of the two has been crucial, and the answers will be essential for China and the world.

Strategy (20th Century): The Army-Party

China's Army problems are existential for the country, as the party knows that power, whether internal or external, comes from the barrel of the gun. The original sentence is 槍桿子裏面出政權, literally meaning "political power comes out of the barrel of the gun" like a bullet. Mao Zedong, one of the founders of the CPC and the grand strategist of CPC victory in the civil war and a co-founder with the (soon eclipsed) Zhu De of the CPC army, pronounced the phrase for the first time during an emergency Party meeting on August 7, 1927. He wanted to stress the importance of building an army to win power through a war in the actual power struggle of the time.

The phrase is grounded in centuries of Chinese tradition, when the ruling power was toppled thanks to grassroots rebellions led by an army of rebels. The first Chinese dynasty was established in this way. Liu Bang, born in a peasant family and founder of the Han Dynasty, so crucial as to lend its name to the majority ethnic people of modern China, rose like this. He took part in the rebellion against the ruling Qin dynasty, which, for the first time at the end of the third century B.C., had unified "all under Heaven," the Chinese world. Then, after the fall of the dynasty, Liu Bang, the weaker rebel leading an army of peasants, wrested power from Xiang Yu, the actual leader of the insurrection.

This storyline very closely follows the rise to power of the CPC. In the early 1920s, the main leadership elements of the party and

its Soviet advisors thought of gaining control through a sudden insurrection, following the successful example of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

In 1927, the party organized an uprising in China's then most crucial city, Shanghai. The uprising miserably failed. The party leadership narrowly made it out alive. Mao drew the lesson that the Chinese revolution must be a protracted war of attrition conducted by an army of peasants. More importantly, he saw that the party, until then an urban semi-underground structure, had to turn itself into a field army, and the military in the rural areas, not the urban presence, was to be the real backbone of the party.

All of this doesn't mean that generals were to rule the country. It is a structure or a way of thinking. There is a structure of political commissars in the PLA that gives the army the "party line." The political commissars are fully integrated with the military and make sure the generals, or the colonels do not move or think independently, but follow the party directives. These commissars are an integral leadership component of the army, not something simply grafted onto it.

The Soviet communist party was a party of activists who first took power in a coup staged in the capital, Moscow, and later were obliged to wage a field war against troops loyal to the toppled czar. After gaining control of power, the Soviets had to recruit the former imperial (White Russian) army officers and surveil them closely to pursue the war. For the most part, these turncoat officers never became a real part of the party. Although Stalin took part in armed actions, he was never a general or a military strategist. He did not personally fight the White Army (that was Trotsky, among others) or the Nazis (that was Zhukov). For this, he periodically purged the army to keep the party always in firm control.

In China, it was very different. After the failed Shanghai uprising of April 12, 1927, the victory in a protracted war was the only path to power. Here, the party soon had to integrate with local chieftains and even sympathetic warlords who had far more combat experience than the young blood of the CPC.

Marshal Zhu De, co-founder of the army and lifetime loyal partner of Mao, was a warlord before joining the CPC in Germany. These people were the army and the CPC's only power; they could not be purged by a party controlling the capital. The party component tried to educate these men politically, but they were the actual party. Similarly, even the party members who first wanted an insurrection, like Zhou Enlai, then learned to be field army commanders.

Mao's position proved to be correct. He even saw the turning point of the war in the Japanese invasion of China in 1936. Then, after a ten-year-long flight from the KMT, after fleeing to a dreadful place bordering on the desert, the army-party saw the political opportunity of a propaganda coup. Mao called for a truce between the CPC and the KMT and built a united front to fight the invader. Another warlord, Zhang Xueliang, expelled from his Manchurian base in 1931 by Japanese military forces, kidnapped Chiang Kai-shek, generalissimo of the KMT, in Xi'an in 1936 and forced him to accept an alliance with the CPC. Chiang agreed. His forces stopped fighting the CPC to concentrate on the Japanese, also thanks to U.S. encouragement. America also lent a hand to the CPC. Eventually, the U.S. won the war against Japan, and the KMT and CPC fought for control of the country, almost like Xiang Yu and Liu Bang. Mao, like Liu, triumphed in an actual all-out civil war.

Mao strategized about it: He wanted to win the war by pitting two large enemies, the Japanese and the KMT, against one

another. He would use the war to build his forces, and at the end of this preliminary contest, he would initiate an armed conflict with the winner. In this strategy, Mao succeeded in winning the understanding, and even support, of the two other important players in the Chinese game, the USSR and the U.S. From the USSR, he received active, although at times reluctant, support. From the U.S., he managed to secure something like passive neutrality.

Unlike Stalin in the USSR, the whole CPC always credited Mao with the overall political-military (the two are always together in Chinese traditional and present thinking) strategy that won the war with the KMT.

Events that followed reinforced this – the strength of the PLA over the "simple CPC." The party, during the war, was divided into two main "branches," the active army, fighting in the countryside, and the underground organization, with its network of spies and militants, engaged in the areas under KMT or Japanese control. Mao and the actual army had the upper hand. But when the army entered the cities, the true center of the country, Mao and his peasant soldiers, who had lived in the countryside for decades, did not know about urban life and economic production. They did not know how to run the cities. Liu Shaoqi, hailing from the underground organization, gained growing clout after 1949, when the CPC came to power, until 1959, when he rose to the position of chairman of the People's Republic. In 1959, Liu wrested away significant power from Mao, who had led the country into widespread artificial starvation through his Great Leap Forward policies. The Great Leap could be seen as an effort to refocus on the countryside, which Mao and his PLA knew, versus the cities.

Part IV

Communist China: The Cultural Revolution and the One-Child Policy

Worldview (1900s): Different Mental Frameworks

War with China and around China is no longer unthinkable. Defense Ministries of half of the world are drawing plans and forecasts anticipating move after move, like in a chess game, mapping patterns of actions and reactions between China and its potential enemies around Taiwan, the South China Sea, on the Indian border, around North Korea, and elsewhere. China is undoubtedly doing the same.

Both are likely to make many mistakes in putting themselves in other people's shoes. It is now clear that Beijing has many issues in understanding American psychology. For at least a decade, it has underestimated the degree of Washington's dissatisfaction with the PRC and its determination to turn the relationship around.

The U.S. ability to judge or misjudge China's way of facing the possibility of war is less clear, as there are structural differences that play an essential role.

Modern Western states created a structure where purely military and strategic concerns are partly separated from political decisions and calculations. Otherwise, there would be military governments or civilian governments unable to manage possible wars.

The two, of course, have to come to a dialogue and thus an agreement, but at least in theory, political and strategic decisions are separated. The military stays out of politics, just as politicians do not try to interfere with the technicalities of military strategies. This is a pillar of democracies, where the military stays out of politics and does not try to stage dangerous coups.

Still, this has also created many short circuits because political leaders can be pressured in many ways by military constraints,

framed one way or another. Similarly, the military can be pushed into actions that strategically and technically make little or no sense due to significant political considerations taken into account by the political leadership.

For instance, the war in Somalia in 1992 was a political decision that made no strategic and military sense, which the military was forced to take on by the political leadership. Similarly, 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan was stalled for many years by military leaders loath to expose some strategic and technical failure.

However, China is different. In China, political and military decisions are pretty much integrated. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is historically the offspring of the Red Army and not the other way around, as in Russia.

In Russia, the party took power with Lenin's coup in 1917. Then, when confronted by the loyalist Tsarist army, the party forged ahead with a newly established army that recruited former imperial officers.

The CCP was very different, as we saw at the beginning of this report. The party as such was, yes, founded between Beijing, Shanghai, and Paris by young intellectuals; yes, it took shape along with the nationalist KMT army marching north. But then, after the failure of the CCP's 1927 uprising in Shanghai, the party survived through the Red Army that fought for many years in the countryside.

The army was the backbone of the party and the underground organization, a sort of group of militarized party secret agents who lived in the Japanese and KMT-occupied areas. As a wholly civilian organization, the party came to life only after the Red Army conquered Beijing, not before. That is, the party as government per se morphed out of the Red Army.

The Soviet party, conversely, had to first face the problem of ruling Moscow or Saint Petersburg; only after that, it created the army. This has generated different thinking about military actions and politics.

The principal strategist for the military victory of the Red Army was Mao, who was also the political leader of the Communist Party. He was both a political and a military strategist, but his worth as a political strategist was grounded in his successes as a military strategist, not vice versa.

He was credited with winning the war, not thanks to deft military maneuvers, but largely because of his keen observation of social and political realities that at an earlier stage managed to pit the Japanese against the KMT and later drew a consensus of domestic sentiment toward the Communist Party, sapping the spirit of the KMT.

This frame of mind continued throughout the history of the power of the Communist Party. Wars in Korea or Vietnam were hardly military victories per se, but they were undoubtedly political successes as they scored clear diplomatic goals for the ruling leadership.

The Korean War won the support of the USSR for China's first wave of modernization; Deng's limited Vietnam War commencing in 1979, "to teach Hanoi a lesson," helped China win U.S. support for the second wave of Chinese modernization. In both cases, the trusted allies, the USSR and the U.S., were gradually pushed aside when the CCP felt aid was no longer needed. It could have been some kind of elaboration from the strategy of the Three Kingdoms: you stick to your ally until you feel the third party has been defeated, and you are stronger than your ally.

This framework helps us think about how the PRC may consider military options around its border now that tensions are rising.

There seems to be a diverging mindset on war. A military defeat in the United States could bring down a president and the chances for his re-election, but not the political system. In China, a military defeat could bring down the ruling communist party.

This also brings the U.S. and China to different outcomes when military decisions are taken. Say a decision to start a war is taken by the U.S. The political leadership can reverse this decision because political considerations have changed, political goals have changed, and therefore, present concerns are no longer the same as the old ones.

Conversely, if China were to start a war, it may take longer and require more consideration to reach a political or military decision. But once the step is taken, it is harder to reverse the political decision without endangering the political leadership that took it. Not only the leader who started the war may be at risk, but the overall rule of the CCP may also be at risk. The CCP must win, or losing will bring down the "dynasty". Also, border tensions may be easily perceived as a wider threat to the Chinese system, and not just something that could be appeased with some frontier adjustments.

In other words, China may take more time and prepare more and longer to stage a war, but once it's started, China may have a harder time stopping it without claiming a political success. This means that if China starts a fight, considerations of possible escalations are already taken into account, factored in, and the country may be ready to go to a full-scale military scenario. The U.S. and Western countries may be less prepared to escalate, thinking that a military clash could be limited.

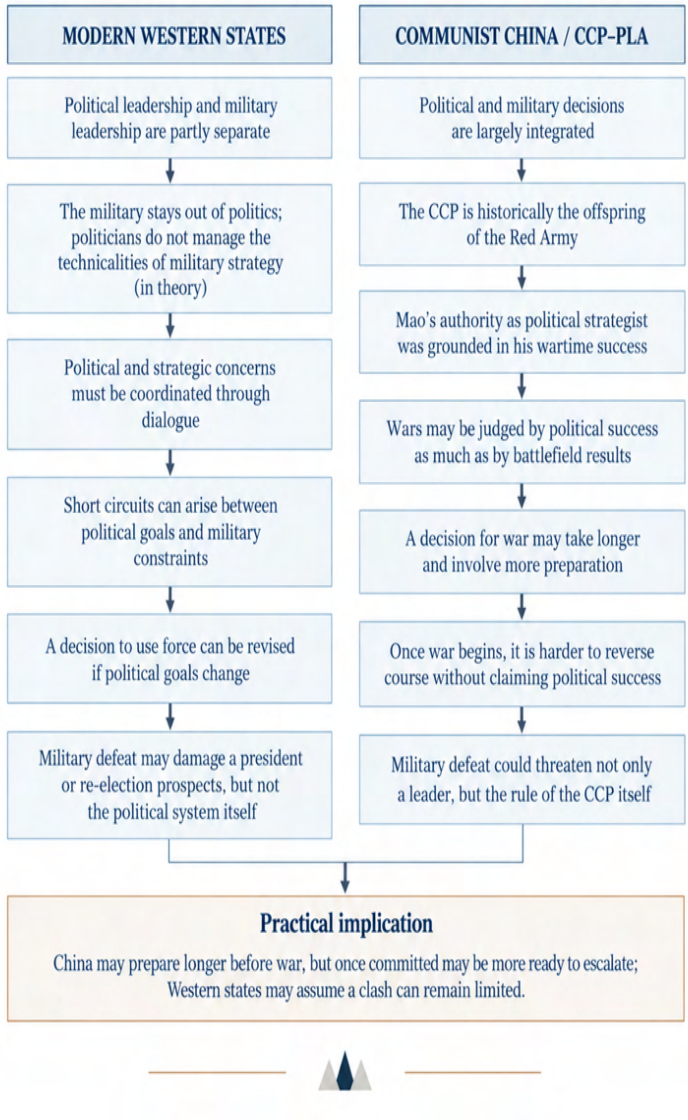
Also, fuller integration of politics and the military is useful for intimidation, brinkmanship, and bragging. Arsenals are convenient for show-offs, not necessarily for actual use. But when the military

is used, then it is difficult to turn back without claiming victory or toppling the regime. No country is willing to step down from a military engagement without a victory. But a loss for America doesn't mean the end of the nation. The US has historically recovered from defeats in Vietnam or Afghanistan. Similar losses might have brought down the Chinese communist party.

In practical terms, for instance, the U.S. must consider the possibility of a PRC attack against the small islands off the Fujian coast, which are controlled by the Taiwan government. Unlike a full-scale attack on Taiwan, these operations could be successful and provide political ammunition for the Party, American strategists may think. However, Chinese generals, also members of the Politburo, may consider the diplomatic and commercial fallout: a crash of international trade, a flight of foreign capital from the mainland and Hong Kong (now completely under PRC authority), and then the risk of a vast military escalation all around its border

Western and Chinese Civil–Military Decision Logic

A two-column conceptual flow diagram



This would also pose the issue of human losses in a possible war. Mao won the war, but he lost all his family in it. His brothers were all killed in the war with the KMT, and his heir, his son, died in the Korean War. With all this personal loss, he could claim the lives of the children of all Chinese families, including those of his closest associates. All people of Mao and Deng's generation lost family and friends in the war. The same is not true for the leaders who came after them. Now it could be much harder to tell families to get their only child killed. Two generations of people, parents and grandparents, six people, would have nothing left.

Governance (1900s): Legacy of World War II and Cold War I

Around China, two troubled legacies still have ramifications in the region and the world. One is the legacy of World War II: the division between China and Taiwan. Once upon a time, the two sides of the Strait held rival claims to govern the whole of China, and now they are still part of an unfinished civil war dating back to 1949. The second legacy is the Cold War: China is still ruled by a communist party, defeated in other parts of the world.

Indeed, the Cold War is still unfinished business, and the West still has qualms and issues with Russia, but there is no longer an ideological rivalry of the same kind. In China, officially, the Communist Party does not wish to spread its ideology worldwide. However, its highly negative attitude toward Western-style democracy is undisguised.

Moreover, its support for the North Korean regime, often described as half-hearted, reminds the region and the world that the Cold War is not yet over in this part of the world. With the baggage of these two long unfinished pieces of business, China is

facing a challenge rare in its history: to criticize and change the world or be a constructive participant in the existing world. Beijing should think about the mountain of challenges it is facing. It is war and politics.

If Clausewitz was right in his classic definition of war as a continuation of politics by other means, then politics is also a continuation of war by other means. In war, you win with good and potent weapons—and so it happens in politics. The PLA wants to acquire all the best weapons in the American arsenal. Still, the CPC refuses to procure one of the best weapons in American politics, democracy. This democracy might be undermined by some Western leaders, but it remains a powerful tool.

The culture of the CPC is a mix of aspirations to modernity, i.e., Westernization and Americanization; the revival of old culture, i.e., "Confucianism"; and banditry, described in the classic novel Water Margin [52] or the noble loyalty of the early Mohists and the philosophical writings of Lüshi Chunqiu.[53]

These are good weapons for a new "guerrilla politics," but modern politics is made of different tools. Here is a brief and cursory list: dependable policing, yes, but modulated through persuasion, built with lofty ideals, and with mediation that helps to build consensus. This must be buttressed by economics, where consensus is also "bought" while respecting dignity. Here, a certain

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[52] Shi Nai'an, *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980).

[53] *Lüshi Chunqiu* (*Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*), trans. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

amount of dissent is healthy as it keeps the game up and forces improvements.

Here, China not only refuses to adopt the political tool of democracy but also seems to fail to see its reality.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom wrote,[54] "Living in China is confusing now." This is because, as the novelist Yan Lianke said, "it can feel like being in North Korea and the U.S. at the same time." I recall smiling and nodding when he remarked, during a roundtable discussion[55] at Duke University's campus outside Shanghai six years ago. In one brief sentence, he captured just how special and strange China can seem—a country that has both gulags and Gap stores.

These contradictions make it difficult for China to deal with the world and the U.S., the present global leader, to deal with China. Neither understands the other and thus fails to address the other adequately.

An authoritative but anonymous American [56] offered a comprehensive strategy for dealing with China and, in sum, found in Xi's leadership the root of the present problems. The writer thus recommended a return to the pre-2013 order, the one before Xi came to power.

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[54] Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "Why Are There No Biographies of Xi Jinping?," *The Atlantic*, January 27, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/01/xi-jinping-china-biography/617852/.

[55] Yan Lianke, remarks at a roundtable discussion, Humanities Research Center Launch Event, Duke Kunshan University, Kunshan, China, c. 2015, https://dukekunshan.edu.cn/en/event/humanities-research-center-launch-event.

[56] "To Counter China's Rise, the U.S. Should Focus on Xi," *Politico Magazine*, January 28, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/28/china-foreign-policy-long-telegram-anonymous-463120.

Yet, the essay's logic is strange from a purely realistic and pragmatic point of view. If the analysis is correct and Xi is the problem, let's look at the present situation.

There was a power struggle (or there still is a power struggle), and Xi prevailed over his enemies. Why talk to and encourage his enemies, who have been beaten? Better talk to the winner, not the loser, i.e., Xi himself, no? His enemies are down, weak, and have lost for eight years. Do we think that if the U.S. or any other foreign power supported them, they would manage to topple Xi? Can the U.S. successfully stage a coup in China, a country with no penetration and little or no internal influence, which is highly complex, and where Xi conversely has tremendous clout?

Moreover, is the analysis correct? It argues that things went sour with the U.S. since 2013, when Xi came to power after Chongqing Party Chief Bo Xilai's "attempted coup." Yet it is possible that things started going wrong with the U.S. after the 2008 financial crisis,[57] and especially, if we want to pinpoint a moment, after the row in Copenhagen between Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and U.S. President Barack Obama, as China and the U.S. failed to find an agreement on climate. If so, Xi inherited the problem and did not create it. Xi may have made the situation worse, but it goes well beyond removing Xi if the crisis started in 2008.

Most importantly, all this discussion about internal Chinese stability is played according to the traditional Chinese mindset: make China internally unstable, break its unity, and conquer China. Without breaking its unity, China can seem invincible. Yet is this

[57] See "False Beliefs of the Inevitable Chinese Rise," *SettimanaNews*, accessed February 1, 2026, http://www.settimanews.it/informazione-internazionale/false-beliefs-of-the-inevitable-chinese-rise/.

logic correct? Especially since the general conditions do not apply any longer.

The main issue is that the world around China is much bigger than China, and the primary failure in Chinese logic is that China cannot dominate it following its old imperial pattern. If China could reasonably do it, it might have already won. But it has not because much of the global economy has been growing colder toward China, and issues are not simply about the economy, but about the power of charm through free debate and winning the hearts and minds of people, even with little or no economic reward. It is about Chinese politics taking an arrow out of the Western quiver: democracy.

Strategy (1900s): PLA Past Performance

The PLA had a relatively solid war record. It escaped annihilation by the KMT and Japanese in the 1930s and 1940s. It won the war with the KMT in 1949. It did not perform poorly in Korea in 1950, India in 1962, and the brief border skirmishes with the Soviet Union in 1969. It fared poorly against Vietnamese war-hardened veterans in 1979, despite intelligence assistance from the U.S.

But on closer inspection, did the PLA really "fight" well before Vietnam? Against the KMT and Japanese, it fought clever guerrilla warfare, avoiding significant confrontations and going for small ambushes and rapid withdrawals. But the CPC, like the KMT, lost to the Japanese in World War II. They won in large part because the U.S. delivered them a victory. At the armistice, Japan was occupying about half of China, where three-quarters of the population resided.

It routed the KMT forces in the civil war. Still, those soldiers were highly demoralized, and much motivation was sapped after almost

a decade of defeats at the hands of the Japanese and massive government corruption.

> Victories did not match Chiang (Kai-shek)'s victories on the battlefield in the political arena. As summer stretched into fall, the Nationalist regime's relationships with its American sponsors and with its people steadily deteriorated … Chiang's style of governance did not conform to American thinking and preferences. His penchant for authoritarianism and confidence in a military solution to the Communist insurrection put him at odds with his American interlocutors. These included not only George Marshall and his staff, but also the newly appointed American ambassador to China, John Leighton Stuart"[58]

As Tanner argued in 1946, Chiang won the actual fight in Manchuria against the CPC. Still, he politically lost his prominent supporters, the U.S., and much of the domestic public opinion, which turned against him, although a vast majority was not "communist." Then the PLA won the "political war" with the KMT, which carried out the actual military combat. The KMT soldiers surrendered when and because they felt they were on the losing side, and their demise would not have benefited their families and the government/country. Their sacrifice was unacceptable. Then they'd better surrender, and in fact, submit.

The PLA soon enrolled all the former KMT soldiers who had surrendered and then deployed them in Korea in 1950. Those men were used in the massive human waves against the Allies. They were "the second tier" soldiers who could save and honor themselves and their families by fighting or even falling loyally

[58] Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 46.

against the enemy for the new "ruling dynasty" in Beijing. That war was for the KMT soldiers an opportunity to clean their slate and start all over with honor. They died in droves; their families, blackened by the KMT background, became "red." They did it in belief they were on the winning side. Their fall would help their families and the new government 國家, literally "state and family," usually translated as "country," so their sacrifice was acceptable.

Incidentally, that war sowed a deep seed for the future of the party. Mao Zedong entrusted his close associate and minister of defense, Peng Dehuai, with his only "viable"[59] son, Mao Anying, who might have become his political heir. Anying was killed in an American bombing, despite being far away from the frontline. Mao might have blamed Peng for this. The result was hundreds of thousands of Chinese casualties, a figure most countries would consider a political defeat, but Beijing considered it a reasonable price for a military stalemate with the Americans.

The PLA fared much better in the brief 1962 war with India, where a better position and better logistical connections favored Beijing. But for Beijing, it was a significant boost of confidence. The time and place were awful for China. It was right at the end of the great famine of the Great Leap Forward when tens of millions of people starved to death out of a population of some 500 million.

It was also the worst location, as in 1959 Tibet rose against the Chinese occupation; thus, in theory, the Indian troops could have coordinated with local anti-communist resistance. Yet, despite these circumstances, the Indians were severely beaten, and this poor performance contributed to the sense of Chinese superiority that persisted for decades vis-à-vis the neighbor.

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[59] Author's note: Mao had another surviving son, but he had mental problems, so he could not take a political career.

Former young Red Guards and peasant volunteers were deployed against the USSR. Still, arguably, that brief war served primarily political purposes–to defuse tension at home, as the country was engulfed in the Cultural Revolution, and to signal to the U.S. that it meant to have an agreement with Washington against Moscow.

In the Vietnam War, Chinese troops were initially meant to descend on Hanoi but were routed back to their borders.

All in all, the CPC inherited from the KMT a political clumsiness in wars. The war in Korea was, according to Chinese scholars, a pledge of allegiance to the USSR, suspicious of Mao's friendly exchanges with the U.S. during World War II. Historians even now are divided about its real utility for the CPC. The CPC might have opened up to the U.S., it could have had the democratic elections it said it wanted in 1944 and 1945, it might have reoccupied Taiwan, and its history would have been very different.

The war with India was a costly political mistake. India, a decade earlier, had supported Beijing's occupation of Tibet with what appeared to be a tacit understanding that China would not be a stickler about the delineation of the border. In 1962, Beijing, apparently very weak in general and particularly in that area, thought that it was a moment to demonstrate its muscle rather than finding an understanding. Beijing stood its ground but made a long-term enemy of India, the only other country with demographics to counterbalance its own demographics.

Wars against the USSR in 1971 and Vietnam in 1979 got better political results. They started the windfall of technological transfers, low tariffs, and financial advice that moved the next 40 years of turbo growth.

Overall, the PLA did not fight brilliantly, but despite their results on the field, they were "political" wars, where soldiers obeyed until

they died, and soldiers did because even their death was the victory of the country and family 國家 behind. And the families, then quite large with better health care and a massive baby boom, supported their sacrifice because they had an "extra child" to give up, and they saw the reward for it. China almost tripled its population between 1949 and 1980. In the following 40 years, it added only 200 million people: a great economic success, but the total eradication of the way of thinking of fighting a war. De facto, after 1980, the PLA gave up on the idea of fighting and lived as if they would not see combat again.

Strategy (1970s): No War, Only Games

The war in Vietnam did not prove China's ability to fight a modern war, but it stopped Vietnam's ambitions for Indochina. Without the 1979 battles, after taking control of Cambodia, Hanoi could have threatened Thailand. In the following years, China also helped to move weapons to the mujahideen fighting in Afghanistan against the Soviets. In return, China received from the U.S. three elements that drove its economic growth in the following decades: permission for technological transfers, low import tariffs, and advice to facilitate, by all means necessary, foreign investment.

These three components allowed China to gradually become the first global and Western delocalization base, thanks to its massive population, and thus to become an international industrial and technological powerhouse. Old Asian allies, like Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan, were not given tariffs as low as China and perhaps not permission for technological transfers as generous as those granted to China. Although the Chinese repeatedly complained about technological transfer restrictions, a lot of American technology was passed on to China.

Part of the deal to free resources for productive investment was also reducing the PLA, which was cut by one million people, from four to three million soldiers. The senior military officers were slashed by half. An official reason for the decrease was to move to a modern mechanized army, away from an army of foot soldiers. The new Chinese leadership fired all officers deemed too sympathetic to the Gang of Four or loyal to generals close to the Gang of Four, under this justification. Moreover, in return, Deng and his people had to make sure the remaining officers would be loyal.

A few years before, many officers were called on to support the left. Mao considered the army the most loyal subjects for his utopian visions. Those who had been too zealous in following Mao were purged with early retirement. Then the army left in place was given the unique privilege of spearheading Deng's slogan, "getting rich is glorious." In the following years, the PLA got into all kinds of businesses.

They opened bars and nightclubs and also engaged in the smuggling of cars, real estate development, hotel management, opening schools for language training, starting factories with foreign investors, etc. In the 1980s and even more in the 1990s, the PLA was the business partner everyone wanted. They were not "soldiers preparing to fight"; they were an organization authorized to break or bend the law as they wished to make money.

Deng, in reality, "bribed" the army to support his cause for modernization and opening up. The army gladly jumped in and accorded insufficient priority to its professional duties. Moreover, the military had accustomed itself to the fact that there was only one person thinking of grand strategy in Mao's time–Mao himself.

The same happened with Deng. Only he was entitled to think of grand strategies. Therefore, with the leftists purged and the rest

of them making money as never before in their lives, everybody was more than happy to forget about military duties. Then basically, the PLA gave up on the idea that there would be a war they should fight. They thought they might never have to fight again or held some vague ideas about warfare.

The pattern was broken only in the late 1990s in another reform. The military was running huge smuggling facilities; the main ones were in Guangdong and Fujian. The smuggling cost China more than lowering tariffs and joining the WTO (that would replace and be more comprehensive than the Cold War General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)), reckoned some Chinese experts at the time. Then, China decided that cracking down on smuggling and joining the newly established World Trade Organization (WTO) was the cheaper choice.

One crucial requirement for China was to drop its import duties. These duties were the primary source of tax revenues for the central government. But import duties were levied only on official imports, whereas a growing part of all trade was flowing in by PLA-controlled enterprises. This created a dangerously uneven internal market, with privileged people and companies accessing smuggling facilities and others facing challenging circumstances as their imports were far more expensive than the competition.

Officially, China dragged its feet on the WTO. However, then Prime Minister Zhu Rongji reckoned that China would increase its revenues by closing the smuggling facilities even if it cut import duties to WTO requests. Then, party chief Jiang Zemin and Zhu managed to force the army to close down their lucrative commercial enterprises and "return to the barracks." But it was a complex bargain. In return for draining these resources from the PLA, the state pledged a vast budgetary increase to finance the

Army's modernization, weapons development and purchase, and technology acquisition from abroad.

That had two sides, one political and one of "bribery." The political one was that part of the army was impressed and shocked by the U.S.'s military prowess and utilization of new capabilities resulting from the "revolution in military affairs" on display in the first Gulf War in 1991. These officers wanted a modern army able to compete in the modern world and were tired of all the petty schemes to make money that had nothing to do with military duties.

The "bribe" side was more straightforward. Weapons acquisition allowed massive commissions that would line the pockets only of top generals and certain critical people. The money was "cleaner" than the abundance of motley operations and did not interest the rank and file, who could now get out of the distractions of businesses. This was also in line with new ideas sprouting in the PLA. The war in Yugoslavia and the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade were a shock because they brought back the idea that the PLA could be fighting a war, and it could be with the U.S. of all countries. The then slight, minority undercurrent of anti-American feeling began to grow faster.

It called for a need for modernization of the army and the acquisition of foreign technology. This got practically translated into petty schemes because a "business" mindset still permeated the PLA.

Soldiers reported shooting at the firing range, for example, but pocketed the bullets and sold them to African countries. Pilots reported training on airplanes but actually siphoned off fuel and stole spare parts to be sold on the black market… and so on. Beginning in the late 1990s, the army acquired a lot of technology and weapons, but this did not translate directly into actual

improved combat capability. All of this put the PLA firmly behind the leaders, in particular party chief and military commission chair Jiang Zemin.

Jiang also managed to win an extension of his retirement time, thanks to the PLA's support. In this period, the PLA also started concentrating on two main areas to bridge the gap with the U.S.: cyber warfare and missile warfare. The other areas would follow later; this was the plan. They believe that as long as China could build up a credible cyber and missile capability, the U.S. would let Beijing be and not "interfere" too much in its internal affairs.

Worldview (1960s): Culture Revolutions

Mao engineered the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to take back power from Liu Shaoqi and all those visibly lukewarm about Mao's notions of "continuing revolution." He fanned and encouraged young people to take up arms, and in this crucial moment, he did several things with the PLA. He had the army give guns to the Red Guards fighting the party apparatus following Liu. He sent army officers to the civilian bureaucracy to "support the left," i.e., make sure the party officials were toeing Mao's line. He kept the PLA primarily out of any purge that conversely engulfed the rest of the country.

That is: not only was the army the actual party, but when the party faced a major domestic crisis, as during the Cultural Revolution, it was often the army that carried out purges of the party, and not vice versa. The army essentially purged itself, while among civilians, only the top leader, the supreme head of the military, was able to purge the army.

Further and final confirmation of the army's position is visible in the open power structure. Deng Xiaoping was the paramount leader of China from 1979 to his stroke in 1995 and then his death

in 1997 while holding on to only one position – chairman of the PLA Military Commission. Deng officially gave up his chairmanship of the PLA, but de facto held the reins of the military and the country until his stroke in early 1995. He was not the party chief and not the government's premier; he was "only" head of the army. This is a testament to the fact that the party and the government followed and obeyed the PLA, not vice versa. As chairman of the Military Commission, Deng had the ultimate power. For instance, he called the shots, deciding to move the army against the students in Tiananmen in 1989.

When he chose to give power to Jiang Zemin in the early 1990s, to underline that he meant a total endorsement, he also gave him the position of chairman of the military commission. Still, Jiang didn't become the head of the country until Deng's stroke in 1995. When Jiang wanted to retain power in the 2002 Party Congress, he held on to the post of chairman of the military commission, while Hu Jintao became just president of the country and general secretary of the party.

The PLA, because of its history and its position, was and is decisive in Chinese politics. The PLA is a political structure that contributes to the country's decisions. It is not a simple arm of the state or the party. One way to describe China's political system is this: the PLA is the backbone, the party and other facilities are the other bones and the muscles, and the government is the skin. The parts have a dialectical relationship among themselves; it is not just made of one-way roads, but there is also a hierarchy. This structure is also reflected in the actual urban architecture of Beijing.

Behind Zhongnanhai, China's Kremlin, there is the old office of the PLA's Central Military Commission. This means that the PLA is the foundation on which the party leadership can rest secure. Before Zhongnanhai, the Great Hall of the People is on the right,

which houses all critical state/party meetings. On the left, there is the Ministry of Police, the State Security, and the Museum of History, the elements that will ensure the implementation of political decisions taken in the Great Hall. The architecture seems to be symbolic of power order.

Still, despite Deng giving up the post to Jiang as chairman of the military commission with all the official trimmings in the 1992 Party Congress, Deng retained his clout in the party and the army until the almost fatal stroke that incapacitated him in early 1995. Despite the lack of official positions, this lingering personal power, the loyalty he managed to preserve, was, and as we shall see, remains a critical element of Chinese politics, especially in the army.

Strategy/Worldview (B.C. and 1960s): The Feeling of the Army

Any army is held together by an esprit de corps, a strong bond the ancient Greeks would call agape (ἀ**γάπη**), a non-sexual love for the fellow soldier for whom one is willing to die. But this bond doesn't work in the same way in all armies. In China, it has its particular twist.

I found it puzzling that right after the death of Mao, in the fall of 1976, the three most powerful men in the country, the head of the army, Ye Jianying; the head of the party, Hua Guofeng; and the head of the leaders' bodyguards, Wang Dongxing, came together. They decided to move against the Gang of Four and reversed the political course of the Cultural Revolution. If they were so clear about the damage of the Cultural Revolution, why did they not move before, a year or two years earlier? Why did they not support Zhou Enlai, who died just months before Mao? Mao was ill, and so

was the head of his secret police, Kang Sheng, who passed away in December 1975. Mao had greater charisma than Zhou, mistrusted by other party veterans.

Over the years, some argued that the Gang of Four could play the Mao card for their own goals, and this made it difficult to move against the old man, who was a demi-God for the people and might have had difficulty understanding what was happening. In any case, all agreed that the three had a personal reverence for Mao. Even if they thought Mao was wrong, they would not go against his wishes and still less move directly against him.

Similarly, after the coup, why didn't the three leaders keep power for themselves? The situation was unstable, and they recognized that Ye Jianying held the greatest authority among them. He supported bringing Deng Xiaoping back, and the others deferred to his judgment. In addition, Deng had strong backing across the armed forces, the party bureaucracy, and society at large. As a result, there was overwhelming pressure for his restoration to power—something Mao Zedong himself had already signaled in 1973–74. Consequently, within two years, Hua Guofeng and Wang Dongxing were demoted, while Ye accepted a secondary role under Deng. Ultimately, they understood they could not effectively govern the country themselves, and Ye- Deng's ally and head, of the military played the pivotal role in shaping the outcome.

It's not clear whether this story resembles the literature or whether the literature has been used to give a quick explanation of the complex power struggle. Indeed, Deng's selection process by Ye sounds like a scene from the medieval novel Water Margin[60]

[60] Shi Nai'an, *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980).

(very dear to Mao). Then a group of bandits, hunted by the local authorities, chose as their chieftain Song Jiang, a minor magistrate who had been helping them. There is an element of a deep personal bond at work that moves decisions about leadership, and that is not quite the agape developed through being in a fight together.

At the beginning of another medieval novel (also dear to Mao), *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,[61] we find a similar bond. Here, two stalwarts, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, pledged their allegiance to Liu Bei and his goal to become emperor at their first meeting, drinking wine and eating meat. In all these cases, the bandits, the heroes, or Mao's generals had developed a robust and personal bond with the person, not his ideas. They saw a person capable and able to carry the country. For Ye Jianying, this kind of leader first was Mao, and when Mao was no more, the man was Deng.

The culture of this bond has a long history. It was cultivated first by the Mohists (4th century B.C.), who developed a tight warriors' order that fought to help small countries oppose the aggression of larger countries to keep an ideal balance of power in the Yellow River Basin. The principle of the organization was to "conform upwards," shangtong, which meant following the orders of the leader, son of heaven.

The tradition died out with the fall of the small states and the centralization of the first emperor. Still, a similar practice surfaced again with the bandits that brought down the Qin dynasty, the uprising during and after the Han rule, and the Buddhist warrior monks. For all of them, there was an element of "ideology," as we

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[61] *Luo Guanzhong, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).*

would call it in modern terms, a belief in some principles or goals. But most importantly, there was an element of personal loyalty to a leader.

This has been extremely strong in the PLA. Mao managed to gain complete control of the army/party at the 1941 conference of Yan'an, where he proved his mettle by theorizing the path to victory and convincing the party of it. He sealed his leadership with the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic and retained control of it until he died in 1976.

In this period, the only serious threat to him was from the army, when his loyalist lieutenant Lin Biao tried to topple him in 1971. Possibly, Lin Biao did that because of his ambition and wanted to move the country out of the then ongoing course of the Cultural Revolution. Or Mao wan wanted to arrest Lin Biao, as he didn't trust him any longer. Or the real engine of the coup was his son Lin Liguo, then commander of the air force at just 25! Some people in Beijing today believe that the older man would never have set the coup against Mao but for the prodding of his son.

After that, as we saw, the army chose China's next leader, Deng, who was brought back by the winning side of the PLA. In a couple of years, he consolidated his power and theorized the path forward in December 1978, proved he was correct with the booming economic development of the 1980s and 1990s, and retained the army's loyalty until his end.

The only serious threat to Deng's power came in 1989, when part of the army was uncertain whether to side with then party chief Zhao Ziyang, vice chairman of the military commission, together with state president Yang Shangkun. In short order, the PLA backed Deng and raised no objections to the removal of Zhao Ziyang, just as they had done during the so-called Lin Biao affair.

After them, no one so far has commanded such an unyielding loyalty of the army. Progressively, the army came to follow the party's path (or possibly it was the other way around), splitting loyalties among different generals who did not seek a lofty national goal but put forward a selfish private interest. That is, as with the 1980s, China was privatizing and going into business, so did the army. The army was the first and most successful of these business ventures, spearheading the economic reforms of the rest of the country.

But before going into this, we must open another chapter about what started in 1980–the one-child policy. This brought about a demographic revolution that helped enrich China and sow the seeds of unforeseen consequences.

Strategy (B.C.): Demographics of the Modern Army

In ancient times, when Grandpa was the absolute head of the family and had many grandsons in his household, he could send a few of them to serve in the army. He was sure that at least some would return and bring glory and rewards to the family. Then the social structure was entirely consistent with the state and military structure according to a pattern first theorized by Shang Yang, prime minister of the then-rising Qin state in the 4th century B.C. and considered the founder of the legalistic tradition culminating in the following century in Han Feizi. A whole chapter of Shang Yang's writings is about "agriculture and war."

Lord Shang set up the foundational principles of millennia of Chinese economic production and warfare. The ruler allotted a family land according to the number of able-bodied men, so the more men, the more land, which meant more economies of scale

because they all lived in one household. The family paid back the state in taxes and by sending some of its men (not all, because otherwise, production would stop) for national corvées (grand infrastructural projects, consolidating the river embankments, digging the Grand Canal, or building the Great Wall) or for military duties.

People would die in the corvées or war, but the return for the corvées was long-term improvements for security and economy, and the direct return for war was glory and rewards for the deceased's family. If somebody tried to dodge his military duties, conversely, the ruler would punish the whole family. Moreover, there was a surplus of impoverished people with little family, nothing to lose, and ready to be drafted into the local militia or the army. It was the way to try to improve their lot.

Then sending a few children to the war to die was no life-threatening sacrifice in a family with three to four children and maybe nine to ten grandchildren, when the grandpa was the absolute chief, in a rural village where half of the people were one clan with a clan elder. Perhaps well over 95% of Chinese lived in rural villages, and indeed, all wanted to continue the family line with other children that would bring glory to their ancestors.

The cult of the ancestors is the most ancient religion and the deepest felt religious sentiment in China. One can honor the ancestors by having children and holding up the name of the family. Rather than believing in the eternal life of an ultramundane paradise, the Chinese believed in making themselves and the progeny of their beloved father and forbears live on Earth through their children's lives. In other words, the Chinese did not traditionally believe in God or even in Gods but believed rather in the survival of their ancestors' memory in their children and children's children.

Then the glory of some children who died for the country, and others surviving and basking in that glory, was both a practical and mystical experience for the family. Conversely, neglecting military duties would put the family in danger of reprisals; they would be collectively punished for it and humiliate their ancestors.

So, the young men going to war did it very clearly and directly for the family back home, their ancestors, and occasionally to seek a better future. All in all, most of the rural economy remained at a subsistence level, and the poorest of the village had nothing to lose but a dreadful life if they joined the military. Some were so poor that in times of peace they joined bandit gangs, and sometimes bandits were enrolled in the proper army.

This set-up, where society, the economy, and war were part of one continuous chain, lasted for about twenty-two centuries. But the chain got broken first when the one-child-per-family policy, which started in 1980, put an end to large families, then, when the urbanization process began in the 1990s, it created a mass migration from the countryside that virtually annihilated rural villages and their ancient life patterns. Finally, the creation and growth of a middle class drastically reduced the number of people with anything to gain by joining the army.



The one-child policy was deemed necessary at the end of the 1970s, with the policy of reform and opening up. It was to create savings for productive investment. The one-child policy is estimated to have prevented population growth on the order of several hundred million over the next four decades, which would have squandered immense resources that fueled the ensuing

miraculous growth. But the one-child policy destroyed the traditional family's semi-religious values.

One child means the ancestors cannot receive the respect they deserve by "the offering" of large families that ensure the future continuity of the name. Most importantly, in a family where the single child is a little emperor, he is also a little slave; he must be successful, or at the very least, he must survive to keep alive the tiny hope to see stretched into the future. The end of the child is almost the end of this and the next life for a family.

Then, in a nuclear family where two grandfathers share one grandson, sending the young man to the military means putting at risk the whole progeny. If he dies, the entire family branch dies out. It is almost like killing God.

Besides the nuclear family, in the 1990s, China started the urbanization process. Villages are no longer the center of social life where clan heads decide for everybody. Nuclear families, with one child, lost even their family network as they moved to a sprawling megalopolis and had to fend for themselves on their own. They gradually found more accessible opportunities for social and economic advancement than joining the military, with strict discipline and demanding requirements.

As of last year, according to official data, more than half of the population lives in cities, and the numbers underestimate the reality because many "villages" are just like thriving towns. Moreover, the official rhetoric has announced that China reached the status of "society of moderate well-being" and hopes to become, in a couple of decades, a fully developed country. Then everybody is relatively well off and doesn't need to suffer from military life, which, although not risky, is extremely tough, especially for young recruits.

Worldview (1900s): Bibles

The Old Testament starts with a massacre of babies; all firstborns had to be killed to eliminate Moses, the man the soothsayer said would liberate the Jews, serfs essential to the Egyptian state. Moses, anyway, evaded that fate.

The Gospel starts with a similar bloodbath. King Herod orders the killing of all firstborns to prevent the birth of the new king of the Jews, Jesus. He, like Moses, escapes his doom.

The stories are at the heart of the Christian and Muslim faiths, believed true by more than half of the global population.

Modernizing China also started with a massacre, not of the firstborn but the second born. Since 1980, right after the launch of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up, millions of children were aborted, killed just out of the womb, or drowned in cold water in an unprecedented family planning campaign that strictly imposed only one child per couple.

Over 40 years, an estimated 400–500 million births did not occur. They were sacrificed on the altar of national economic progress at the behest of Beijing, with tacit acceptance from Western powers, in awe of and worried about the consequences of an unconstrained Chinese population explosion.

Since Mao and his Communist Party took control in 1949, the population grew unfettered, believing in a naïve economics that more people meant more power in the international political game.

In fact, doubling the population in three short decades drained national resources. If it had continued in 1980, it would have drowned the Chinese economy and sandbagged the world. It would have made China a behemoth of roughly 1.8 billion people, the current size of the Indian subcontinent.

As punishment for their massacre, the Egyptians lost their pharaoh, his army swamped by the waves of the Red Sea, says the Old Testament. As punishment, King Herod's Jews lost their land and were scattered around the world, according to the Jews following Jesus, after the Romans destroyed the temple in retaliation for a vain uprising.

Is there a price China is going to pay for its slaughter of innocents?

"I killed babies in the day, and delivered, saved them at night," said a gynecologist who, in the 1980s, was part of the family planning campaign.

"We would give them injections, and they would get a miscarriage. But once, in what was to be a miscarriage, a mother delivered a baby who was alive. Possibly, I messed up the dose of the miscarriage medicine. The mother called me at night and showed me the baby was alive despite suffering. I helped him, stabilized him, and saved him. The mother ran away with the baby in the morning, fearing it would be taken away."

Forty years later, the doctor laughed at himself, the situation, and the horror he witnessed and inflicted.

In his interview with the Chinese in 2016, the Pope encouraged people to forgive themselves for the monstrous wave of abortions.

Are the Chinese doing it? The collapse of the birth rate tells a different story.

Worldview (1900s): Unforgiven?

Faced with a graying population before it fully developed, Beijing ended family planning and encouraged people to have at least three children. Still, many Chinese do not want children.

Other developed countries also do not want children, and trying to redress the trend is highly costly and works poorly.

China doesn't have the resources. Many families earmark about 40% of their savings for their only child. Then two children would bankrupt a family or dramatically drop the standard for child care—the family shoulders the cost of hospitals and education. The state cannot easily step in. It is burdened by a mountain of debt from local authorities; it simply cannot readily take on any more.

In the past, many Chinese quietly obeyed. They sacrificed their second born, and most did, from top to bottom, from Deng's family onwards. Most, but not the most stubborn, peasants accepted having only one child.

It was the same during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. Many tacitly starved to death in a famine that took an estimated 30 million lives. They did not rise, rebel, take their tools, and use them as weapons against the cadres.

As recently as with COVID, confronting the immense danger of the first large pandemic of modernity, most accepted segregation at home until the disease prevailed over all precautions and spread everywhere.

Would the Chinese again obey, change their lifestyles, agree to a poorer lifestyle for the country's sake, and agree to have more babies? Even if it happens, it will take more than a decade to show results, as with the 1980 family planning. Meanwhile, the situation is getting tricky.

Governance (1980s to 1990s): The Reforms

The great revolution brought to China with the policies of reforms in the 1980s and 1990s was to make everybody dream that their child could be an emperor—the popularization of the "emperor"

as the only man in China, free and master of his life. It was no longer the case that the emperor was to be the only one. Everybody in China could aspire to be an emperor, have their own business, be independent, and do what they wanted.

But, of course, different emperors with absolute powers created confusion and collision, also because, possibly, everybody took their rights but did not know their duties. Therefore, a new order had to be reset. It happened with President Xi Jinping's drive to concentrate power in his hands.

The resetting that was decided on was not to try to set in order the different powers of the different "emperors" and mutually limit their powers; it was not to establish rights and duties, something organizationally very challenging and unprecedented in Chinese history. It was to give all powers back to the one "emperor."

It might have been a reasonable choice. However, it has many drawbacks.

The two systems have competitive advantages. A system like the Chinese one, stressing the organization of the state for full efficiency, may have the benefit of resiliency.

However, this advantage has failed twice already in the past, with the Ming dynasty in the late 16th century and with the Qing dynasty in the 19th century. Both were adversely affected by the global market started and dominated by the Spanish, with the Ming, or by the English, with the Qing.

The Ming dynasty first hoarded silver from trading with Spain, and when silver from Mexico and Spain stopped coming in, there was a financial crisis.

Similarly, when the Qing dynasty stopped hoarding silver from the tea trade and was forced to pour out silver to buy opium, the dynasty failed.

Now we have a great imbalance again, almost similar to that of the Ming and the Qing. China ran a huge trade surplus in both cases, but this trade surplus can be attacked in many ways, and the domestic economy could collapse.

The American weakness is the permanent weakness of the capitalist system and of the Western system, which thrives in chaos and sometimes in chaos collapses—but most of the time comes back stronger than before.

It's hard to gauge whether this crisis right now is fiercer than the crisis in the 1960s when the U.S. was in the middle of the Cold War and domestic turmoil, or whether it is worse than the aftermath of the 1929 financial crisis, or during the Civil War in the 19th century.

American problems are immense and cannot be trifled with; however, China may have more significant issues of its own, and at the end of the day, it is not about who is more robust but who is weaker. Plus, when America confronts problems from outside, it traditionally finds greater domestic unity.

Finally, it is not just America but the "American world." Like it or not, the world is an American basin.[62] It functions as a modern UN, a place where every country can plead its case and lobby for the support of its causes.

Can China survive if it doesn't improve its ties with the U.S. and the world?

Now, many Chinese pundits try to argue for "fighting without breaking," that is, arguing with the U.S. without breaking its bonds with America. But this was possible only as long as the U.S. trusted that China would become part of the "US world" sooner or later.

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[62] Thomas des Garets Geddes, "How China Should Engage with the US and the World as Viewed by Tsinghua Prof. Da Wei," *Sinification*, February 15, 2023, https://sinification.substack.com/.

Now the U.S. has stopped believing this, and therefore, any form of confrontation now leads the U.S. to break with China. China's room for maneuver is getting tighter and more difficult. But just because of this, it is the time of calm, patience, and imagination.

Strategy (1990s): The Power Struggle Behind PLA Restructuring

The PLA restructuring took place in the middle of a particularly fierce and complicated power struggle in which party chief Jiang Zemin had to emerge ahead, but his success was far from guaranteed.

Jiang was appointed Party chief and president of the state and chairman of the military commission just days before the 1989 June 4 crackdown in Tiananmen, much to his surprise. He had no power base in Beijing, where he was an outsider, and he was not Deng's first choice.

The old man might have preferred Qiao Shi, then head of state security, who had been very close to liberal party leader Hu Yaobang. Hu Yaobang's demise had sparked the 1989 protests. Qiao was also close to former Minister of Defense Xi Zhongxun, demoted in late 1986 for following Hu. Xi Zhongxun had voiced his opposition to the violent suppression of the student movement in 1989. Qiao had refused to back or oppose party secretary Zhao Ziyang in a momentous restricted Politburo meeting about the actions to be taken regarding the Tiananmen movement and thus triggered the intervention of conservative Party elders headed by Deng. But Qiao refused the position as he did not want to go down in history with the students' blood on his hands. Jiang's appointment was the elders' second choice.

Jiang accrued power at the 1992 party congress, when the entire faction supporting mighty Yang Shangkun was purged. Yang had been head of state and vice chairman of the military commission and had guaranteed that a very divided PLA would find some unity and carry out the 1989 crackdown on the students. Yang's power was deemed excessive by Deng and overshadowed that of Jiang, and was therefore eliminated.

But then, most of Yang's effective powers went to Qiao, not Jiang. Qiao, in 1992, was head of security, leader of the trade unions, vice president of the state, and head of the influential Central Party School. He even managed to wrest the military police PAP (People's Armed Police), wu jing, from the PLA and put them under his command. He was the shadow master, especially since he had Deng's confidence. Still, one of Qiao's problems was that the PLA had mixed opinions about him. Part of the army had "dirty hands" because of its involvement in the 1989 crackdown. Qiao, who had kept aloof, hadn't. This may have been a reason to purge the army if Qiao came to power.

Things took a new twist when in January 1995, Deng had a stroke and was incapacitated. Until then, despite holding no official roles, Deng was still calling the shots. But at that moment, his staff, made up of military people, surrendered all his archives to the chairman of the military commission, Jiang. Things grew worse in the following couple of years until Deng passed away on February 19, 1997. In these years, the PLA and its powerful vice chairman Liu Huaqing, with many fingers in the smuggling scheme, were unhappy and wanted to get rid of Jiang. The army even tried to enter into an alliance with Qiao, but reportedly, he kept aloof.

The requests for WTO accession gave Jiang the necessary framework to clean up the army and get rid of his enemies. He bolstered his strength by two more reforms with long-term

consequences that gave him substantial popular support. He reformed the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), making them business oriented. He allowed them to lay off millions of workers who became totally dependent on the government. SOEs were permitted to retain up to about 95% of their profits and not surrender them all to the state. This, without mechanisms for transparent control and oversight, the SOEs turned into gigantic money-making machines that soon could have enough cash to sway politics their way and systematically corrupt society and state.

Another reform was the fire sale of state apartments to tenants. This turned the Chinese urban population from state employees into a semi-independent middle class in the blink of an eye. Employees who cheaply leased an apartment from their employer had nothing to lose in social upheaval. Small apartment owners, conversely, would lose their small properties in a revolution and thus supported stability and the government.

In other words, with these reforms, Jiang and his prime minister Zhu Rongji made everybody happy, the ordinary people, who suddenly became middle class, and the SOE leaders, who could spend or invest billions as they wished, and became extremely wealthy.

All these elements gave Jiang massive strength and changed internal party politics. In the 1997 congress, Jiang, born in 1926, passed a new rule on age limits for tenure. Based on that, Qiao, two years his senior, was forced into retirement. Still, Qiao commanded colossal influence, but that was largely wiped away with the April 25, 1999, Falun Gong (FLG) demonstration. That day, about 10,000 FLG elderly people surrounded Zhongnanhai, China's Kremlin, with the support of some military and security personnel to try to pressure the authorities to make concessions

permitting the movement to conduct its activities legally and openly.

The FLG were conservative, extremely xenophobic, against modern science, and were seen as potentially becoming some kind of Khomeini revolution if they had acquired greater power. Qiao had been asked what to do with them in 1998, and he advised monitoring them but not clamping down on them. This advice, the presence of "his" security people among the organizers, and the infiltration of FLG into the ranks of police and military were interpreted as signs of his support or his error in judgment. Qiao was then marginalized, his people purged, and Jiang eventually took all the power.

Without his success in this power struggle, Jiang might not have secured the military reforms he started in those momentous months. Becoming rich was no longer a slogan; it was a reality, and rich people, private entrepreneurs growing in the shadow of newly vibrant SOEs, were called into the party. The CPC even coined a new theory, the Three Represents, inspired by Gramsci's research on Machiavelli's The Prince.[63] The new approach argued that the party should represent the dynamic forces in society; those could be the proletariat in one period and the entrepreneurs in another.

These military reforms in China were not isolated but part of a more extensive redefinition of the state and its tasks. The same had been true with Deng's 1980s reforms, as we have seen. The same would be true about two decades later with Xi.

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[63] Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86ff.

Governance (3rd Century to 1900s): Buddhism, like Western Influence?

In the third century A.D, China was torn by centuries of internal wars that decimated large portions of the population. As the vast bloodshed was going on, China also went through a profound cultural and intellectual revolution. Buddhism came to China from India and radically changed the Chinese way of thinking about the world. After some five centuries of turmoil and strife, and an uncertain power balance, a unitary China was reestablished under the Tang dynasty, and the empire was very different than before.

A similar political and cultural shock swept China in the last moments of the Qing empire through the civil war, the Japanese invasion, and the foundation of the People's Republic. China was searching for a new identity, a new way of thinking, and a new way of ruling itself.

The PRC underlined its specific nature by calling on "Chinese characteristics." These Chinese characteristics were to distinguish the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the Russian Communist Party and to assert that the Chinese Communist Party and, therefore, its PRC were to be quite different from the USSR and how it was managed.

In the first decade or so of the PRC, the influence of the Soviets was paramount in China; still, after roughly a decade or so, the PRC started to shed the Soviet influence and tried to move in a different direction, which was not that of Moscow, not the example of Western countries, and not the feudal past of China. It was uncharted territory where only the wisdom and the practical sense of the leaders of the time attempted to move statecraft and decision-making along.

Without points of reference, however, the Chinese state soon became engulfed in a messy decision-making process that eventually centered solely on Mao Zedong, who ruled by issuing statements to be followed nationwide.

The fledgling structure of the state set up after the republic's foundation, the Party design that took shape in the anti-Japanese resistance and then the civil war, and the first attempt to manage the country were de facto destroyed by this method of ruling and the systemic punishment and reeducation of Party leaders.

In 1976, at the end of Mao's rule, the Party and the country were in shambles, and it was not clear how they could move forward. Many people were disillusioned and did not believe in the Party any longer. Fortunately, at the time, China was not under heavy external pressure, and the demise of Mao's rule created new hope in the people.

Therefore, the country managed to move forward. The big step in moving forward was Deng Xiaoping's signature policy of reform and opening up, which provided economic inspiration and real fuel for the nation. It motivated everybody and also held the country together because collectively, the Chinese felt that they could get to a better tomorrow.

On the other hand, as a system of rule, Deng Xiaoping and his comrades established a new arrangement that tried to bring new order to Mao’s previous autocratic personal rule. They set up an agreement by which Deng was the first among a group of Party veterans called to make important decisions through consensus. This method created a degree of confusion because it divided the power of the party, the power of the state, and the power of the army, without clear boundaries between their competencies and authorities.

In some Western countries, power is attributed to different parties, but each has some limits on its strengths. In the U.S., for example, the Federal Reserve manages the money supply, but the president cannot intervene. There are some gray areas, but if somebody steps into them, there is a whole array of institutions and procedures to sort them out clearly and fairly quickly.

Yet, in China at the time, the specific delineation of roles and power was unclear. This lack of clarity appears to have contributed to the situation in 1989, when confusing and contradictory orders came from the top to the ordinary people. People did not know what to obey, and they chose to follow what they liked.

It was also a time when different ideas welled up from society, and it was unclear how the central government should respond to them. From the late 1970s to roughly the early 1990s, there was talk of a fourth modernization, democracy. Until the late 1990s, there were strong voices in the Party—supported by Qiao Shi, then chairman of the National People's Congress and president of the Central Party School—claiming that the rule of law should be paramount and should be followed by the Party, and that the Party should not be above the law but subject to the law.

Governance (1990s): No Democracy, Confusion

These drivers and the confusion arising from the lack of clear delineation of powers among the top leadership led, after 1989, to the decision to concentrate power in one man, Jiang Zemin. At the 1992 Party Congress, he held nearly all formal levers of power. He was president of the state, general secretary of the Party, and chairman of the military commission.

Still, this apparent concentration of power was largely formal and not real because power was still distributed among elderly veterans who retained the ability to influence and, as required,

sway the decision-making process of the Party and the government. Meanwhile, the push for putting the Party under the law never quite worked out, as it conflicted with the principle that the Party had the final say in leadership of the country. This was difficult to reconcile with the idea of subjecting the Party to the rule of law.

For a spell, Jiang Zemin managed to have greater power than everybody else. After the death of Deng Xiaoping in 1997, he was the unchallenged paramount leader of the Party. Still, the decision-making process remained unclear. Because of the rules the Party laid down in 1997, Jiang Zemin was supposed to retire in 2002; however, contravening those rules, he stayed officially in power until 2004 through retention of his position as chairman of the military commission, and in practice, he continued to have influence and authority even after that year.

It created a situation in which Jiang's successor as top leader, Hu Jintao, although officially the head of the party, the state, and the army, had to deal with a never-ending variety of challenges from Jiang and retired leaders, and also a certain amount of pushing and pulling from members of the Politburo and the Standing Committee of the Politburo.

The decision-making process became even more chaotic, confused, and disorderly than before, leaving ever more significant loopholes for corruption and profiteering that were draining the country's wealth. The process was accompanied by massive economic growth, creating extraordinary wealth for everybody, but at the cost of growing social disparity, ballooning internal debt, and ample chaos in the organization of the party and the state.

On the surface, it produced the phenomenon of corruption for ordinary people. Junior and senior officials took large amounts of money in return for favors granted to private or public companies.

Corruption was just a superficial sign of a much deeper issue: a profound disruption and the messy situation of the decision-making process in China.

How could one make decisions? Ideas come from below and from above, findings come from different sides, and everything was near-total mayhem. The two episodes of the ex-Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai and ex-chief of the party general office Ling Jihua showed that senior leaders were not following the rules at a very senior level, the Politburo level.

The condition was messy and difficult to understand, let alone orderly. Not only was the Party not subjecting itself to its own rules and regulations, but senior leaders were ignoring laws in the name of their pursuit of personal power. All this was threatening to break the party and the country apart. If the state crumbled, there would be no business opportunities either. It would be simply a time for pirates plundering the spoils.

Xi Jinping came to power with this tricky situation in the background. His answer, in the author's view, was to concentrate power in his hands and establish direct and clear lines of communication and decision-making in the country, bringing borders and limits where the situation had been increasingly muddled and out of hand.

Perhaps even worse than during the time of Mao and the establishment of the PRC, for Xi Jinping, there were no clear precedents and no clear examples to use. He apparently tried to find some inspiration in the imperial past, but knew very well that imperial history was just an example, an inspiration, and not something that could be used fully in the new China. The other ready-made tool, known to himself and his cadres, was the old communist, Soviet-era party organization. The imperial past culture

and the Soviet precedent were the two instruments for his consolidation and reorganization of power in China.

Democratic institutions, traditions, and thinking were not there at all. Conversely, some parts of the party, looking at the present situation in China compared to the U.S. and India, a democratic country similar in size to China, did not understand democracy and came to believe it was unsuitable for China's size and ancient traditions.

Xi Jinping was facing issues that China had arguably not seen since the fall of the Zhou dynasty sometime in the 7th or 8th century B.C.—that is, the fall of an old "imperial" order and the creation of hundreds of independent states, each claiming its own tradition and hierarchy.

Strategy (1990s to present)

The Cold War ended with two dominant, overlapping, prominent theories about the expected future of the world. One featured the clash of civilizations, and the other posited the so-called end of history, which were derived from seminal books by Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama.

One theory, Fukuyama's end of history, claimed that with the end of the long struggle against communism and totalitarian regimes, history would unfold smoothly following the full-fledged development of capitalism, the market economy, and liberal values. The other theory, on civilizations by Huntington, asserted that future conflicts would arise from different cultures and civilizations opposing one another and mainly fighting against the dominant civilization, the Protestant Anglo-Saxon one.

The present friction between the U.S. and China could be read as confirming both theories: China is often described as a

totalitarian regime, heir in part to the Soviet one, and it's a very different civilization compared to the Anglo-Saxon one.

However, such intellectual frameworks offer little to help one understand what is going on within China and what has been happening in the past 30 years. The experience of the wars of the U.S. in Central Asia and the Middle East tells us that even if Huntington's and Fukuyama's models were accurate, they do not give us any positive solution to present political fissures. The Anglo-Saxon model of democracy is difficult to export wholesale.

In the past two decades, the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq (under military attack by the Bush administration in the apparent hope of transplanting democracy there), or even Egypt (where a domestic revolution nurtured anti-democratic sentiments but was replaced in a relatively short period of time by a pro-Western military coup) have illustrated this difficulty. Democracy is not like tap water from a well that you can dig and turn on or off. It depends on highly complex cultural, social, and systemic assets that make it possible.

Moreover, differences in cultures and civilizations are extremely hazy and hard to pinpoint. Southern Italy, now firmly conceived to be within the Western world, once upon a time was labeled, with Greece, the Near East. This mental placement gave the name "Middle East" to the Arab world, which stretched up to Morocco.

Yet even if we were right in thinking in these terms, and Italy was indeed Eastern, what would that add or subtract from the understanding of the world and attempts to reconcile significant differences? Moreover, totalitarianism may be an accurate and helpful label, but at the end of the day, Saudi Arabia is a staunch American ally and arguably is less liberal and democratic than Iran, which periodically holds relatively free elections and is home to a vibrant cultural scene.

That doesn't mean that we are in a night where all cows are black. Essential differences do exist and cause significant issues that are now revolving around China.

The real issue seems to be that the U.S., for a few decades, forgot politics. As a master strategist, Clausewitz said war is only the continuation of politics through other means. The famous statement underlines that politics is the essential element to which war is a "deviation"; in fact, the U.S. won the Cold War through politics and economics, not via an open hot clash. In 1990, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, President Bush fought the first Gulf War with a remarkably broad alliance that lined up virtually everybody against tiny Iraq.

In this alliance, there were the USSR, China, Iran, and Syria. All these countries were not essential for fighting the actual war, but were fundamental to building a new world order. That is: Bush realized that just as the USSR was being defeated, a new world order had to be constructed on the past ashes, bringing together everybody, including old enemies like the Soviets or the Iranians. It was the same thing the U.S. did with Germany, Italy, and Japan after WWII. Bush was applying this experience to the post-Cold War era. After a couple of years, this critical lesson was soon to be forgotten in favor of the facile idea that markets and democracies would pour in naturally once the evil of "tyranny" was defeated. This conception forgot that modern free-market capitalism emerged only in the 18th century after long years of development, and it remains a weak plant in need of constant gardening. Otherwise, it can go wild.

The Past that Did not Pass. 1925–2025 Empires' Resurrections

Russia, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary seem to be back. There are good reasons for this. But modernity pushes in directions, and the US needs to think ahead about them as they will impact China, too.

Just a hundred years ago, three polities that, for centuries, disputed the true legacy and thus the authentic spread of Rome's ancient power were crushed and crumbled. The Russian Empire, the third Rome, was trashed by the Soviet revolution that boasted of leaving behind the Czar and his Orthodox Church. Russia's colonized Asian people became legitimate "ethnic minorities" with their republics in the new federation. The Ottoman Empire, conqueror of the Second Rome, Constantinople, became a Turkish military republic, shedding its religious and multiethnic legacy -- the Greeks were expelled, the Armenians wiped out, and the Kurds turkisized. The Austrian-centered Holy Empire forged Europe in a twin tie with the Pope for a millennium and was reduced to a German-speaking statelet.

All shed their old link with their homegrown religions (Russian Orthodoxy, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism), all gave up their non-ethnic heritage and found a new nationalist identity (Austria and Turkey, became German and Turkish) or internationalist (Russia, with its global communism). But institutions that shaped people and territories for centuries can't be wiped out in just a few decades.

When Russia's experiment with communism went bankrupt. In the late 1990s, Moscow got cold feet with its complete transition to a market economy; President Vladimir Putin gradually shifted the country onto a neo-Czarist path. Chechenia's pro-independence

forces were wiped out in 1999, Georgia was carved up in 2008, and Ukraine was deprived of Crimea in 2014.

Similarly, Turkey was rejected from an EU association in 2016, the same year it cracked down on the modern-oriented Gülen movement following a failed coup. At the same time, since the first Gulf War in 1990, it confronted the danger and opportunity of crumbling Arab states on its borders, Iraq and Syria, and the rise of new Kurdish national entities and ambitions in those territories and their eastern regions.

Therefore, to keep all these pieces together, it also voices a return to its Ottoman roots. But Israel has changed the geography. With the war in Gaza, more Muslim Arabs and more Druze have become active in Israel. The ultra-orthodox Jews became less privileged (they have now been drafted into the army). Israel has better ties with the Arab countries, which fear Hamas radicalism. These Arabs, squeezed between Turks and Persians, may prefer fellow Semites in Israel.

Almost in parallel, present independent nations like Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria are all voting for the conservative rightist parties, and Italian regions, formerly part of the Austrian empire or in its orbit (Friuli, Veneto, Lombardy), are pressing Rome for a law granting them greater autonomy. Vienna is a magnet for them all. They seem to share a common sensibility against a "foreign Islamic invasion," represented by the immigrants from Muslim countries, shared interests in opposing a newly rising axis of Polish-Ukrainian-Baltic interests. They would like to project themselves between Central Europe and the Adriatic Sea through Trieste and maybe even Venice.

These new pulls and pushes have already been reshaping the map of Europe and the Mediterranean. They can't be trifled with.

Empires, Old and New West, Old and New China

West against West

There seem to be two Wests: one is dead, though pretending to be alive, and the other is thriving, though pretending to have troubles. They are different and must not be confused, lest great mistakes be made. China should be aware.

For centuries, the West has struggled with the recurring idea of its own decline and looming disaster. While other nations refrain from discussing their decline or possible fall as if it were a taboo, as if mentioning it would hasten it, Western countries have long wallowed in this narrative. And yet here they are—stronger than ever and far from declining.

US President Donald Trump, with his "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) slogan, appeared to be the latest incarnation of this idea. America, the paragon of the West, is faltering, yet it must rise again, said the slogans.

There is a genuine historical element rooted in a confusion between two "Wests": one Mediterranean and grounded in an old imperial order (West 1), and the other global, born with the discovery of America (West 2). These are interconnected but also widely separated. The definitive end of the first post-World War I period paved the way for the second to bloom fully.

The comprehensive narrative of the First World War's crisis—its fall—relates to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the end of World War I, with its horrors—a vast, senseless bloodbath. At that moment, not one but three key pillars of the Western order crumbled. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Holy Roman Empire—mainstay of Europe for over a thousand years, the Russian Empire, the Third Rome, heir to Constantinople, and finally

the Ottoman Empire, with its capital in the old Constantinople, now Istanbul.

Three Roman Empires, Three Religions

All three were legacies of the Roman Empire, relying on a close relationship between religious and imperial authority—the German Emperor had a dialectical relationship with the Pope; the Czar had the Patriarch at his beck and call; and the Caliph was both spiritual leader and supreme civil authority.

At that time, Oswald Spengler, a Bavarian thinker, crystallized the idea of the West's crisis in his 1922 book. The West, centered around the Mediterranean, was indeed finished, and it would never return—and that is right.

Simultaneously, in the same region, thinkers like Hayek, Schumpeter, and Weber, faced with the explosion of socialist internationalist uprisings (close to Moscow) and nationalist movements (like those in Rome and Berlin), patiently explained that something new had been born from the ashes: the unparalleled value of the free market.

Over the last three to four centuries, there has been an explosion of the market economy—a product of Western thought and experience, shaped by influences from China and the history of global exploration. This idea evolved slowly, in opposition to the old empires, such as the Habsburgs, blessed by the Pope.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century paved the way for the transformation, followed by the French Revolution in the 18th century, and ultimately the end of World War I in 1918. Through these stages, capitalism and Western ideas became globally dominant. Even the Soviet Union is a product of Western thought—Marx was born in Germany and spent most of his life in London, the very heart of the capitalist West. Kemal Atatürk in

Turkey radically rejected the Ottoman heritage, including its religion and script.

That world is gone; it is not merely declining but buried—despite temptations in Russia, Turkey, or even within Europe—to revive it.

At the same time, a century after WWI, there is no crisis of capitalism or its worldview. There is no crisis in the West 2. There may be a crisis of individual Western states, but not of the Western model itself, born of the capitalist revolution.

The idea of the market—phase after phase of the industrial revolution—has established itself, reaching now its latest frontier: artificial intelligence. Here, China is catching up, but the breakthrough came from Western America. It demonstrates the ongoing strength and validity of the Western experience. Radical opponents of free markets—those who rallied behind fascist or communist authoritarian regimes—have all been defeated over the past century.

Singular Problems

If the system works, that doesn't mean every country adopting it has no troubles. Various nations face specific problems. The United States, for example, grapples with enormous budget and trade deficits, as well as a national debt—problems that are neither new nor unique.

Another example is China, which over nearly fifty years has adopted only parts of the Western experience, resulting in a skewed, lopsided situation today. While Chinese production is exceptional—the best in the world in terms of both cost and quality—there are issues with overproduction and deflation. The domestic market isn't driving growth, and nobody really knows how to unlock it organically and without pain. These problems are

increasingly weakening China. They can be resolved, perhaps, but they are tough to fix without systemic reforms.

What we have witnessed over the past few centuries is not the crisis of the Western capitalist model, but rather its remarkable resilience. It transcends the countries that adopted it. Over the last hundred years, while talk of crisis persisted, the West shifted from the dominance of Britain and France to a period in which the United States now appears unshaken—possibly even stronger.

This has clear consequences. Presently, the West is winning because the primary challengers over the past few years have suffered significant setbacks. Russia is tearing itself apart over Ukraine, Iran has proven to be a paper tiger, Hamas has been dismantled, and Iranian allies in the region have been decapitated. The Assad regime in Syria has fallen.

The Western setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2005 have not led to a viable alternative or emerging rival, as during the Cold War. The threat of global radical Islamism has largely faded—shown to be a matter of domestic law and order rather than a strategic, existential threat.

The Vatican and Western Religion

Yet, within the West, the narrative seems to diverge. Especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a cognitive warfare has started portraying Russia or Hamas as winning and the US-led West as losing.

The end of the Mediterranean Empires also marked the end of their traditional connection to their respective religions. The Russian Orthodox were persecuted and then revived almost as if nothing had happened, as Russian President Vladimir Putin groomed his new czarist dreams.

In Turkey, Islam was cast aside for decades until President Recep Erdogan also tried to follow a similar pattern, casting himself as a modern sultan and reviving the role of Islam, though not to Putin's degree. Neither Russian Orthodoxy nor Turkish Islam had lost its social and political foothold in its respective society. Turkey and Russia modernized, but their religious traditions came back with a vengeance.

The Pope was different. In 1870, it lost its Pontiff Estate, which had guaranteed its independence for over a millennium, and its defender, the Holy Roman Emperor, was abolished as well. Plus, the Holy See was for many decades under the triple siege of atheist communism, deist freemasonry (holding massive influence in capitalist countries), and militant Protestantism. Communism arrived in Russia, but not to the same extent in the Muslim world. Freemasonry and Protestantism never really penetrated Turkey or Russia.

The shock for Rome had been enormous, but slowly the Holy See assumed a different global role—one that neither Russian Orthodoxy nor Islam managed to achieve. It built bridges with all three previous mortal challenges. The Holy See modernized Catholicism in ways the others did not, yet it preserved a thread of continuity with the past that does not hinder modernity.

The Vatican experience should serve as a model for Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. The key could be to be in sync with modernity, not in opposition to it. Indeed, the Pope reaching out to all religions is a beacon of innovation, though rooted in continuity.

First Notes on Geo-Philosophy

Ancient Roman and Ancient Chinese Foundations. "We think in relation to our geographical and historical contexts. Philosophy

allows us to address the historical issues before us clearly and thoroughly."

The differences between the ancient Chinese and Roman states, as observed by Feng Youlan in the 19302, begin with the geographical environments in which the two civilizations developed. The Roman Empire was established around the Mediterranean, building upon the foundations laid by the Greeks and Phoenicians. These earlier peoples had already mastered the sea; they were skilled navigators, and Rome first had to wrest control of the Italian peninsula from them to ultimately rule the Mediterranean.

Two parallel lines of rowers operated their original ships—all equals—who had to work in perfect unison. The captain was simply the one with the heaviest oar: the rudder. He had to keep the rhythm and the harmony of the rowing; it was easy and immediate to see when he made a mistake. The rhythm was an abstract rule, independent of his will. He could do it faster or slower but had to consider all conditions.

The phalanx—the model army of the Greeks and the foundation of the Roman legion—was also a group of equals. The king held the main line of the phalanx; the spear was used somewhat like an oar. Whether in a boat or a battle formation, the key was cohesion. If one person made a mistake, the entire ship could sink, and the same was true for the phalanx, whose break could lead to defeat. Therefore, the main goal was to maintain equal effectiveness, governed by the simple rule coordinating the rowers or the steps of the phalanx.

Moreover, the Mediterranean is a treacherous sea where winds and currents can change at any time. Mistakes are inevitable because the sea and wind are unpredictable. The goal, then, is not

to execute a single plan consistently over a long period, but to cultivate the ability to correct sudden errors and adapt to surprises.

The political structure of Sparta, or its equivalent in the Roman Republic, was designed to correct mistakes. Sparta had two kings who ruled in succession; similarly, Rome had two consuls who also served in succession. This system aimed to correct potential errors made by the previous leader. It proved highly effective, enabling the Greek League to defeat the mighty Persian Empire. Later, under the leadership of Alexander of Macedon, the phalanx conquered half the known world, demonstrating its unstoppable force.

The Greeks and Romans were both merchants and pirates. The legion was organized almost like a private equity firm; everyone was entitled to a share of the loot based on their rank. As an organization of equals, its members had rights that matched their duties—two sides of the same coin. One had to stay in formation in the legion, holding the shield, and would receive payment based on performance.

The Mediterranean was a vast, open area bordered by three continents and six other seas, a geography that for centuries prevented its political unification. It was unified only once, by the Romans—a feat never achieved again. Although the sea remains a fiercely contested battlefield to this day, its unity was never pursued after Rome.

The Chinese Space

The Chinese space was profoundly different. First, it was enclosed. To the north lay the steppes, to the west the desert and mountains, and to the south more mountains and dense jungle. To the east was an archipelago and a peninsula, and beyond that, a vast, endless ocean. This limited space was challenging to access.

Initially, it was also a dense jungle inhabited by elephants and other wild animals, with formidable mountains and rivers.

These geographic features could only be controlled by organized groups of people executing a long-term plan—burning forests, hunting elephants, managing river courses, and leveling mountains. Here, nature was harsh but not unpredictable; it was a stable environment over months and years. Surprises were rare and usually caused by exceptional events, such as earthquakes or locust plagues.

To address these challenges, a highly organized hierarchy was necessary, and for that hierarchy, authority was essential to validate it. Those with more efficient organization, greater manpower, and more resources succeeded in building more river embankments, clearing more forests, and hunting more elephants, thereby expanding the land under cultivation and increasing food production. This led to a larger population, a stronger army, and better weaponry. The core issue was the organization as a whole.

This river region differed from the other three ancient river civilizations. The rivers of Egypt and Mesopotamia flowed through deserts and were close to each other and to the sea—the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. They were also near the Indus civilization, which was situated not in a desert but amidst forests. These were not isolated but connected, open, and contiguous areas. From the start, these three civilizations had mutual relations and influences. Inspiration from Egypt and Mesopotamia shaped Greek society, and Alexander later conquered parts of India.

China and its civilization, on the other hand, remained separate from this sphere. Social organization in China also became a way of waging war. But while governing the boat leads to the phalanx, which in turn leads to the res publica and democracy, hierarchical organization leads to a different kind of political structure and a

different kind of warfare. In Rome or Greece, the emperor was a warrior who fought alongside his soldiers.

In China, the emperor was a semi-religious authority who guaranteed social peace—that is, the hierarchical order. At the start of any major waterworks project, you cannot know if the chief designer is right; you must trust him, have faith in him, and you need a clear social order to carry out the work. This is very different from a boat, whose fate—whether it is sinking or crashing under the waves—can be determined in minutes. Therefore, in China, there was a distinct social distance: the sovereign, the general-bureaucrat, and the soldier. Because the organization is only as good as its leader, the ruler is the key. Everything belongs to him. There are no rights or duties, only loyalty or disloyalty, and he distributes rewards and punishments based on his undisputable judgment. If he seriously fails, the world and the dynasty collapse. Consequently, no one wants him to fail. His person was more important than the rules he used to govern.

An Ancient Debate

It is interesting to observe the philosophical debate in China during the fourth and fifth centuries BC. The philosopher Mozi was the first to provide an account of the intense intellectual and political discussions of that era, with three sets of chapters all titled Fei 非 (Against), aimed at presenting arguments against opposing schools of thought.

Fei Ru 非儒 (Against the Ru) clearly opposes Confucius and the Confucians. Fei Gong 非攻 (Against Offensive Warfare) argues against those who advocate for wars of attack, where large states target smaller ones to eliminate them. Sunzi supported the idea that large states should continue to grow stronger and larger, with more people and greater resources, enabling them to conquer

more territory and support a bigger population with a more efficient organization. Fei Gong seems to oppose Sunzi. Possibly, the chapter Fei Yue 非樂 (Against Music) (or perhaps it should be read as Fei Le, Against Fun-Enjoyment, as A.C. Graham suggested) targets Zhuangzi and his followers, who preferred to spend time in the forests singing and dancing rather than working hard for the state.

Mozi agrees with the principle of efficient organization and supports its logic, but he opposes large states expanding further at the expense of smaller ones. Instead, he believes that a return to an inter-state religious-political authority should ensure a balance of power. An overreaching Son of Heaven (tianzi 天子) arbitrating between independent state lords (guojun 國君).

Therefore, he suggests a series of measures to strengthen the defenses of cities and smaller states. However, he never proposes an army of equals, like the Greek phalanx or the Roman legion, which would have been more effective for a small state facing a larger one, as Greek history against Persia showed. A few, equal, highly motivated individuals can defeat larger, poorly motivated crowds who may dislike their own generals more than they dislike the enemy.

Greek warriors were bound by a special love for each other called agape. There was a kind of love also in the Chinese social organization that the Mohists called ai 愛, etymologically "a heart between a claw and a beating stick." But even that was to be directed hierarchically, above one's superiors, not below. The sentiment among low-class members was referred to with the derogatory term dang 黨, etymologically "mouths under a roof in the dark."

The Mohists were unique in ancient China. They were the most organized school of thought, with highly loyal disciples serving as

"military advisers" to various warring states. However, even they failed to see beyond the limits of a bureaucratic army.

The army of equals was clearly outside China's cultural horizon at the time, as well as beyond its geographical and political boundaries. The army consisted of noble warriors trained for years in archery and chariotry, or of growing numbers of farmer-soldiers commanded by a Strategist-general.

There was no united group of comrades who fought and died together, as in Rome or Sparta. There was supposed to be no love for comrades. In Rome, beneath the heroic band of soldiers privileged to fight and thus be immortalized in their deeds, there was a crowd of nameless slaves who could only live as long as they remained useful: they were tools, animals raised to pull plows or be killed for entertainment in the Colosseum. Dying as a hero was a privilege; the great foundational poem of Western culture, the *Iliad*, is centered on this—the drama and suffering of Achilles, a man who chooses to die young in exchange for eternal fame.

In China, this concept does not exist. Since ancient times, when numerous large and small states fought among themselves, the idea of Yang sheng (nourishing life) has persisted—maintaining one's own life even at the expense of sacrificing a state, aiming to extend life indefinitely. In Greece and Rome, however, people sought a heroic death by the sword, to be celebrated in triumph on shields as a fallen hero. There is also the idea of the immortality of the name—almost a personal soul—that holds more significance than earthly salvation.

There were not many fighting heroes in China, but there were not many slaves either. In Rome, the economy relied on agriculture, war, conquest, and plunder—raids brought in material wealth and slaves. In China, wealth was generated mainly through agriculture and industry. War was either a waste of resources or aimed at

increasing territory and manpower to gain more arable land, a larger workforce, and thus more resources for further expansion or consolidation, as Mozi's Fei Gong chapters vividly described.

Furthermore, although the unity of the Mediterranean was achieved only once, the unity of the Central Chinese plain became a recurring theme in the history of Chinese civilization after the second unification by the Sui and Tang. Unification was not only geographical but also historical. All dynasties emphasized a linear continuity and succession of cycles, glossing over historical differences.

In the Mediterranean, although the Romans admired ancient Egypt, as shown by the obelisks they plundered and brought to Rome, they never claimed a historical continuity with Egypt.

Empires Strike Back and The Western Imperial Rise

The old Western Empires fell to a new Western order – modern liberalism. After the turn of the century, slowly but steadily, empires are rising from the ashes, threatening liberalism. Can modernity survive without liberalism?

The drive for empire started with the end of the Punic Wars (264 BC–146 BC). Then the Republic was without peer challengers in the region, but its territory was far too extensive, and it needed a professional standing army. Marius (157 BC–13 January 86 BC) was the first to push for it. However, an experienced army carried the seed of the Republic's destruction.

Professional soldiers became loyal to their generals rather than to the Roman res publica. This, in time, ushered in mighty generals who came to be the supreme military commanders of the Roman world—i.e., emperors. Following the defeat of the

Carthaginians, the vast and diverse Roman organization required long-term planning, a complex organizational structure, and extensive standing armies that could be easily deployed. This implied the development of complex logistics, armories, and food supplies. They needed plans whose success or failure could be judged over the years. This, in turn, demanded trust and faith in a long-term leader – hence the emperor.

It was a massive philosophical move from the organization of a rowing boat or the legion, where each man was responsible for his oar or his shield within a unit of equals (see here). Yet the legion continued to exist; in fact, it remained the core of Roman victories. Boats in the treacherous Mediterranean Sea, with sudden changes of winds or a lack of wind altogether, were still reliant on coordinated rowing. Here, mistakes remained immediately visible and had to be corrected immediately.

These opposed elements may have also contributed to historical sedimentation in the imperial transformation of Rome. It promoted a new emperor but maintained the separation of powers, with the old republican trappings and a religious entity distinct from the political one—a relatively separate religious entity, well suited to a structure of split yet equal and balanced duties and rights. In a phalanx or in a boat, rowers are all equal, but each has distinct requirements to fulfil.

Trust in long-term imperial planning transcended the single emperor; it was generational or multi-generational. Its outcome could only be seen in the afterlife, whether one was in hell or paradise.

Yet daily mistakes and surprises had to be addressed and corrected immediately. There was a double time: one of daily 'chaos' to be managed daily (with the ancient republican trappings)

and the imperial time, eternal, like the gods, and to be judged not in this life.

The distinction might have been weaker in Byzantium, Moscow, or Istanbul. Still, the Czar or the Sultan had to confront the periodic challenges of a clergy that sometimes called out actual or alleged imperial errors.

The clergy could have been used to run the empire. Still, bureaucratic structures were never as developed as in China, and the loyalty of the clergy to the emperor or the religious faith was totally overlapping. Physics and metaphysics were distinct realms in the Abrahamitic religions that conquered the world, and, by principle, they didn't coincide; thus, the emperor's actions could become questionable and, by extension, be challenged by the clergy. This was the backbone of the Mediterranean empires that lasted until 1918.

China

The picture in China was very different. The emperor was the son of Heaven in a public religion where public peace and stability were practical proof of heavenly favor. One didn't have to die to see if he was in hell or paradise, as was the case with Christians or Muslims. The daily order and the food abundance in the markets were clear evidence of the emperor's good work. There was no official religion beyond this, and thus no real clergy; only bureaucrats serving the state religion and the emperor.

It was a practical time, between daily chaos and eternity. The rise or fall of a dynasty proved, in practice, whether the empire was right or wrong. Daily troubles could be fixed or not, provided they didn't exceed a certain threshold of general instability. Then they had to be crushed, lest the empire's stability be threatened.

Any dynasty also had a specific ideological/religious drive that gave its rule a distinct shape. It was their own particular philosophical content, unlike in the West, where all sovereigns drew from Christianity or Islam, albeit with different shades. Again, it was a time frame shorter than God's eternity and longer than the daily mess.

Rebellions broke out when people felt stability and well-being were not guaranteed—when there had been a major famine or flood that the state hadn't managed to cope with. Rebellions began when the emperor and his officials/clergy failed to provide stability and food. People would then feel they could no longer rely on arrangements from above and had to take things into their own hands.

Ancient China, before the Qin unification, had a specific term for it, dang 黨 (mainly as explained in Mozi; people are encouraged to conform above shangtong 尚同 and not clique below xiadang 下黨), which meant something like plotting in local villages without consulting superiors. This plotting led to banditry. Farmers, impoverished and deprived of their land, took to the forest and mountains, robbing people. This led to growing penury in a vicious circle that imperial forces had to quell; if they failed, it would ultimately end in the empire's toppling. When banditry grew in scale, it often took on religious/ideological colors.

Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty in the second century B.C., came from this tradition. He was a little petty criminal who joined a group of escaping criminals. Zhu Yuanzhang, founder of the Ming, was a penniless Buddhist monk who joined the Red Turbans in the 14th century.

The Turbans were yellow when they toppled the Han dynasty in the 3rd century A.D., although they failed to establish a new dynasty. The rebels, known as the Taiping, were pseudo-Christian

when they almost overthrew the Qing dynasty in the mid-19th century. That is, religion and politics were one, both in the rule and the challenge of the empire. The proof of their faith was in the pudding of their revolution. The revolution succeeded because its ideology/religion was effective. If it failed, the religion/ideology could well disappear, very much unlike the millennial Mediterranean religions.

Below the dynastic faith, Buddhism has had a lasting impact, mixed with Taoist beliefs. But they were private, personal events. They didn't require weekly assemblies (Sundays, Saturdays, or Fridays) where the preacher would collectively direct both ordinary and influential people in one direction or another, as seen in the Abrahamitic faiths. Faith was not a social affair. Social faith was only about the state.

Mediterranean Incursion into Asia

In the 7th century AD, the expansion of Islam weakened the Roman Empire. Still, Constantinople resisted the onslaught. On the other hand, the Arabs broke the Persian Empire, which had, for centuries, blocked direct contact between the Mediterranean and the Indian world. The feat had been achieved only once before by Alexander the Great. The realms of the Muslim world subsequently failed to maintain a unified faith and a unitary state.

Still, Islam continued to spread and attract converts throughout Indonesia, the Philippines, and southern China. It created the first trade/religious network spanning from East Asia to the Mediterranean shores.

The eastern expansion of Muslim culture after the fall and conquest of the Persian empire reached India, where Greek culture, which undergirded Muslim philosophy, had already had an impact since the time of Alexander; i.e., Western culture wasn't wholly

new. Besides, Islam originated in the cradle of ancient Greek philosophy, Christianity, and the Jewish faith, which also influenced northern European culture.

Christianity sought to break the Islamic hold on contacts with Asia, possibly by exploiting the extensive network created by the Mongol conquests in the 13th century. It dreamed of a Christian king of the east—the mythical Prester John—but it never really pierced the Islamic monopoly. The European traders who thrived in the Mediterranean did so by compromising and dealing with Islamic and Jewish traders.

Ottoman wealth and power originated in Central Asia and the Islamic network —an empire of trade that stretched across Asia, including China. Islam had established a stable connection between the Far East and the Mediterranean basin. The 15th-century voyages of Ming admiral Zheng He may have been a Chinese response to this Muslim power. Zheng was a Muslim loyal to the emperor of China, not to other sultans. Zheng proved a significant religious point: one could be personally Muslim, as different Chinese were personally Buddhist, but it was a purely personal belief, not social, and it didn't interfere with the "social faith" in the sacred imperial order of the Son of Heaven.

When the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch (all initially loyal to the Holy Emperor of the Habsburg dynasty) first arrived in East Asia in the 16th century, they had to fight and expel Muslim traders. The European merchants brought to Asia an unparalleled advantage compared to their Muslim competitors – the goods and silver of the Americas, which they had monopolized.

Over the following centuries, the Muslim trade empire and political empire slowly came to an end. It was brought about by military defeats (the Spanish stopped the Muslim advance in the Mediterranean with Lepanto in 1571, and in the east, they

conquered Manila) and economic advantages (the westerners had more and better goods to trade thanks to their control of the Americas). Still, it was not the end of their religious footprint on the Asian continent.

To try to win over these new areas, the Catholic Church, then far more organized than its Protestant competitors, sent missionaries to the east. They brought back a trove of untapped Chinese culture that influenced the Western world in the 17th and 18th centuries. It contributed to the labor of modernity.

This culture contributed to the transformation of Europe and the emergence of modern society. There were three sets of contributions that gave rise to modernity in the West:

1. From ocean voyages came: a sense of a limitless world, the discovery of discovery, the new as a positive element, and no longer as a threat to an established order.
2. From China came: the concept of revolution, the bureaucracy and backbone of an abstract yet personal state, wu wei (no proactive action), a concept similar to the capitalist economic theory of the invisible hand of the free market, and an ethic independent of religion.
3. From the European tradition, there were the ideas of a Res Publica, the division of powers, and the role of religion in society and the state. The concept of a personal god led to the recognition of the sanctity of each person.

The Making of Western Modernity

THREE INTERACTING CONTRIBUTIONS



OCEAN VOYAGES

- A sense of a limitless world
- Discovery of discovery
- The new as a positive element



CHINA

- Revolution
- Bureaucracy and public administration
- *Wu wei*
- An ethic independent of religion



EUROPEAN TRADITION

- *Res publica*
- Division of powers
- Religion's role in society and the state
- Sanctity of the individual

WESTERN MODERNITY

The End of Emperors

At the time when Western Christianity was winning, it broke down. The Protestant Reformation, which occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries, significantly disrupted the pact between the Pope and the Holy Emperor, which had been the gravitational pull of Europe since Charlemagne. The long reign of emperors, spanning some 18 centuries, was now waning. The Dutch claimed independence from the Habsburgs and established a Republic.

In the 17th century, the English beheaded their king and gave power to parliament before remitting it to a dictator, Oliver Cromwell. When the monarchy was re-established, the king was provided by the Dutch Republic.

The century following American independence (proclaimed in 1776) was marked by the country's efforts to play the French against the English and establish its republic. In France in 1789, a republic beheaded the king but then proclaimed Napoleon a dictator and made him an emperor, whom the Pope crowned, as Charlemagne had been a millennium earlier. The reign of Emperor Napoleon was short-lived, and the movement against imperial power that accompanied the wealth and power created by modernity and capitalism carried on in the 19th century, engulfing the whole world in its wake.

Dictatorships, from Cromwell to Napoleon, seemed like a nostalgia, a muscle memory of the King's old hieratic power. In the 19th century, the old European order crumbled, culminating in 1918 with the fall of the three ancient empires: the Holy Roman, the Russian, and the Ottoman. The rest of the world's empires fell to their knees or shortly thereafter. Empires were no more; democracy, whether liberal or popular, was the keyword.

It was the end of the world. However, the collapse occurred with the sudden replacement by an emerging power —the US, also a Roman offspring—the death of the old West and the birth of the new one. It happened over two centuries, starting with the French Revolution, which spread the revolutionary idea that societies could be reshaped and re-engineered. Later, in the 20th century, this idea of rebuilding societies and states continued.

With the French Revolution, Leninism, some democratic Western movements, and fascism came the idea of a society that can and should be re-engineered. Indeed, the idea of engineering the state and society was not unknown in traditional times. The whole ancient pre-Qin debate over unification (3rd century BC) was about engineering state structures. The goal was to create the most efficient state and social structure to boost production, thereby increasing the population and equipment necessary for the army to win wars and expand territory and population. The goal was the power and survival of one's state against competing states.

In Europe, the Soviet revolution aimed to boost social justice over personal riches, and, consequently, the happiness of the people. The liberals, conversely, primarily aimed to increase wealth growth, which, in the end, boosted their nations' wealth and, by extension, their power.

The social project began with the people, not the state, but ultimately the state would be more prosperous and more powerful, with happy, driven people.

The French and Soviet revolutions also adopted different senses of geography. Every person in the world (not just within one state) should have the same rights and enjoy the same opportunities, governed by the same rules that would collectively govern the whole world. The abstraction of a unified world, not a singular state, was the general political horizon.

China, whether consciously or unconsciously, may have recognized elements of its own cultural DNA when it came to believe in the bankruptcy of its cultural order and introduced Western concepts wholesale in the 20th century. The Communist Party introduced and spread the idea of equality among people, a concept previously unheard of in a highly hierarchical society. It brought the idea of democracy as the rule of the people. Then, with Deng's reform, the concept of abstract market rules was also introduced.

In a nutshell, the massive transformation brought about by the party is threefold:

1. The party utilized the concept of equality, which did not previously exist, and continued to face challenges in gaining cultural acceptance within a hierarchical mindset.
2. There was no emperor; some veteran comrades select leaders and decide policies.
3. Geographically, since the 1980s, China was no longer isolated; it maintained trade and diplomatic relations with many countries.
4. Because it controlled Tibet and Xinjiang, formerly buffer areas, it had no buffer state anymore; moreover, its economy depended on international trade, unlike any other time in Chinese history. Therefore, the party needed to follow global developments and could not simply concentrate on its own territory as it did in the imperial past.

However, there was still the tradition of isolation, a semi-conscious belief in an emperor, a sense of hierarchy; how could these be reconciled?

The Communist Party had already altered the fundamental concepts of "Ancient China" by uniting formerly separated elements: ownership (which was under the emperor's control) and

management, which was in the hands of ministers appointed by the emperor. In the 2020s, without an emperor, interpreter of the will of Heaven, or without a people that can elect its leaders as in liberal systems, everything is confused. Who establishes what the right direction is for the country and its people?

At the same time, there was a growing impatience around the world with the liberal order and the division of power that have characterized the cultural debate of the past three centuries. Social media has enabled people's general wishes (lumping together all the singular postings) to connect directly with top leaders, eliminating the need for physical contact and personal debates. Moreover, by providing a platform for everyone to reflect on their own postings, each individual has developed a sense of self-satisfaction and egotism, even though their postings become just a tiny part of a broader statistical analysis.

Old rights to privacy and freedom were de facto restricted by vast mechanisms that generate trends driven by the unfettered surge of personal liberty and private exposure. Then, the needs of large companies feed on personal delusions of freedom. Only "outdated" laws on privacy and liberty stand between the mass-control led by companies and genuine personal freedoms. The industrial and developmental trend is toward mass control.

In this situation, a country like China, already well-structured and unshackled by the ideas of the old necessity of privacy and personal freedom, and driven by the accepted notion of public need, could be ahead compared to a country like the US, still fettered by democratic trappings.

... And Their Rebirth

Understandably, empires fell only a little over a century ago, and their memory is still with us, fostering a nostalgia for the good old

days. Moreover, the new liberal order is proving tiring, largely incomprehensible, and confusing to most people called upon to take on their own responsibilities. Many have grown impatient with the complexities of the liberal order in the new West (see here), forgetting that the Western transformation into modernity has tripled average human life expectancy, increased the human population tenfold in about a century, and improved the quality of life to an unprecedented level.

This was due to the complex and contradictory nature of the Western capitalist revolution. Still, it is so confusing that many would prefer to trust a messianic leader. However, here's a twist and a question mark. Ancient empires included a religious element to justify the rule of one over millions. Consciously and unconsciously, people believed the gods had touched the emperor, enabling him to foresee events and steer the nation's future. The Chinese emperor was the Son of Heaven; the Sultan was also the Commander of the Faithful, as was the Russian Czar; the emperors and kings of Europe needed the Pope's blessings. Leadership was viewed as a divine gift, akin to the gift of a prophet.

In the 2020s, some leaders seem to seek a similar sense of divine authority. Russian President Vladimir Putin turns to the Orthodox Church. Former US President Donald Trump had a group of evangelicals bless him at the White House. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, has inscribed his divine right to rule in the constitution, and propaganda venerates his father and grandfather as if they never died—in a neo-shamanistic cult.

This leaves Beijing as the major entity rejecting a special relationship with the divine. In theory, it should either renounce the communist legacy and return to the times of the Son of Heaven, or reject imperial tendencies and embrace a more liberal society. If it chose the second path, it would become the champion of

liberalism; otherwise, in an apparent retreat, it would further push the pro-imperial current in the global cultural debate, rejecting all that the cultural transformation brought about by the party in its history. A middle ground, the first Chinese temptation, would be difficult to achieve.

The root cause of the triumphant march of imperial mode is the breakdown of a social covenant that held together old societies. This covenant is felt to be broken because societies are divided over how to address rules on new immigration. Liberal democracy, and thus a fair market, is based on a social covenant. If the covenant is broken, democracy falls apart. This leaves an enormous new space for the Catholic Church: what role can Catholics have—and want to have? They were traditionally always in a dialectical dialogue with power but, unlike other faiths, were never a simple tool of government.

The Silence of Liberalism

In the 20th century, when liberalism was under attack from the converging forces of fascism and communism, liberal society produced a massive library of authoritative arguments countering the totalitarian trends. However, now in the middle of the comprehensive cultural offensive of traditional neo-imperialism against liberalism, it is almost mute. Still, it should have a lot to say.

Last century, the response was with economic theory and the theory of scientific research to counter arguments that sought to make the free market a service to the State. Capitalist societies were branded "plutocracies" by both challengers. Today, with the imperialist challenge, no one openly questions the free market, and the challenge is more subtle and indirect. Now, perhaps, the response should be historical focused on modernity and historical

development. Two recent books could help reveal something that shifts the current cultural landscape.

In *Crack-up Capitalism*, Quinn Slobodian writes that modern capitalism, as exemplified by giant American entrepreneurs, seeks a world in pieces, where states have little power, allowing them instead to exercise their discretionary power, and it can't stand democracy.[64] But this vision may not hold up in a very concrete clash between imperial powers.

On Liberalism, Cass Sunstein views this liberalism as an almost romantic quest for freedom.[65] But it's not just a love of abstract freedom. Liberalism has been an essential component of modern development. But liberalism is more than that. Altering liberalism alters the chemistry of modernity, halting or slowing the rate of progress and development, and sends everyone back to a static, neo-medieval world.

Neither tackles the new mix of domestic political strains on democracy and the bitter international competition with China.

Like in old empires, there seems to be a naive and possibly unholy alliance between tech billionaires and 'kings', which at the beginning may look mutually beneficial. The kings grant privileged 'patents,' and waivers (protection against antitrust, tax loopholes, and lucrative state contracts) to tech billionaires, and the tech companies give autocrats mass support, funds, and votes through their platforms. The pact is special, already outside the traditional realm of a res publica, it is without duties and rights, but with only a political contract between the king and his 'best men'.

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[64] Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2023).

[65] Cass R. Sunstein, *On Liberalism: In Defense of Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025).

However, as the history of pirates and the stories of Jack Ma, Elon Musk, and all the "suicided" Russian plutocrats prove, in the end, the king calls the shots. If one wants a king to have a privileged patent, you are a privateer only as long as the king gives you a patent; otherwise, you are a pirate. To be truly free, you have to take responsibility, stop being naïve, and acknowledge your duties in a res publica, which will entitle you to your rights.

Some billionaires may want the privileges of special contracts and special waivers, and for that, they may wish to grant special powers to a man who can deliver those privileges, forgetting that these are pacts with the devil. America today seems to think that the world is too complicated and diverse; it's better to focus on what one knows, one's own horizon, which is broad anyway.

America competes with two or three imperial systems: China, Russia, and Iran. For this reason, it wants to become more monocratic. Perhaps it is right, but it's not the only issue.

Yesterday, the threat was class conflict, the proletarians against the owners. But they were all together, they spoke the same language, they had known each other since they were kids, they had almost the same tastes and habits.

Today, the challenge is immigrants, who speak different languages, are other, unknown. It's easier to discriminate against and hate them. These foreigners are found both within and outside the Western world. This is like the past century's challenges, when fascists and communists were abroad and at home. From this, some lessons might be learned.

Algorithmical Theology

There is more to the US-China TikTok dispute than meets the eye. It's the future role of IPR and modernity. The agreement reached by the US and China for the sale of the Chinese platform TikTok is

a landmark. The Chinese will retain a 20% share ownership, and with that, the algorithm, which is foundational to the platform's success. The new American shareholders will control the proper use of the algorithm, but not the algorithm itself.

For China, it is a blow, but through that 20%, the country continues to maintain a presence in America that would otherwise have been completely denied to it. It is an ideological, more than a commercial, compromise, centered on a quasi-theological principle of new digital technologies: the sacrality and, thus, intangibility of the algorithm, which China doesn't trust it will be protected by the old IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) regulations. TikTok is the most recent example of this "techno-theological" dispute, and the first to be resolved through this compromise.

Around 2009, the United States and China had a similar dispute concerning Google. The Chinese demanded that Google open its ideal-technological vault and bring the source codes to China. Google refused, fearing the Chinese would steal the technology. The newly elected President Barack Obama tried to intervene and mediate but failed to resolve the issue. With great fanfare, Google left China. For essentially the same reasons, other similar platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, also failed to enter the country. China always demanded the "Sinicization" of the ideological sources. The Americans would not grant it.

Today, America could have similarly shut down TikTok because the technology and the platform are considered dangerous from many perspectives. However, by now TikTok has assumed an essential role in the American electoral process; President Trump appears to have over 170 million followers on TikTok. Shutting it down would have hurt Trump and the entire electoral process.

It's a significant concession to China. A similar compromise was possibly offered to Beijing for the US platform seeking to enter

China, but Beijing rejected it. Beijing sought access to the technological holy grail and was willing to forgo the platforms altogether. The US, already hooked on TikTok, seems unable to wean itself of it and thus accepted the deal.

The TikTok compromise seems like the one the Holy See struck with China regarding the appointment of bishops. The Pope retains control over the mother code—the core technology—but China is responsible for managing this code within its territory. China could simply block Chinese access to the Catholic and Christian source code. Still, with millions of Catholics and hundreds of millions of Chinese interested in religion and Christianity, there would be an ideological void that could perhaps be filled by other faiths more insidious and uncontrollable than Christianity. China was already hooked on religion, and Catholicism, almost like the US is on TikTok.

Therefore, similarly, for the Church of Rome, limited access to the Chinese market is better than no access at all. This aligns with a modern idea of Christianity, no longer hinged on a supreme imperial-papal relationship, but one that reaches out to every person who chooses their faith freely and unites with the Pope in a spontaneous and liberal synodality.

Religious Authority

With the rise of modernity came a decline in religious authority. With the 16th-century Reformation, the Pope and imperial power lost their grip on it, which was devolved to the northern European princes and eventually to the pastors and laymen who could read the Bible without seeking authoritative interpretations. Eventually, with the late 18th-century French Revolution, religion was dispensed altogether, and materialism and atheism triumphed worldwide. The pope, the bishops, and the priests all lost prestige

and power. Faith in science, and in its practical application, technology took over.

With that came also something unprecedented: the rise of patents. Inventions had a trademark, a value. They could be bought, sold, and rented like any other good, such as real estate. IPR protection became the key to everything, the deep secret holding all power over the good.

On the occasion of the Reformation, the 1474 Venetian Patent Statute is typically regarded as the earliest codified patent system in the world. It states that patents might be granted for "any new and ingenious device, not previously made", provided it was useful. Generally, these principles remain the fundamental principles of current patent laws.

Two centuries later, in the middle of the 30 years' War, pitting papal and anti-papal forces in Europe, and just before Cromwell's Protestant Revolution, Britain approved the Statute of Monopolies (1624). In 1710, the British Statute of Anne was enacted, which laid the groundwork for the current patent law and copyright, thereby firmly establishing the concept of intellectual property.

Before this time, guilds, trade associations, states, religious authorities, and abbeys held secrets, granted or denied access to books, and dispensed them as they saw fit. The unpatented Greek Fire, which had commanded Byzantine maritime power for centuries, famously died with the fall of Constantinople. Similarly, a myriad of secretive techniques were employed by various medieval crafts, ranging from steelmaking to textiles and masonry. Above them all, it was the authority of God that kept the social and political order; the pope and the emperor were the ultimate authorities of the secrets and over the secrets. They were the sancta sanctorum.

Then, kings, religious authorities, and sanctioned guilds-controlled secrets that had no open trade value, as they could not be freely exchanged in return for money. With trademarks, private individuals owned inventions and could trade them in an open market. People could buy them and build new patents in an increasing "capitalism" of inventions. Just as money well invested rewards money, so inventions well developed reward new inventions in a never-ending pyramid of development.

It all worked well and fine until some 20-30 years ago, when inventor capitalists started feeling that patents were no longer enough because they could not be really protected. It's very different from the previous Cold War. Then, the USSR had its inventions, but they were not put on the market. American inventions, although available for civil use, were stolen only for their military applications, which stifled the development potential of those patents.

With the US-China struggle, a new playing field emerges. Inventions have dual use, both civil and military, that foster new, distinct technologies. Patenting them is not enough. Companies and states have restarted keeping secrets. The heart of these secrets is now algorithms, the key stones of all the latest technology -- social platforms and AI.

Practical Gods

They are the practical God, the foundation that gives rise to development and economic growth. Algorithms are controlled by states or special companies serving the state, such as the sanctioned guilds of the past, which served the imperial power. Algorithms, the heart of the new power, like the gods of the past, have to be controlled by the emperor.

For the return to the IPR, every state should commit to IPR protection, but there's no similar horizon. Here is the heart of modernity: the accumulation and investment in developmental inventions and technologies. Here, more practically than ever, the future is at stake.

China offers a neo-imperial mode grounded on the state control of technologies. Because they are dual-use, and crucial to developing a strong, independent army, the ultimate guarantor of the state's political independence, this is based on deep-seated mistrust of the United States. This shakes the foundation of the Western civilizational model.

If the US civilizational model collapses, China's imperial model will remain the sole and unchallenged alternative. China means Asia, unless Asia finds a new special unity against China, which might well be the case. Asia, with 60% of the world's population and over 50% of the global economic growth, is the world's largest region.

However, IPRed inventions are not simple technologies; they are the ultimate culmination of a complex chain reaction that began half a millennium ago.

China apparently understands what is at stake, and it is now seeking a new developmental model. A recent essay in the Party Theoretical journal, "Seek the Truth," attempts to rethink the entire process of modernization.[66] In the West, it is traditionally viewed as a highly complex historical process, but China now seeks to

[66] Lu Zhoulai 卢周来, "Goujian 21 shiji zhengzhi jingjixue de jidian sikao" 构建 21 世纪政治经济学的几点思考 [Some Reflections on Constructing a Political Economy for the 21st Century], *Qiushi* 求是, no. 19 (2025), October 1, 2025. Qiushi article

encapsulate it in a rational formula that justifies its present evolution.

It aims to answer the fundamental question: how can China's model fit into a modern system without significant changes and without compromising its political system. It is captured in the idea of the need "to explore the role of the state in guiding capital, regulating monopolies, preventing risks, and promoting innovation—thus establishing a more efficient and rational system of economic governance."

The question differs from Russia, which offers a neo-czarist response to modernity. It is deeper, holding more weight as it challenges the Western system more profoundly. If it works for China, it changes all global balances and also the modern space of religion. Religion in each state, as per the IPR, will depend on the state's consent.

Then, if the West, including the US, abandons its foundational role in liberal ideology and its IPR-based technology, China's efficiency will be much higher than America's. That is, President Donald Trump's acceptance of the Sinicization of America's TikTok could have much longer and heavier consequences than the Vatican's agreement with China.

Does China need a Grand Strategy?

China might need a new Grand Strategy for the first time since the 3rd century BC unification, but it is quite elusive. Italy has parallel issues, and there could be lessons to be learned there.

"Here begins our tale. The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been. In the closing years of the Zhou dynasty, seven kingdoms warred among themselves until the kingdom of Qin prevailed and absorbed the other six. But Qin soon fell, and on its ruins two opposing kingdoms, Chu and

Han, fought for mastery until the kingdom of Han prevailed and absorbed its rival, as Qin had done before. The Han court's rise to power began when the Supreme Ancestor slew a white serpent, inspiring an uprising that ended with Han's ruling a unified empire. Two hundred years later, after Wang Mang's usurpation, Emperor Guang Wu restored the dynasty, and Han emperors ruled for another two hundred years down to the reign of Xian, after whom the realm split into three kingdoms. The cause of Han's fall may be traced to the reigns of Xian's two predecessors, Huan and Ling. Huan drove from office and persecuted officials of integrity and ability, giving all his trust to his eunuchs. After Ling succeeded Huan as emperor, Regent-Marshal Dou Wu and Imperial Guardian Chen Fan, joint sustainers of the throne, planned to execute the power-abusing eunuch Cao Jie and his cohorts. But the plot came to light, and Dou Wu and Chen Fan were themselves put to death. From then on, the Minions of the Palace knew no restraint."[67]

The passage is the cornerstone of Chinese culture and way of thinking. "The writings of the Warring Kingdoms period and the culminating unification of 221 BC may be considered the foundation of the institutions and philosophical traditions that created the China still known today. Confucius, who died in 479 BC, predicted the continuity of Chinese traditions and institutions -argues Professor Roberts in his preface to the novel – All the works of statecraft, social morality, and cosmological speculation covering ca. 500–200 BC, the Warring Kingdoms period, build toward and lead into the unification of the kingdoms under a single dynasty, the Qin, followed in fifteen years by the Han, which lasted for more than four hundred years, until AD 220. Three Kingdoms

[67] Luo Guanzhong, *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

offers a reverse perspective, from the fall rather than the rise of the Han, revealing the factors and forces that can cause a dynasty to break down and lead to a period of disunity… Three Kingdoms largely depends on Mencius's theories of leadership and also has Daoist components. The team of Liu Xuande (also known as Liu Bei) and his main adviser, Kongming (also known as Zhuge Liang), operate within a synthesis of Confucian and Daoist-Legalist ideas."

Masters of Jigsaw Puzzles or Artists?

The novel's beginning introduces a pretentious character, Liu Bei, who claims he wants to become the emperor of China because he asserts that he's a distant descendant of the imperial family and that his heart is not corrupt. He meets two not-so-brilliant but tough individuals who swear allegiance to this pretentious claimant. This follows the pattern of many traditional bandit novels. What sets "Three Kingdoms" apart is the presence of Zhuge Liang. He is the clever strategist who truly puts Liu Bei on the political map and is celebrated in China as a master strategist. But who is he really? Is he truly a "strategist"?

In Western tradition, a grand strategist is someone like Cyrus, the first Persian emperor who envisioned and achieved a new empire that won the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. It's Alexander, who marched from Greece and conquered everything in his path until reaching India and Central Asia. It's Caesar, who vanquished Gaul and laid the foundations of a new political reality, transforming the Roman Republic into the Empire. It would be Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor, who imagined, pursued, and achieved the unprecedented unification of the Yellow River Basin.

Zhuge Liang did not devise a new political plan for his master. He tried to obtain the unification of China as it was established

under the Han dynasty. His goal was to achieve stability in the Yellow River Basin; after that, all problems would be solved.

There's a difference between designing a new game and being very skilled at playing an existing one. These are two distinct sets of skills. Zhuge Liang resolves problems like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle or winning a chess game. He is a grand master, for sure, but within the scope of "dividing and uniting" the Empire.

In the 7th century, the Turkic Tang and, in the 12th century, the Mongolic Yuan, facing similar challenges, accepted the mantra about the centrality of stability in the Yellow River Basin.

But what if the game is entirely different?

Perhaps the "Three Kingdoms" strategy worked until 1571 when the Spanish expelled the Chinese traders from Manila and turned the city into their main trading hub between Mexico and Asia. The sport then completely changed for China, yet 450 years later, China still struggles to grasp this shift.

The Ming dynasty, entirely caught up in its "divide and unite" mentality in 1571, did not support the Chinese merchants in Manila because it had little to no control over them, and their relative independence undermined the emperor's absolute power. Thus, the Ming allowed the Spaniards to be at their doorstep rather than dealing with unruly Chinese. The crux of the matter was that the Ming failed to perceive the new reality. The world was no longer a jigsaw puzzle; it required a creation anew, fueled by imagination.

The flow of Chinese merchants throughout Asia mirrored the pattern followed by the Spanish and Portuguese at the time: dispatching people with some authority and loosely overseeing them. It was the well-trodden path of the Italian republics like Venice, Genoa, or Amalfi. This pattern entailed a different relationship between the ruler and the subject, necessitating negotiation over their respective shares of the spoils.

However, there is no negotiation in China's "divide and unite" strategy. Once Zhuge Liang commits to serving Liu Bei, he ceases to negotiate for himself and solely assists his master. Conversely, the 16th-century Chinese traders did not want to be mere serfs of the emperor; they asserted their Chinese roots. Yet, instead of negotiating a new agreement with them to expand imperial influence and confront the world as it had evolved, the emperor chose to disregard them, leaving them to the Spaniards, if he didn't eliminate them himself.

Perhaps this vision of absolute imperial power is what makes it difficult for China to imagine a grand strategy—something that isn't yet present but can address existing challenges.

European Difference

Since the discovery of the American continent in 1492, the West has consistently pursued new developments and dismantled existing structures and ways of thinking. Luther published his 95 theses in 1517, just 25 years after the discovery of America. The theses broke the unity of the Catholic Church and began to undermine the Holy Roman Empire, a political cornerstone of Europe since the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD.

Following that, there was a continuous effort against the Holy Roman Empire and the Church, leading to brand-new practices and ideologies (such as liberal capitalism and communism) that have transformed the world. These were not jigsaw puzzles to solve but entirely new games to be played.

The real question now is: Does China want to adopt a new development model better suited to present and future realities, or does it intend to promote its traditional "divide and unite" strategy on a regional or global scale?

This is not only a Chinese problem; it's a European issue, too. Before the discovery of America, the world was segmented, with each region being self-centered and politically self-contained. After America was discovered, Europe rapidly became the world's undisputed center. In the last century, three world wars (the First, the Second, and the Cold War) were centered in Europe.

Yet, since Obama's pivot to Asia, America has shifted its attention away from Europe for good reasons. In the Asia-Pacific region, 60% of the global population resides, and most global growth occurs there. Europe, including Russia, is marginal for the first time in history. Even the current war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East are just sideshows compared to the main event—dealing with China.

The war in Ukraine may have deterred a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and some believe that ending the war in Ukraine without a definitive resolution might encourage China's bold moves in the region. Ukraine in 2022 is akin to Korea in 1950 in terms of deterrence. Repelling the North Korean invasion halted Soviet attacks on Western Europe.

Now, stopping the Russians in Ukraine restricts China's ambitions in Asia. It's classical deterrence. Caving into Vladimir Putin could embolden China. The connection is apparent in Asia; indeed, Japan's new prime minister, Shigeru Ishiba, advocates for an Asian NATO, like how the Korean War promoted NATO in Europe 70 years ago.

It's unclear how Europe will confront this global challenge. Some countries, like Poland and Northern Europe, are embracing the new reality, have joined NATO, and are opposing Russia. Other Western European nations are hesitant, believing life will return to normal after peace in Ukraine and the Middle East. However, there is no "normal" to return to.

Israel is considering redrawing the Middle East map, pushing back on Iran's clout in the region. It will have immense consequences, especially since China has distanced itself from Israel over the past year. If Israel succeeds, China's influence in the Middle East will shrink and it'd be a new snag for its global projection.

Italian Troubles for China

Israel's success would also impact Turkey, Ukraine, and the rest of Europe. Italy's case could offer an insightful lesson for Europe and China in this context. The Italian monarchy and republic were established amid specific European geopolitical strategies. The monarchic project was framed by a continental attempt to dismantle the Holy Roman Empire, particularly the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The German-led but multi-ethnic Empire, deeply entrenched in the Italian peninsula, along with the Papal States, was the anchor of the European power balance since 800 AD. Its fall at the end of World War I in 1919 closed the chapter on 11 centuries of history and ushered in a period of significant political volatility, culminating in World War II.

For about a decade between 1933 and 1945, the alliance between Germany and Italy seemed to be a renewed version of the old Empire, with Hitler being Austrian and Mussolini originating from Romagna, a former papal estate. The Europe that emerged after World War II was divided for the first time into two camps by powers that were previously only marginally involved in European disputes: Russia and the United States.

Italian unification was reconstructed within this ideological and geopolitical division: it remained united not to dismantle the Holy Roman Empire but to serve as a bulwark against Soviet expansion. Greater Germany was divided into three parts: the West aligned

with America, the East aligned with Russia, and Austria remained neutral. Hungary, a former imperial component, was Russian but remained historically rebellious.

In this post-1945 European division, Italy, historically monarchical and anticlerical, reconciled with the Holy See. It restricted the Pope's power to the Vatican but was governed by a Catholic and clerical party. Furthermore, the Church, once an enemy of the liberal and Masonic forces that dominated the continent, was enlisted by those forces against communism. It participated effectively by weaving intricate plans with Christians beyond the Iron Curtain from all denominations: Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox.

Disunited Italy

In the 1990s, with the Cold War over and the collapse of the wall, the role of Italy's political unity was not guaranteed. Its purpose was ending, and it was unclear why it should remain united. Centrifugal forces pushing for a gradual division of the country quickly gained momentum. However, political horizons have expanded over these 30 years with the rise of Asia, home to states far larger than the whole of the old continent. Thus, European states will struggle if they act individually.

Today, Russia wants Europe to fragment on this new horizon, thinking it can dominate the region. The US desires unity and alliance in facing new challenges. Italy's decision—where Russia has strong influences with parties in both governing and opposition coalitions—may prove crucial as it was a century and a half ago.

For the Holy See, the consequences are equally dramatic. Today, the Catholic Church leans toward Asia, where it is a small minority except in the Philippines. If the unity of the peninsula is shaken, the Pope might be forced to scale back the Asian

projection and focus on Italy, which could have monumental consequences for the Church's future.

In this complex scenario, what will China do? There is no "Three Kingdoms" playbook. Yet, its cumbersome past feels heavy and unshakeable, almost binding the nation to a crumbling old structure. It's vital to salvage as much as possible from the old edifice, but it would be madness to perish under its ruins.

Mao, helped by the USSR, tried it but perhaps destroyed both too much and too little. Deng, backed by the USA, tried to rebuild, but maybe he also rebuilt too much and too little. Will President Xi Jinping find the right balance? His challenge is bigger than that of his predecessors; he has both to tear down and reconstruct, and he has no great power to support him.

Cina's Communist Party Subconscious

The subconscious of countries and institutions shapes their choices. How to speak to the CPC on a deeper, more soulful level and get it to see the broader, global reasons behind the market? Do states or institutions have a subconscious, a character? Some psychiatrists, like Italian Narciso Mostarda, (see here) believe they do. If so, a state's subconscious, its deep unspoken logic, is formed by its history—and mainly by the history their schools teach their people.

China's deep instinct seems conditioned by a relentless drive for survival and expansion—until it reaches outright annihilation or subjugation of all possible rivals or challenges, and achieves total control over everything. It was initially shaped around the 4th–5th century BC, when states in the Central Plain (the cradle of Chinese civilization) were rapidly conquered and destroyed (mie). Out of hundreds of small states in the central plain in the 8th-

7th century BC, only a few survived and ultimately emerged as the final unifiers. Eventually, only one survived, the Qin state.

A similar pattern emerged after the fall of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century AD until the Tang dynasty's unification in the 7th century. This process was also made possible by relative geographic isolation—oceans and a small archipelago in the east (Japan) that was mostly harmless until recently, mountains in the south and west, deserts and steppes in the north.

So the periodic threat historically came from hungry, warring northern peoples who raided, invaded, and at times toppled the pacified populations of the Central Plains. Unlike any other empires with undefined and often unstable natural and political borders, China, for two millennia, defined its rule according to some obvious limits that were difficult to overcome.

Survival and expansion have been the mantra of every dynasty. The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) is, in many ways, just a new dynasty, inheriting this subconscious, just like a grown man is shaped by his childhood experiences.

However, each dynasty had its own ideology to justify its rule, much like individuals justify their job and place in life at each phase of their life and career. A first ideological element was based on the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which posits that one's right to rule is proven by their own rule. If you no longer govern effectively, you lose that Mandate, because you've lost Heaven's approval. In other words, it's a tautology: if you are successful, you are successful; if you lose, you deserve to lose.

It's like living until your natural death because your lifespan ran out. Of course, doctors can then explain the cause of death—smoking, drinking, overeating, etc. Similarly, a dynasty ends because the signs are there, and the new dynasty, with hindsight, can warn the current rulers to avoid the same mistakes.

Communist Adoption

That first ideology, borrowed and adapted by subsequent dynasties, was shaped by the Han at the turn of the first millennium. They combined a core of legalism, a veneer of Confucianism, and a bit of Taoist soul. The mix produced what in modern times could be called "radical realpolitik". This sentiment existed in the West as well, but for millennia was tempered and at times thwarted by several factors–a Christian missionary spirit trying to save all people; the domestic division of powers between the ruler, the Church, and the aristocracy; an external balance of powers that prevented any single state from gaining total control. This produced an ideology with many counterbalances and contradictions. In China, none of these factors existed. Domestic and external power followed a rigid hierarchy, and even ideology had a hierarchy: legalism was first, followed by Confucianism, and then Taoism, with some overlap and confusion, but a clear order.

In many ways, the communists adopted the same pattern. Still, they developed their own party logic—possibly more complex and deviating from the past—because this time, it was officially Marxist and therefore non-religious, i.e., without the mystical trappings of the Mandate of Heaven.

The communists also came to power after a long century of gradual foreign encroachment and disruption of the old order and dynasty (the Qing), without ever entirely replacing them. The Qing dynasty fought a war (17th century) and replaced the Ming dynasty. The Ming fought a war and replaced the Mongols (14th century), and so on, leading back to the pre-Tang chaos and the pre-Qin-Han independent states (pre-3rd century BC).

Meanwhile, the Qing Dynasty was challenged from 1840 onward by Western powers and the massive Taiping Rebellion. The

post-1840 impact was more profound, as it involved smashing China's millennia-old geopolitical boundaries. China was no longer the center of a mighty region that could ignore the rest of the world, but found itself overwhelmed by a much larger world it didn't know how to cope with.

The Qing crushed the Taiping rebellion with foreign help, which didn't result in immediate replacement—the way the Ming fell to the Qing, or the Tang taking over the Sui in the 7th century.

On the one hand, Western support for the Qing against a rebellion looked like the past, when the Manchu-Qing helped the Ming crush the Li Zicheng rebellion; this time, Western powers helped the Qing crush the Taiping.

However, Westerners didn't take over and topple the Qing; actually, to some extent, they helped sustain the wobbling dynasty. Moreover, with their new interventions from regions that had never intervened in China, the past political geography was gone forever, and China, in this new Western world, had to think differently; yet, the Chinese struggled greatly in adapting to it.

Western powers maintained some control over the order that emerged in China, protecting their interests and pushing the Chinese rulers to adhere to Western norms. Still, they never outright took control of China. Instead, they spread their culture and worldview on a massive scale.

In the 17th century, the Manchu were called in by Ming loyalists to crush the Li Zicheng rebellion, eventually overthrowing the Ming. A similar pattern occurred when the Tang took over the Sui in the 7th century.

The Western pattern of behavior was at odds with Chinese tradition, and this may have contributed to the emergence of a new Chinese consciousness since the early 20th century. The imperial past came to be seen as the root of national humiliation.

Buddhism, meanwhile, changed China. It spread during the decline of the Han and through the long, turbulent five centuries before the Tang restored imperial order. But it was not driven by foreign pressure—no Indian kingdom pushed or forced China's war-torn states to adopt Buddhist philosophy between the 3rd and 8th centuries.

The Western powers, by contrast, promoted their own culture, and although they didn't take over the empire, they limited China's influence and introduced new worldviews. In the 2nd–3rd century AD, Buddhism came to China and gradually radically changed the Chinese worldview, but it was not propped up by a foreign military threat. No Indian state sent troops to Xi'an.

Western values were conversely supported by Western military might. Western or Westernized (like Japan) powers explicitly aimed to set China on a new path without directly controlling the country. They promoted their culture and ideas. So, there were two unprecedented, shocking events – the Westerners didn't take over China (like the Qing had done) and promoted their own new worldview, which was changing China (unlike the soft penetration of Buddhism)

"Go to the Place you Know."

The Party's strategy has been to tap into Chinese tradition, as they are familiar with it, while maintaining a core of Marxist and Western ideology. Marxism legitimized their takeover—opposing the traditional failing imperial ideology—and responded to global demands from Western powers, whether allied (such as the USSR) or adversarial (like the United States and Europe).

The USSR managed to dominate China culturally and forcefully for over a decade—probably more than the Americans ever would. The Japanese, steeped in Chinese history and westernized

themselves, tried (and failed) to revive a Qing-style takeover, similar to what the Mongols or Manchu had done before.

The US opposed Japanese ambitions because it saw a Japanese-controlled China as a major threat. Since the groundbreaking bilateral rapprochement in the 1970s, the US has shown respect for China's local order—even though it views communism as inimical—something again unprecedented in Chinese history. It promoted cooperation without the threat of force, but through peaceful discussion of the mutual benefits of the collaboration.

Perhaps, the deeply ingrained Chinese "realpolitik"/survival subconscious has never fully grasped how to process this US approach. Many Chinese might interpret this as hidden evil—believing the US secretly wants to control China through other means. Or it is proof of American weakness; the US can be easily pushed around and manipulated. Or a mix of the two.

Many works that try to explain China tend to interpret it through a Western lens—analyzing It for a Western audience based on Western values and viewpoints. While these are important, they are written for Western readers and reflect Western subconscious assumptions. They often fail to resonate with the Chinese themselves.

A real challenge is to frame the argument about what the US wants, and democracy based on China's core survival subconscious, without the use of force. Can there be arguments that China could more readily relate to and accept based on its survival instincts?

Reasons for Democracy

There are three objective reasons why democracy is vital for China:

1. For China's economic survival, it must boost internal consumption—meaning more disposable income, a stronger welfare system, and consequently higher taxes. Therefore, it requires a popular vote, because nobody likes to pay taxes without knowing what they are for. This is also crucial to address the giant internal debt bubble.

2. China needs to balance its trade—otherwise, its surplus becomes unsustainable on a global scale. A fully convertible currency is thus necessary. However, a convertible currency opens the gates to a possible financial crisis, which can spill over into a political crisis. Political turmoil can be peacefully managed with a democratic system. An authoritarian system can, conversely, break down during an economic crisis.

3. Yes, a democracy that spills into chaos can lead to national collapse. But a well-balanced democracy can generate unparalleled consensus, which translates into enormous strategic strength.

The latest example is Israel's 12-day victory over Iran. Many reasons for victory, but one key factor—Iran's deep internal dissent and unrest—helped a vast Israeli spy network, supported locally, to identify targets and decapitate Iran's system in hours.

Israel is tiny compared to Iran, with about a tenth of its population. Yet, its democracy gave it a crucial weapon: internal and external consensus, which helped win the war. Hamas, its opponent in Gaza, claims a righteous cause—national liberation. But Hamas is fundamentally flawed: it is not liberal, oppresses its people, and preaches totalitarian, cruel theories. Therefore, its support is limited despite massive cash flows from friendly governments.

Western history and the Western 'cultural occupation' of the world exemplify the effectiveness of liberalism and open systems.

Tiny Athens, with its democracy, stopped the Persian Empire. Republican Rome, organized like a private equity fund for war, defeated the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Italian city-states beat the Germanic Empire and halted the Turkish expansion. The more liberal English kingdom and the Dutch Republic defeated the Habsburgs, who ruled over half of Europe, as well as all the Americas, stretching to the borders of China and India. Eventually, a mix of liberal systems and private enterprise expanded worldwide.

Fragile China

Without democracy, China is weaker and more fragile. Democracy wouldn't eliminate all troubles, but it would smooth many of the rough edges—and give China a crucial modern international tool: a free press. Without it, honest reforms and real persuasion are much harder because you have limited power to influence others domestically and internationally.

The current world order isn't a zero-sum game; it's based on a positive-sum system of theoretically fair, regulated trade. While it's not perfect—there are moments of extreme realism—there's also a balanced power system where hegemonies can happen to succeed each other peacefully. Consider how the US succeeded Britain.

Otherwise, if a new power tries to impose a new dominance forcibly, the system will react sooner or later. The incumbent hegemon will perceive a threat and could attempt to weaken or wipe out the rival—the Thucydides' trap —even without directly trying to control it.

A practical problem is that China doesn't truly know how to govern democratically. The experience of the past half-century was to introduce economic reforms, assuming politics would naturally follow.

But that entire package—political and economic liberalism—should have been offered as a take-it-or-leave-it choice. It wasn't. As a result, China didn't evolve into a full democracy, and the market economy without democratic politics has ultimately caused the current problems—bankrupt companies, irresponsible capital allocation, overcapacity, wage squeezes, and so on.

Since the late 1990s, the system was balanced only by rampant corruption, which redistributed pressures and income but was also slowly destroying the country. Today, the concentration of power in Xi Jinping's hands might actually present an opportunity. Excessive power held tightly and unchecked tends to become inefficient—that's history. Power naturally tends to devolve, either spontaneously from the center or, once tensions mount, to break the system. Louis XIV centralized authority, and about a century later, the French Revolution broke out.

Can China release power in an orderly fashion? How? It would require a plan that aligns with China's deep psychology—its subconscious, the core of its collective identity and history.

American Zhongguo

Different cultures see and represent reality differently. The West was keen on strict realism: reproduction of the naked anatomy of a body and of realistic visual perspective marked its art since ancient Greece.

China was more interested in representing the emptiness and symbolism of the mind. Chinese art paints human bodies fully clothed and looking at the vaguely defined environment where they move. Different forms of representation entail different approaches to dealing with reality.

Cultures of strategies, and dealing with war

Anatomy and perspective led to confidence in the ability of men to control, reproduce, and perfect their own personal reality, which, once free, would fall in place in natural order, as with market forces.

The shadow of emptiness required just the opposite. It demonstrated that reality was out of human control and that some external force—the power of the painter or that of a forceful state—had to set boundaries to make it possible to live in it.

Perhaps strategies are similarly derived from a way of looking at reality. Strategies are possibly not determined by preexisting natural laws that can lead somebody to victory, but are grounded in reality's cultural and geographic perception. They start from the cultural perception of one's position and then develop from there.

For example, the concept of Thucydides' trap, now highly fashionable to use when thinking of the confrontation between the US and China, is grounded in the cultural perception of Athens vis-à-vis Sparta in the Greek peninsula. It has the background thinking of a balance of power that can be tipped one way or another.

Conversely, China's perception of strategy is based on a different premise. The premise is that of a Chinese unity that can be acquired, gained. Once this unity is attained, all other challenges can be managed and overcome. The Chinese perception is born out of the experience of two millennia, founded on the idea that, overall, the Chinese empire was more prominent, with a larger population and greater wealth than all of its neighboring countries put together. Therefore, no one country could endanger the center, China, if the center held its order firmly.

The same is not valid in the West, where neighboring countries didn't challenge a unitary, solid empire. The Roman Empire itself

had extended borders that were extremely fragile and, except for the one adjoining the Sahara Desert, had no natural defense.

The Roman Empire held back the threat of the Persian Empire for centuries, knowing full well that this hazard had to be contained but could not be eliminated, as doing so would stretch the empire beyond its borders, putting it into direct contact with another perilous realm based in the Indian peninsula. The experience of Alexander the Great, who was de facto defeated by its own never-ending successes in an even greater, never-ending world, loomed large in the Roman mind. At Alexander's death, his vast empire simply shattered into a dozen larger or smaller kingdoms. The world was too large to conquer and hold it whole.

This mental realization led to the policy of Roman and Byzantine containment and balance with the Persian Empire. It became the compass of the strategy on the Eastern Roman border. The containment of the Germanic tribes from the north was also of paramount importance. They could not be conquered and vanquished because new tribes were coming from Eastern Europe anyway. They had to be checked, somehow tamed and managed, but there was no possibility of having a very stable peace because they could imperil at any time a highly vulnerable and weak northeastern border.

The centrality of the empire was a sea, the Mediterranean. It was linked to a system of sea transportation that included the Red Sea and the Black Sea, which were dominated by the Romans at a certain point, and also extended to the Caspian Sea over the Caucasus.

Then it was not a defined space; its borders, the limes, described the land around this space, but it was held together by a highly efficient system of transportation and roads that still hold together the standard for transportation nowadays. The standard

train gauge has been de facto fixed by the space occupied on a road by a car driven by two horses side by side.

The Roman Empire, in other words, although it was an empire, had to manage the borders, and any given challenge could threaten the unity of the kingdom: the Persians or the new Barbarians coming from the edges, be they the Germans, the Slavs, the Huns, or the Arabs.

In this way, the idea of balance of power was also inherited by the Roman Empire, and the imperial system in the West has a premise unstated of complete reason.

China's fissures

The underlying Chinese assumption was somehow different. The steppes were too vast and too sparsely populated to gain full control of them and of their population. These were to be held in check by a system of tributes in which, in theory, these tribes recognized the suzerainty of the Son of Heaven by offering gifts and gained back more than they gave. Actually, the emperor paid off the border thugs with some kind of protection money and held them back with the threat of ruinous retaliation. The empire said, "Actually, take this money and be happy, or we shall attack you. In reality, the empire knew that the "protection money" was cheaper than mounting a full-scale attack.

Then China had not a mental block, but a very physical block. It was surrounded by borders that were all similar to the Sahara Desert for Rome. The borders had to be managed but rarely constituted an existential threat. Or they were existential only if the imperial unity was in jeopardy to start with. Then the unstated assumption for China was conversely holding the center, keeping the country together; if that was achieved, nothing else could be challenged.

The reality of Chinese geography has changed presently. As China gained complete control of Tibet and ended the independent existence of the territory as a buffer state/zone between the Chinese and the Indian empires, and with the encroachment of the West after the conquest of the American continent by the Spanish and the English, Beijing's land perception and defense demands changed completely. Now, China is part of a larger world where it is just a tiny minority compared to the rest. It is about 20% of the population, and 15% of the global GDP. Furthermore, it is also a minority in its neighboring areas. All the next-door countries put together—India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia—are larger economically and as a population than China.

This creates a different reality for China, while the cultural perception in China remains the same. China still believes that if it manages to control its neighborhood, home to 60% of the global population and 70% of global economic growth, it will eventually dominate the world. China, consciously or unconsciously, doesn't see its grand strategy as one of keeping a balance of power, managing the rising or waning powers at its rim. It sees it as one of gaining a significant foothold in a substantial part of the world, and from there repeating and extending its 2,000-year model of ruling. That is, putting the Chinese empire at the center, and keeping more or less at bay the rest of the world, which will not be a challenge if the center holds strong.

This theory is critical in understanding what China is doing and what it is doing wrong for its own good. To achieve this dominating power, China should have done two simple things: win over the two more considerable economic and demographic forces at the borders (Japan and India), and prepare for some kind of political reform that would have made the Chinese political system more

palatable to its neighbors and the rest of the world, which is used to a more liberal structure of rule. That is, China should have tried to expand its political footprint peacefully, and it should have tried to assuage global political fears about the harshness of its political system. It didn't do either for whatever reason that we shall ignore now.

China, on the contrary, managed to antagonize both India and Japan and didn't make its political system more palatable; it made it more indigestible. Its economic system didn't become more integrated into the world, which could have turned it into the hub of economic and global trade. It made itself more closed. It did that by constantly refusing to have the RMB fully convertible or thoroughly reforming its financial system. In this situation, China defeated itself and made its strategic victory eventually more difficult.

Still, things are far from decided in the present predicament. China in imperial times was held together by a system of roads and canals that made internal communication easy and convenient. The Chinese strategy of the new Silk Road was basically to extend its traditional road system to the Eurasian landmass and reach out to Europe, as Europe had reached out to China before the discovery of America.

With the outline of the Silk Road, China de facto marginalized, or at least attempted to, the American continent, and tried to regain the centrality of Asia, Eurasia, and therefore of Beijing. The system and the strategy are failing because they ignored the central part of the continent, the Indian subcontinent, and the Japanese technological powerhouse. Therefore, the agreement of Europe and the new approach to the weak Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries could in no way outweigh the opposition of so many mighty countries.

But the idea of One Belt, One Road took in a European concept of power that China may have entertained in the early 15th century but abandoned soon after: that of becoming a maritime power. China realized that in the present world, it needed a sea outreach to counter the current American ocean presence, and thus it had to follow in the steps of the European powers such as Spain, Portugal, the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Americans.

The attempts to gain maritime footholds were based mainly on surrounding India. Sri Lanka was lured, and Pakistan was also brought in. Both were promised port facilities for Chinese naval ambitions, and so was Myanmar. In this way, India was surrounded on all fronts; in the north, there was China itself; in the west, there was Pakistan; in the east, Myanmar; and in the south, Sri Lanka.

Roman roads for America

Therefore, India could be subjugated and forced to give in. If India were to surrender, China would gain political-military clout in Asia, and from there, everything would be downhill. However, a strategy like the famous game of Go must be guided by a focus on the bigger picture. In this case, while China was trying to surround and besiege India, India moved out of its predicament by striving to develop ties with other countries and then encircle China itself. India contacted Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and the United States to present its situation as proof of Chinese global ambitions and global threat. Therefore, it contributed to the push against China.

In this game of reciprocal siege, there are many elements to consider carefully.

New Cold Outlines

The attrition around China is not entirely unprecedented. Now, if the USA stops believing in its system, it may lose it all. Using the term "Cold War" can help highlight the seriousness of the situation between the United States and China. The attrition is very intense, but it differs from the first Cold War. The initial Cold War began before World War II, through a period of purely political disputes that didn't involve state-to-state controversies. Even before World War II, there were already early tensions between the liberal capitalist world and the Communist world. It was a struggle between communism and capitalism, rooted deeply in Western culture. Communism originated in the 19th century, a century before the first Cold War.

When the Cold War started, there was already a clear division: you on one side, me on the other; you support the market, I oppose it; I believe in a thoroughly planned system where a group or a single person makes all the decisions; on the other side, you are for a democratic, liberal system.

In 2026, the situation had changed. The two economic systems—one centered on China and the other on America—were interconnected. It was clear in trade negotiations in those years. On one side, America imposed tariffs not only on China but also on other countries it believed were exploiting the American market. On the other side, China imposed export restrictions on rare earth elements (REE), impacting not just America but the global economy.

This economic integration, which had lasted for the past 40 years, is about to unravel. However, the appeal of that integration led many to believe that, once this dispute—after all, a commercial one—was resolved, everything could return to the way things were

before. In reality, the dispute is not simply commercial. There is a commercial issue—European or Japanese surpluses compared to those of the United States. This is mainly something that can be solved with trade tools: remove this subsidy here, open this market sector there, import more of this and less of that.

The Chinese issue is more complex. Around the late 1990s—about 25 years ago—then-Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji aimed to reform the Chinese economy and achieve full convertibility of the RMB. He reformed the financial system and sought to liberalize the Chinese currency, the RMB, fully. However, for many reasons, this never materialized. The Chinese market and its financial system have remained largely separate from the broader commercial economy, not only in the United States but also worldwide, where countries operate in markets with freely floating currencies, thereby subjecting them to exchange-rate fluctuations.

Moreover, over the past 20 years, China has built a highly complex and unwieldy economic system that is neither solely market-based nor purely administrative, but a mix of both. It's not the centralized planning system of the old Soviet economy. Still, it isn't like the economies with a strong presence of state-controlled enterprises that dominate the market, such as Japan, Korea, Germany, or Italy.

In China, it is not the companies but the local governments—cities, provinces, and sometimes districts—that play a dominant and shaping role in both the market and finance. Lizzie Lee provides a very accurate description and analysis of the environment (see here). These government entities then interact with each other, with businesses, and with the central government.

A Chaotic Plan

Initially, this system may appear more organized than the chaos and constant threat of market instability in capitalist countries. It is also more efficient than the endemic inefficiency of a planned economy. But ultimately, over time, it proved more chaotic than the apparent disorder of a free market and perhaps even more inefficient (with different kinds of inefficiencies) than a planned economy.

It's a mixed bag, not simply one thing. In theory, China should be able to address this challenge. But that would mean dealing with structural and institutional problems it doesn't seem willing to confront. Adding to this—here it becomes a dangerous stew—are ideological controversies (that the Chinese are communists); geopolitical disputes (Chinese ambitions regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, or parts of the Himalayas); mutual suspicions (the Chinese fear that America's ultimate goal is to establish a kind of total, global dominance to eliminate China).

As a result, a new nationalism emerges, and these factors reinforce one another. On the one hand, they isolate China not only from America but also from the rest of the world; on the other hand, the new confrontation rose amid elements of potential cooperation.

Then it's not easy to determine how to handle it. Trump, during his first term, tried to address the issue by breaking it down: focus on the trade dispute and see if it can be resolved at least partially. Simplify the challenge. The idea was reasonable in principle, but for many reasons, it didn't succeed. Then came the complication of the war between Russia and Ukraine, followed by the war in Gaza—real, intense conflicts like those during the first Cold War. In these two hot conflicts, the leading players took opposing sides: the US supported Ukraine, while China backed Russia; China also

interacted with Hamas and obviously supports Iran, whereas America stood on the opposite side.

With all these elements, we face a situation that is very new and hard to explain or understand. What is happening now, also thanks to Trump's disorderly and perhaps unavoidable efforts, is an attempt to clarify. Maybe we are reaching a clarification, but not a short-term solution. Instead, it is for a long-term clash/friction. Therefore, we may have to prepare for a progressive increase in tension, but hopefully, a controlled one. Here, there are many complications between long-term goals and short-term deadlines.

The first issue concerns REE. Optimistic Americans believe it may be possible to produce REEs within a few years, thereby breaking free from the Chinese yoke. Others think it could take 10, 15, or even 20 years. The yoke remains until this global strategic dependence on Chinese rare earths is broken. On the other hand, the West is in the middle of a crisis, and the Chinese are energized by it. It's like what happened to the Communists in the 1950s, who saw the crisis in Western countries and thought, "Here is proof capitalism is collapsing." It turned out differently.

Two Wests

The issue is what is in crisis and what is not. The crisis of the West? There are two Wests that we often confuse but should not. One is a West directly descended from the legacy of the Roman Empire, which split into three great empires: the Holy Roman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire (as we saw).

These three empires continued to dominate the Western world and the Mediterranean basin, expanding in all directions—east, west, south, and north—until 1919, the end of World War I. At that point, all three empires collapsed simultaneously. Conversely, over the centuries from the 17th and 18th centuries, and then more

rapidly in the 19th century, a second "West" emerged outside the physical West of the Mediterranean.

It expanded naturally. The first region of expansion was the American continent. Then Asia followed, with countries like Japan, Korea, and India. Today, we do categorize them as "Western," even though they are neither geographically Western nor part of the Western-originated "civilization"—because they have a different history. However, they embraced the capitalist and liberal world—the new set f market-oriented rules originating in the West—without being constrained by Western physical provenance.

This second wave of Western expansion worldwide was so widespread that even China eventually adopted some Western elements, including communism (a Western concept) and Deng's market reforms. This second West should not fear itself or its history because 1) the old West is gone, and 2) this second West may have caused great disasters but has also achieved unprecedented results. For the first time in human history, in a century and a half, average human lifespans have tripled. The planet's population has increased tenfold; quality of life has risen exponentially.

Unlike other contemporary socialists, even Marx, the most famous critic of capitalism, didn't criticize capitalism on 'moral grounds' but for economic reasons—unequal distribution of income. Smith and Ricardo explained the mechanics of the market and the structure of cost and price; Marx argued that there was another element, labor cost, that was not adequately explained and thus not adequately compensated, but called the buildup of wealth, leading to capitalism's 'primitive accumulation'.

There were no phones, telecommunications, heating, or artificial light. For thousands of years, we essentially kept warm by putting our hands near the fire. Today we fly—something that never happened before—go to space and are relatively

independent from the forces of nature. These are unprecedented developments; moreover, despite some claims that technological progress is slowing down, as philosopher-billionaire Peter Thiel argued (see here), the benefits of this progress are spreading worldwide. They are no longer limited to a few privileged countries.

For the first time, the world is globalized, but the center is no longer Europe and the Atlantic route; it's Asia and the Pacific route. This shift began in the 1980s, when Thiel said there was no change left. The fact that the lives of some Americans don't change doesn't mean the world isn't changing. Then, what is there to be ashamed of for having improved the lives of so many people? Many who complain today probably would have died at birth just a century ago.

Given these undeniable results of Western tradition, culture can act as a foundation for exchange and confrontation with China, which has gained from this substantial push toward Westernization. Therefore, it could be a way to speak to China and to see if there can be a real space for dialogue.

The China Turn

Perhaps there's a historical cultural oversight on China's part. Between 2004 and 2009, Beijing became disillusioned with democracy and the free market. In 2004–2005, the American intervention in Iraq fell apart, and America failed to export democracy to Iraq successfully; in 2008–2009, the financial crisis revealed the fragility and massive flaws of the American financial system. These two huge failures convinced China that it was better to keep everything under control and no longer try to follow the American example. It was about both the political system (where

some considered moving toward democratization, which was a possibility at the time) and market liberalization.

The Chinese logic makes sense. It's practical: it doesn't work, I don't use it. But maybe the Chinese overlooked a longer-term perspective. Sure, America was wrong in its intervention in Iraq and in how it handled the financial crisis. However, there is a long-term aspect: the lasting value and resilience of liberal systems. It is true that if a liberal system loses focus on the long run, it can act as if it is intoxicated. But historically, liberal systems have consistently managed to control and steer both the short- and long-term, even despite many short-term mistakes.

Take the Napoleonic Wars, for example. Napoleon had conquered all of Europe; he had a mighty military and political force, yet England, although smaller, with a more flexible financial system, managed to defeat him. The same happened with Venice, which, for centuries, was a small power that controlled trade through a clever financial system and a republic of merchant-warriors who gathered to discuss the future of the Republic. Similarly, Genoa managed to hold onto control and even push back the Ottoman advance.

Liberal systems have significant strength because they rely on voluntary consent through elections and free funding, which can motivate individuals to contribute in ways that autocratic systems led by an emperor or an extremely intelligent, enlightened sovereign may not. An autocratic sovereign usually cannot count on the voluntary contributions of all citizens who do not see themselves as stakeholders in their government, nor do they feel like stakeholders. No matter how loyal subjects are, they are different from stakeholders.

Today, America faces a similar challenge: confronted with those who doubt the value of democracy, it has a wide range of tools—

both long—and short-term—to combat all authoritarian systems. If America stops believing in its own system and democracy and instead tries to become something else—a fully authoritarian system—then a fundamental obstacle arises. If a newly autocratic United States were to confront another authoritarian system, such as China, with over 2,000 years of experience of authoritarian rule, then the US, with less experience, could also be less efficient.

But if America does not stop believing in itself, then China could face difficulties. Alternatively, if America loses focus, China might succeed. Perhaps the most essential part of Michael Pillsbury's book on China, The Hundred-Year Marathon, is the final chapter. Pillsbury offers a series of policy recommendations for the US to counter China. His recommendations, ten years after the book's initial publication, have yet to be fully implemented.

Moreover, if China sees that America does not stop believing in itself, if America renews itself through democracy, and if the liberal system revitalizes and expands its influence and power, then, since the Chinese are very pragmatic, perhaps they would start to reconsider how to confront America.

The main issue for China right now is its inability to boost domestic consumption. Beijing is unable to do this because the ordinary Chinese are cautious and apprehensive about their uncertain future. They are not panicked because they see chaos and confusion elsewhere in the world, so they follow the government, which provides them security. At the same time, they are less optimistic about the future, which leads to less spending and investment, and they are much less proactive than they were over the past forty years.

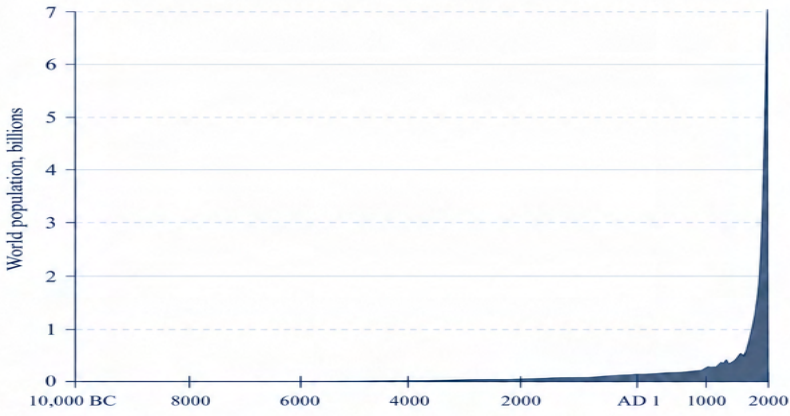
This lack of activity and optimism among Chinese consumers and entrepreneurs is what is holding the entire country back, and perhaps it can only change if China revises its political and social

system. It does not do so because it fears that importing the American system after the failures in Iraq and other democracy-exporting efforts would unravel its whole system. There are very delicate elements, but it might begin with a renewed American confidence. If America doesn't believe in itself, how can others believe it can ever win?

A Coda: Population and Trends

The graph shows that for 6 to 7,000 years after the start of the agricultural revolution and the end of the ice age, the population remained stable. It began to grow from the 4th millennium BC, with the dawn of civilizations, increasing from 7 to 60 million people by 750 BC. It experienced its first 'surge' at that time, coinciding with the beginning of the Axial Age and the spread of the world's first cities. Over the next 2500 years, growth was slow, reaching 600 million by 1600, the start of the liberal revolution.[68]

[68] "Population Curve," *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain, file uploaded by El T, showing world population estimates (10,000 BCE–2017 CE), based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Population_curve.svg; see also U.S. Census Bureau, "Measuring America's People and Economy," https://www.census.gov/.



Long-term global population growth, 10,000 BC–2000 AD.

It added 200 million over the next two centuries, and then, in the last 150 years, with the surge of modernization, the population grew tenfold. It now shows signs of stabilizing globally and declining in the most developed countries. The main reason is that children are no longer a driver of economic success, as they have been throughout history, but are now simply a 'hobby'—a pleasure rooted in ancestral instincts.

Children no longer need to care for their parents, and workers are no longer necessary to produce goods. AI and robots take their place, and better medical care enables people to live longer, more

active lives. As a result, a larger population isn't needed, except to increase consumption.

Or if war breaks out. The massacres in Ukraine remind us that conflicts still involve massive waste of steel and blood. Therefore, countries still need surplus populations, an excess of mad young people willing to go to kill or be killed. But short of an earth-shattering nuclear war, the global population likely won't face a shock. Instead, it could first stabilize and then decline worldwide, delegating more tasks to machines, as Marx first predicted in his third book of Capital. But the key question is: how will this transformation be governed? Through a process of increasing liberal modernization or through authoritarian regimes?

Here, Thiel could be vindicated. It's not true that innovation has slowed down; it's spreading globally (no longer limited to a few wealthy places) and taking a new direction (telecom, AI, space). However, it could be different if autocracies come out on top. They focus on stability, not racing toward a different future.

Unless different autocracies start competing with each other, it would be a new era of warring states, as four Chinese thinkers—Li Xiaoning, Qiao Liang, Wang Jian, and Wang Xiangsui—predicted 25 years ago. The book *Xin Zhanguo Shidai* (the new period of the Warring States) refers to the 7th–3rd centuries BC age, when a few states emerged from the previous chaotic era, fought each other, and were eventually unified by the First Emperor. See the footnote for a limited and selected bibliography that was used for this work.[69]

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[69] Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), a seminal work on Chinese philosophical ideas, including *wu wei* and their influence on Chinese political and ethical thought; A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), an innovative

Changing Religions

When the future looks uncertain and vague, a past model provides a secure anchor, with its specific bond between politics and religion and, thus, daily life.

The new pulls have problems because a hundred years don't pass in vain. The past imperial fantasies clash with complex realities born in the meantime. Ukraine doesn't want to go back to Russia; Israel opposes Turkish expansionism, and Italy could break up if the Northeast were given greater autonomy. Here are also the differences among these different pushes. Russia's ultimate shove in Ukraine created unexpected resistance from Ukraine and other neighboring states. Turkish ambitions seem to fill a void created by the defeat of Iranian dominance in Syria and Lebanon after the Israeli attacks. The Austrian fascination stems from the twin political weaknesses of Italy and the European Union.

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and comprehensive account of early Chinese philosophy and its lasting impact on China; David Wootton, *The Invention of Science: A New History of the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), explaining how transoceanic voyages created a sense of discovery later transferred to science; Li Yu, *The Ethical Foundations of Chinese Economic Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), examining the relationship between Chinese ethics and economic thought, including notions like the "invisible hand"; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), on the lasting impact of the French Revolution; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), discussing twentieth-century ideologies that envisioned rebuilding societies after World War II, including liberal democracy and state modernization; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), reflecting on revolutionary ideals, including the potential to create anew and reconfigure political and social structures.

Moreover, religions have grown differently, too. As Lorenzo Prezzi argued,[70] in 1721, Peter the Great abolished the Orthodox patriarchate and replaced it with a governing body called the Holy Synod, directly under state control. This effectively made the Church an arm of the state until the restoration of the patriarchate in 1917, with the revolution. The patriarchate was persecuted by the communists; then, it resurfaced with the collapse of the USSR. Since the war, it has moved constantly in support of Putin, but the relationship remains murky, and the hierarchical relationship between President Putin and Patriarch Kiril is blurred.

In parallel, the Ottoman Caliph was the defender of the Islamic faith and claimed to be the supreme religious authority in the Islamic world. Kemal Ataturk's Turkish Republic abolished the caliphate in 1924, and all successive attempts to re-establish one have failed so far. Sharia courts in Turkey were subsequently abolished, and even the Arab script was forfeited for the Latin alphabet. With the fall of the USSR, Turkey claimed a new role as a polar star of the Turkic people, once under soviet rule -- Azerbaijan on the western shores of the Caspian Sea and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan on the eastern shores. However, a stronger Turkic identity rubs against the ambitions to rule the Arab world in the name of an Ottoman heritage. The Ottomans were non-ethnic; they simply didn't look at the national identity of the rulers. Now Turkey is and wants to be very Turkic,

[70] Pierluigi Mele, "L'Ortodossia davanti alla guerra," interview with Lorenzo Prezzi, *SettimanaNews*, April 24, 2022, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/ortodossia-davanti-alla-guerra/; Lorenzo Prezzi, private conversation with the author, Rome, January 2026.

and Recep Erdogan has no credentials to be a Caliph, despite his religious leanings.

The confusion in Central Europe, around Vienna, is even greater, as no one called for a return of the Habsburg Emperor, and the dreams of a Crusader Pope clash with the Pope's different dreams to reach out to Asia.

The present world is the product of Protestant reform, Catholic adaptation (France), or outright rejection of religion. These religious rituals (masses, ceremonies) have a less pervasive role, which doesn't mean there is less religion in life. However, fewer religious rituals also mean greater difficulty in returning to some old model (imperial) with close religious ties. On *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Giancarlo Pani [71] argued about the significant contribution of the Reformation to the life of the Church, and the Pope, with his trips to Germany and northern Europe, tried to mend fences and build bridges, paving the way for a greater Christian reconciliation.

Catholicism wants to find a new space for religion in life, not alongside old emperors but modernity. The Pope is the religious leader possibly most projected into the future, with a religion distinct from the state.

Here is the future, however vague and hazy it may be. But simultaneously, the past can't be forgotten with a shrug. It should be essential to hold these different threads together but cast the line for change and not be dragged down by the past.

At the same time, it's essential to think of new geopolitical directions. What will Middle Eastern geography be without Iran's tentacles over Syria and Lebanon? Does Europe accept the

[71] Giancarlo Pani, *Lutero tra eresia e profezia* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2017).

weakening of Italy and the EU to strengthen a new Austria-Hungary, or does it want to push in the opposite direction? The American voice will be decisive in all these matters because a pathway for these "empires" will impact the U.S.'s main concern on the other end of the Eurasian continent, China.

Worldview (2020s): A Broader Look at China

Still, we may want to take a broader, more skeptical view of things. With a couple of easy labels, we could say that civilizations can stay apart but have to learn to talk to one another, and authoritarian regimes become globally dangerous as they grow in economic and political weight, conditioning other liberal systems. With this, we might want to try to understand the deep reasons whereby each country works within a specific design, as we are not in the business of bringing paradise to earth, as totalitarian regimes thought of doing in the past century. Then, although countries can speak their languages, they have to be entirely understandable to one another; otherwise, miscommunications and defensive, aggressive behaviors will supersede all else.

Some now may confuse their wishes with a solid reading of reality when it comes to China. The Chinese government has repeatedly shown itself capable of fast reaction and remarkable ingenuity. However, its responses and creativity do not work the same way as in the U.S. or Europe. Almost one year ago, we wrote[72] that China should use this opportunity of COVID to start its own

[72] Francesco Sisci, "Doom or Renaissance? China after the Plague," SettimanaNews, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/doom-or-renaissance-china-after-plague/

Renaissance, or it could succumb to the consequences of the plague.

That was what Beijing tried to do. In a few months, Beijing managed to turn this vast calamity into a significant geopolitical victory. China managed to get COVID under control and restart its economy, while the rest of the world and most of the Western world were still in the throes of it. This appeared to prove to the leadership that the Chinese system is better than the Western one, or vice versa, or that a decisive advantage had been gained. The success was then turned into a political defeat a few months later. In 2021, the world got vaccinated with the new formula produced in America, and in 2022, China backed Russia on its Ukrainian adventure. At the end of 2022, it was clear that both the COVID strategy and the Russia forecasts had been flawed. The rest of the world had used vaccines that freed the economy, and Russia failed in trying to secure an easy victory. In 2023, again, China failed to see the gravity of the balloon accident with the U.S., and it erroneously believed the Hamas attack on Israel would start a regional war.

Still, things are not so straightforward.

This success comes after forty years of consistent results. In four decades, China went from being one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the richest, from one of the most backward technologically to one of the most advanced.

This certainly did not happen just because Beijing did it all on its own. This was also mainly due to the massive help of the U.S., which, 40 years ago, granted China an unprecedented privilege: to export to the U.S. with very low tariffs and the possibility of Western technological transfer to China. Furthermore, until recently, the U.S. gave China a free pass on media scrutiny, basically expecting China to evolve in the "right direction."

This did not happen without strife and difficulties. The U.S. honeymoon with China ended with the 1989 crackdown on the student movement in Tiananmen. Still, the relationship lumbered on with the agreement on China's admission to the World Trade Organization. However, about twenty years ago, with the Cox report, the U.S. voiced its discomfort about China. China was accused in massive detail of IPR (intellectual property rights) theft by Chinese companies in the 1990s. This discomfort was growing into tremendous friction at the beginning of the George W. Bush presidency.

It culminated in the EP-3 incident when an American surveillance plane collided with a Chinese fighter closely tailing it and then crash-landed on the Chinese island of Hainan. After that, the U.S. and China looked as if they were set on a collision course. However, both sides aimed to avert sustained friction and worsening relations, so a resolution was found within a few weeks. After September 11, 2001, America was persuaded that the main enemy was Islamic extremists and not China.

With China's rapid offer of moral support and practical assistance to the U.S., China had a few years of grace to readjust and prepare for when the U.S. would come back knocking on its door, demanding changes. China ignored and forgot about this very close call. At the 2002 Party Congress, then Party Secretary Jiang Zemin should have stepped down entirely and all of the old generation with him.

They should have given full power to Hu Jintao, and Hu Jintao should have started economic and political liberal reforms that would gradually bring China in line with the Western world and decrease friction with the dominant power, the U.S. Absorbed with its domestic political machinations and the logic of its power struggle, China did not.

Jiang Zemin held onto power, liberal reforms were carried out at a much slower pace than needed, and a cumbersome political decision-making system took root where people from the Hu Jintao era and the people from the Jiang Zemin era coexisted in a murky way, sharing power, and increasingly losing an intimate connection with and deep understanding of the outside world and the big picture.

Worldview (2020s): U.S. Misunderstanding

At the same time, the U.S. must not assume that China is simply a clone of the old USSR and that China stopped in a time warp in the early 1990s. In China, 1.4 billion people have experienced improvements in living standards unprecedented in Chinese history. The Communist Party now has over 100 million members—that is, practically one in every fourteen people is a party member.

That results in a party closely intertwined with the population. During the Qing dynasty, with a population of 300 million people, there were about 100,000 officials. If we multiply that by ten, counting all their retainers, we arrive at one million people. And even if we multiply this by ten, which is an incredible number, including the families and clients, we would reach ten million. That would still be one in thirty, half of the official-to-people density of the Communist Party. Plus, now the Communist Party has at its disposal previously unmatched technology to reach out to every single Chinese individual, something that has never happened in Chinese history.

This happens against the backdrop of a massive social transformation. Chinese people are broadly literate, and for the first time, they all share a spoken, not only a written language. Ordinary people are flocking to universities, with millions taking the

national entrance examination, the gaokao. Chinese universities are improving in quality. For ordinary Chinese people, studying is a privilege, and they feel blessed by it.

Millions of Chinese study Western classical music and learn foreign languages. Their healthcare is poor but has been improving, as is their pension system. The Communist Party pledged to cover one billion people with primary healthcare and basic retirement coverage in 10–15 years, and given the party's record, people tend to believe this will happen.

Nothing like this is happening in America or Europe, where the quality of primary schools has been declining, as has the investment in education. Healthcare and pension systems, the two pillars that convinced the Western world that capitalism could take care of social needs better than communism, are under strain. And the COVID crisis underlined these difficulties.

Of course, this is also due to development. China is developing, whereas America and Europe, on average, have plateaued, and they have issues about where to go from here. China has fewer of these problems because it can more easily follow the pattern of past Western experiences.

Chinese people, moreover, are among the biggest savers in the world, saving roughly about half of their income. They put their money into state-owned banks, and the banks indirectly tax these people by rewarding the savings with interest rates below the inflation rate, maybe one or two percent. Then they lend the same money on the market at much higher rates.

These savings, the difference in interest rates, the trade surplus, and the administrative barriers to free trade and full convertibility of the renminbi create a huge cushion for the Chinese economy. This has made it possible for Beijing to accumulate a vast amount of internal debt in the past twelve or thirteen years, estimated at

over forty trillion dollars, without causing a financial crisis. The Chinese financial system is largely isolated from the world and financed by export surplus and savings at little or no cost for the state. This system is not currently facing immediate danger.

The COVID crisis appeared to make the Chinese economy stronger, with substantial increases in its exports, and there was no capital flight of savings, if ever possible, with the administrative rules that exist.

This all creates a system by which top-down decisions can be enforced, and it is also evidence of the domestic consensus the Communist Party earned in the past decades. This cannot be underestimated, and the COVID crisis—a sudden turn of events followed by a rash reaction—appeared to demonstrate the system's full capability to muster popular support in the face of an external challenge.

This does not mean that the Chinese structure is invincible or without faults. The fact that the party feels the need to enforce strict control signals its fears and weaknesses. But it is not all arbitrary authority. Its complexity suggests the system is far more resilient than some easy foreign propaganda may concede.

Then, were the ones who wanted to fight China in the late 1990s right, and has the U.S. lost too much time? Perhaps not. Twenty years ago, the Chinese were about ten times poorer than they are now. They had little or nothing to lose but their poverty. Dying in a war would not have been too difficult.

Now, with a nominal income roughly half that of the developed world and the purchasing power parity of the U.S., many fear losing their hard-won wellbeing. If the government doesn't keep its promise of continuous improvement, it loses legitimacy, and what was a negligible threat twenty years ago has become a serious concern. Moreover, families could be highly reluctant to sacrifice

their only children, their little emperors, on the altar of national glory for this welfare. It's more likely they'd blame the government that led them into conflict, whatever the reasons.

Governance (2010s): Xi Takes Power

Xi Jinping was selected to become the next CPC chief in the 2007 party congress by voting among standing and retired leaders. His promotion was to become official at the 2012 autumn party congress. Yet it was not until the whole Bo Xilai and Ling Jihua separate yet connected affairs burst open in 2012 that Xi appeared to prove his steadfast leadership.

Bo, as party chief of Chongqing, had campaigned against the city's "mafia." He seized the assets of wealthy people who did not play along and distributed them among companies of his friends in the military, thus building his constituency there. It was widely rumored that of the twenty richest men in Chongqing, seventeen were arrested and their properties confiscated.

Moreover, Bo also gained the support of the security czar and Politburo standing committee member Zhou Yongkang, whose home turf was in Chongqing's neighboring province, Sichuan. Bo planned to succeed the retiring Zhou as security czar and member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and, with the backing of his military friends, to corner Xi and become the shadow party chief. He also had a political plan, fundamental to winning the CPC's internal political debates. He wanted to suppress large private companies and create market competition among SOEs, something similar to what Japan has.

Bo's plans collapsed with the flight to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu of his security chief, Wang Lijun, who had refused to take the blame for the death in late 2011 of Neil Heywood, considered a British spy by the Chinese. Heywood was allegedly killed at Bo's

behest by his wife Gu Kailai, to remove any obstacles that could potentially be used against him in his run for the leadership. Bo's dealings with Heywood, suspected of being a foreign agent, would cast suspicions on Bo as being somehow in the pocket of foreigners. Thus, the whole Heywood affair could put Bo's promotion in jeopardy. Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao were his enemies, and in 2011, they were investigating him, perhaps trying to pin something on him, and Heywood was ideal.

On the other hand, Ling was chief of staff to then party chief Hu Jintao, who had long been at odds with Jiang. Ling's son was caught in an accident while driving a Ferrari, which killed at least one girl. In the convoluted web of Chinese affiliations, Zhou was loyal to Jiang, who, although officially retired, still had his fingers in many pies, and Ling, to try to save his career and his son in the accident, called on Zhou. Zhou then called on Jiang, who, in turn, took advantage of this whole thing to blame Hu. This was Jiang's retribution for Hu having leveled criticism against Jiang for supporting Bo.

How could the son of Hu's chief of staff drive a Ferrari? Hu did not know anything about the accident and was surprised by Jiang's scolding and Ling's betrayal. Ling should have first informed Hu of everything. Moreover, in the ensuing investigations, there were indications that Ling had consorted with Bo behind Hu's back. Surely the whole Ferrari accident with Ling's son was fishy, and almost looked like a trap set to ensnare Ling and Hu. Months later, rumors circulated alleging that Zhou had his first wife killed in a staged car accident. The rumor aroused speculation that even Ling's son might have been similarly trapped.

It was a moment of utter confusion where none of the ruling top elite was beyond reproach; then Xi moved cleverly and bravely. In September 2012, weeks before his formal promotion at the next

party congress, Xi refused to attend scheduled meetings with foreign dignitaries, thus showing abroad that there were issues inside. Allegedly, he demanded full powers to take over as party chief, making a massive break in the structure of power that had held China since the late 1970s. Since then, a murky system with well-preserved secret arrangements and rules split the power between "supervisors," elderly leaders, and "managers," the front men in charge of the party. The system, set to prevent the excessive concentration of power of Mao's time, had grown into a multi-headed, murky, and mysterious hydra devouring resources and stifling the efficiency of all kinds. Again, it was some kind of "authorized mafia," different in its activities but as a power structure similar to the 1990s PLA smuggling operations.

Xi blamed that system for disrupting the political organization and for the extreme corruption within the party and the military. He demanded full powers to clean it all up, or he would just step back.

If Xi had stepped back, this would have brought into the open the massive rifts in the party and could have triggered a crisis as big or even more significant than the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. Allegedly, Hu and Wen, feeling betrayed and angry because of Bo and Ling, supported Xi and thus prevailed on Jiang and the leaders of his age cohort, who still wanted to play a role.

Xi got the power he had asked for and immediately turned over a new leaf. He called together all his family, brothers and sisters, and cousins on his mother's side, all very close, and ordered them to stop business deals. They could carry on with what they had, but could not use family ties to expand. News of this meeting spread in China, sending a clear message to all the powerful families: they could no longer pull strings to secure new deals. If the first family of Xi did not, nobody else could.

It was not a return to the wild destruction of wealth and the attack on the rich of the 1950s, when the CPC came to power, or the Cultural Revolution, but it was very different from the pursuit of wealth of the past. A new wave of party "puritans" 清教徒, as their enemies derogatorily called them, had come to power. They were not being tempted by the promise of the immense wealth of the past. They had all they could wish for -- a good house, good food, and influence. They were not poor and had no particular wish to be rich, but they had a dream to make their country powerful and full of glory again. In this, they were a "spiritual" break from Chinese people of the past three to four decades who had believed that wealth could do it all.

It was the dream of the times. Since the failures in the war in Iraq after 2003 and the 2008 financial crisis, China has grown increasingly disappointed with the U.S. Following American theories of U.S. decline and Paul Kennedy's grand ideas about "imperial overstretch," very popular in China, about the rise and fall of great powers, the Chinese felt they were rising, and America's power was waning. They only had to wait and pick it up. The "Puritans" wanted to prepare their state for that.

Part V

Governance in the 1990s: A Plunge into the Past

Governance (1990s): A Plunge into the Past

The path for China has been clear since the late 1990s. The path was missed to pick the low-hanging fruit of growth that has since then become rotten. Here, the analysis was actually drafted at the end of 1998 in Italian. The goal of presenting it 30 years after is showing that China could have gone in a different direction, but for different reasons chose not to.

China at the Center of Asia, Limes, January 8, 1999

Just a few years ago, the question was whether a country as populous and as large as China could manage to remain united against all centrifugal tendencies and against all historical precedents. The historical precedents, especially, were not there, and appeared not to be there. No country had previously administered 1.3 billion people efficiently. The other example of a mammoth state, India, was often cited to prove that you could not administer a billion or so people without going through episodes of fierce clashes in parts of the country and between parts of the population.

On the surface, the Chinese example also seemed to fit. Tensions in the far west of the country, in Xinjiang, where a part of the Muslim and Turkic-speaking minority had taken up arms, and in Tibet, where the Dalai Lama's followers were on the warpath, appeared to indicate that this was also China's fate. Tensions between the various provinces and Beijing could have escalated.

Some five years after these warnings of an implosion and splintering of the Chinese continent, however, China appeared more solid and united than ever. Indeed, Beijing seemed to have halted this process of the country's fragmentation by reversing

centrifugal tensions and instead activating a centripetal force across the entire region, placing it at the center of this Asian continent of more than 3 billion people.

The consequences for Asia and the rest of the world are immense, and not only for geopolitics but also, as we shall see, for the development of many current industrial policies. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that these trends are not unambiguous or certain. There are risk lines and uncertainties that can change the course of events.

But first, we need to look at how China appeared to have arrested centrifugal trends within itself and turned them into centripetal trends.

From Repulsion to Attraction

The first stage manifested itself in the two-year period from 1995 to 1996. In these years, Beijing used force and the threat of force to arrest two strong centrifugal tendencies that separately threatened de facto if not de jure, its political unity and the primacy of Beijing to be the center of China. Compared to Beijing's authority on the one hand, Taiwan was trying to assert more markedly an independence of its own, and on the other hand, Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama were trying to gain more political-religious space.

The two phenomena were independent but certainly contributed to the same purpose: to undermine Beijing's central authority in the Chinese subcontinent on the eve of another major historical event, the return of Hong Kong to the motherland on July 1, 1997.

Taiwan's centrifugal process partly paralleled its democratization process and its effort to heal wounds inflicted 50

years earlier, when about one million mainland Chinese had effectively invaded the island in the wake of Nationalist General Chiang Kai-shek. This minority had fiercely suppressed island resistance and imposed its control over the island's original majority. For decades, Taiwan had claimed to be the true heir to the Chinese tradition, versus the betrayal, with respect to that tradition, wrought on the mainland.

The ideological operation might have worked in the hope of Taiwan's recapture of the mainland, but as this hope faded, such ideology appeared only as a trick to keep that mainland-born minority in power on the island. This resulted over the passage of years in a gradual delegitimization of the ruling party, KMT, and a strengthening of the antagonistic forces that supported island particularities, even with initial tacit support from Beijing.

Instead, President Lee Teng-hui, a Taiwanese native, nearly half a century later, sought to right those old wrongs by restoring weight to Taiwanese particularity within the KMT's power. In doing so, he was turning the tables against the support Beijing had hitherto given to KMT opponents. Lee made himself such a champion of the island's particularity that he called for a recognition of Taiwan's formal independence from the rest of the Chinese mainland.

The leap made by Lee in the mid-1990s appeared extremely threatening to the very unity of the rest of China. That is, if Taiwan, inhabited by an ethnic Chinese, Han population, like the rest of the mainland, could declare formal independence, then all the more could those provinces and regions of China inhabited by non-Chinese, Han majorities, such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

In other words, Beijing needed to reassert its authority over Taipei to arrest ideologically, even before militarily, centrifugal tendencies in other regions.

Not least, because Taipei's centrifugal force was beginning to be felt strongly in Fujian Province, where the southern part of the province speaks the same dialect as the island, and where many Taiwanese investments are concentrated, and where Taiwan's currency, NT, circulated frequently. And centrifugal drives in China did not stop at Tibet and Xinjiang.

The democratization process in Hong Kong, by which British governor Chris Patten was giving more and more powers to the LegCo, the territory's parliament, and expanding its democratic representativeness, represented a major force of attraction for the rich and dynamic Guangdong province. It could thus be attracted more to Hong Kong than to Beijing. With the end result that this province, after the territory's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, could have become the starting point for a destabilization and splintering of mainland China instead of, as Beijing hoped, being the anchor that would closely tie Hong Kong to Beijing.

In Tibet, the situation was even more delicate. The death in 1989 of the Panchen Lama, the region's second spiritual authority after the Dalai Lama, appeared to have created an immense vacuum for Beijing. Indeed, the Panchen was close to Beijing, and thanks to him, Beijing could reasonably hope for soft control of the region since the Panchen's death. De facto, Beijing and the Dalai Lama appeared to have collaborated in the religious-political process of seeking the Panchen's reincarnation. Both sides had something to gain in such collaboration. Beijing received from the Dalai Lama, a cloak of religious orthodoxy for what was, in effect, an effort to politically control the region, the Dalai Lama reentered Tibet by participating in the delicate process of discovering the Panchen, thus also gaining some influence over the choice. By 1995, however, this underground collaboration had broken down with the Dalai Lama's unilateral proclamation of the new Panchen.

Politically, this was seen by Beijing as unacceptable, which it interpreted as a challenge to its political power in Tibet.

Finally, Xinjiang, where some Uighur minority militants were reported to have for the first time studied the Quran more closely and had also learned from guerrilla experiences in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, was facing an independence movement described as increasingly militant, that went so far as to carry out a handful of small-scale terrorist attacks in Beijing for the first time in 1996.

Alongside these marked fracture lines, there were also others, albeit more tenuous ones. They were lines of economic attraction that, in light of the stronger political fractures, could also have become dangerous. The Southeast was attracted to the dynamism of Southeast Asia, and the development of the Mekong area exercised a magnetic pull-on Yunnan toward Thailand. So, to the north, Japanese and South Korean dynamism was forging stronger relations with the three provinces of Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning.

The conceivable result was disturbing and even frightening: a possible balkanization of China. And in 1996, scholars such as Hu Angang were highlighting what they saw as a parallel between the shattering of Yugoslavia and the relationship between divisions of tax revenues between central and provincial governments. Data in hand, Hu Angang argued that there was a dangerous trend not only politically but also administratively and financially, according to which an increasing share of resources was flowing from the center to the provinces, weakening the capital's power of financial and, therefore, also political intervention.

Such a shattering tendency was a problem of Beijing's political sovereignty, but also of re-legitimizing the power of the CPC in China. The two went hand in hand. The CPC, to strengthen itself

and find new legitimacy, had to reaffirm Beijing's power in the provinces.

The first step to halt this trend was somewhat suggested by circumstances and not planned at the table. In 1995, Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui, contrary to prior private assurances given by the U.S. State Department, obtained a visa at the behest of the U.S. Congress to make a trip to America for the stated purpose of speaking at his alma mater, Cornell University.

This was a significant political victory for Lee, who could portray himself at home as a genuine champion of Taiwan independence, and thus undermine the appeal of the opposition independence party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

But for Beijing, it was also a serious challenge to its legitimacy to rule the country. From that moment on, the threat of the use of force, built around a tough rhetorical offensive and a deployment of a visible military force backed by a growing arsenal of missiles aimed at Taiwan, served multiple purposes.

On the one hand, it aimed to intimidate the Taiwanese population with a threat of war or invasion if the island dared to proclaim de jure independence. On the other hand, it sought to convince the most skeptical island businessmen that they would suffer significant economic damage to their investments in China. During the 1995–96 period of Beijing's continuing visible pressure on Taipei, Taiwan spent an estimated $20 billion to defend its stock exchange, and the pressure resulted in an estimated decline of 2 percent in economic growth.

Along with the stick to Taiwanese entrepreneurs, Beijing also offered the carrot: they had excellent business prospects in the mainland if they discouraged Taiwan's independence line. The same line was applied with Hong Kong at the end of the year, where the choice of Tung Chee-hwa, a wealthy shipping executive

born in Shanghai but whose family-maintained ties to the Kuomintang, as the territory's governor after the handover was a clear wink at prospective benefits for wealthy Taiwanese.

By the turn of 1996 and 1997, externally, a close relationship between Hong Kong's business and economic elites was being cemented, and a relationship with those in Taiwan was beginning to form. Moreover, the fierce patriotic rhetoric on Taiwan also had a centripetal effect on domestic public opinion because it was not seen as a purely official phenomenon. Indeed, although it had initiated it, the Chinese government found itself in the months between 1996 and 1997 trying to stem the harsh nationalistic campaign.

The overwhelming success that greeted *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* (*China Can Say No*), coauthored by Zhang Xiaobo under the name Zhang Zangzang,[73] should not be overlooked. The volume is an unsophisticated and indeed sometimes simplistic collection of anti-American and even xenophobic biases. But the millions of copies sold and the dozens of volumes released on the same wave indicate the public's interest in the subject.

In addition, controversies with America over the protection of intellectual property rights and disputes with Japan over possession of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands reinforced the country's patriotic sentiment. It was the beginning of a shift that then picked up a tumultuous pace in 1997 as Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty approached.

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[73] Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, Tang Zhengyu, and Gu Qingsheng, *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: Lengzhanhou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze* 中国可以说不：冷战后时代的政治与情感抉择 [*China Can Say No: Political and Emotional Choices in the Post-Cold War Era*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe, 1996).

The approach of July 1, 1997, promoted a crescendo of national-patriotic sentiments. Internal surveys revealed a rise in nationalistic sentiments that went far beyond Beijing's expectations and needs and threatened to turn into something else. Indeed, heated patriotic sentiment has historically been a double-edged sword for China: patriotic demonstrations have traditionally been in this country first an opportunity to demonstrate against foreigners and then to oppose Chinese rulers who have not done enough against foreigners. Such logic lay behind the May 4, 1919, movement that started the revolution from which both Beijing and Taipei are offspring.

Evidence of the political danger to Beijing of such sentiments can be seen in the fact that Beijing banned a series of anti-Japanese demonstrations and prevented Zhang Xiaobo's second volume, *Zhongguo hai keyi shuo bu* (*China Still Says No*), from being published.[74] This suggests that at that point, a nationalist sentiment was moving independently of government control and indeed went beyond what Beijing had at first intended.

On the other hand, a number of studies put Hu Angang's early analysis in perspective, pointing out that tax burdens should be read more carefully and that, in any case, Beijing maintained a strong degree of control over the provincial apparatus with its power to appoint and remove all levels of the administration.

On the other hand, the very alarms of years past meant that in 1997, Beijing was preparing to launch its new economic reform program, later presented at the 15th Party Congress in September. The Congress ratified the dismissal of about half of the central committee, unveiled a vast program of divestment and

[74] Francesco Sisci, "China at the Center of Asia," *Asia Times*, December 26, 2020, originally published March 2, 2001. Asia Times article

restructuring of state industry, and launched a vast program of bureaucracy reform, which in March 1998 became official with a plan to lay off approximately four million state bureaucrats.

The purpose of this immense change was to strengthen Beijing's lines of command and control across the whole of Chinese territory. Administrative reform became the counterpart of the country's new centripetal feeling. The reality of this new atmosphere, in which the centrifugal shadows appear, for the moment, to have receded, stems from an external phenomenon: the testimony of the difficulties now felt by Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama as he himself ponders seeking a compromise with Beijing. But domestic success is also due to a more complex international success, again achieved by riding circumstances. One such circumstance was the unanticipated gifts of the financial crisis and the Indian atomic tests.

The Unanticipated Gifts of the Financial Crisis and the Indian Atomic Tests

On the eve of the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in July, the atmosphere surrounding China in the region was well short of optimal.

Japan, the year before, had signed a new pact with the U.S. in which the two countries pledged to maintain stability in the region. The formula was vague enough to possibly include the stability of the Taiwan Strait, from where Japanese oil routes pass. And despite Chinese insistence, the Americans did not want to clarify whether Taiwan was to be considered within such a pact (which would have hurt Beijing's sensibilities) or not.

Throughout the region, the memory of military exercises around the island and the tension that had caused that crisis with the arrival of two U.S. aircraft carriers in the strait still weighed. The patriotic wave that had bridged many fault lines within China

externally revealed an alarming side, with small but still worrisome frictions with Vietnam and the Philippines over various Nansha Islands features, and with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Finally, there was the accusation that the financial crisis was partly set in motion by Chinese exports competitive with those of Southeast Asia and South Korea.

Such exports had taken market slices away from these countries, thus depriving them of the liquidity needed to finance the high growth rates they had projected for themselves. In fact, the Chinese were making no secret at the time that they wanted to launch their consumer electronics industry in competition with the Korean and Japanese industries.

This atmosphere was destined to change dramatically in the following months, when from September onward Hong Kong fended off speculative attacks on the devaluation of the territory's common currency and pledged not to devalue the renminbi.

In September and October 1997, China's cherished idea of creating an Asian crisis aid fund stalled. The Americans opposed it officially on efficiency grounds. They feared that such aid led by China and Japan would mask the structural weaknesses and inefficiencies of the economies instead of restoring them.

On the other hand, it was also clear that Sino-Japanese aid cordiality in Asia would have strengthened relations between Beijing and Tokyo to the possible detriment of Washington's strategic influence in the region, and that an International Monetary Fund-led economic rehabilitation would have created an economic environment more conducive to the movement of American companies than Chinese or Asian ones.

However, the “cordial” hypothesis was not appealing even to the influential Singaporeans, who nevertheless saw the need for rehabilitation in some countries in the region, but felt that an

American-imposed recipe would be better accepted than one proposed by Singapore's neighbors. However, the IMF's recipe was not working to arrest the shock wave of the regional crisis. As the months passed, the crisis engulfed South Korea, which also slowly invested more and more widely in Japan, the world's second-largest economy.

Not only that, the IMF models proposed in Indonesia were not bearing fruit as hoped, and this giant of nearly 200 million people, the fourth most populous in the world, and the most populous Muslim country on the planet, was sinking into a financial, then social and political crisis from which, for now, there appeared to be no exit in sight. In a few months, through its own and probably others' folly, nearly 30 years of slow economic development were slipping away, as if down the drain of a sink. The Indonesian crisis remained for some time one of the most serious elements of instability in the region.

In early 1998, the scenario in the region was alarming. In essence, China was the only country left standing, and while in March and April, many hoped that the situation was going to recover, in reality, the crisis was getting deeper and deeper.

In that situation, Beijing made what many Southeast Asian governments recognized as the greatest contribution to exiting the crisis: it kept the exchange rate with the dollar fixed for both the renminbi and the Hong Kong dollar.

Chinese economists repeatedly explained that, other than financial stability reasons for the region, there were no economic reasons to devalue the renminbi. In essence, a devaluation of the renminbi would have triggered a series of competitive devaluations in the region, which in turn would soon wipe out the benefit of China's first devaluation. Moreover, since more than 50 percent of China's exports are re-exports, a devaluation would have increased

import costs, and China would also have experienced inflation, which at the end of 1998 was instead negative.

At the time, it was the first occurrence of the need to have a market-oriented exchange rate, following the necessities of the country and those of the international market. Those long-term concerns were ignored in favor of short-term requirements. In fact, reasons to devalue could be found in abundance.

It is true that China will end the year (1999) still with an abundant trade surplus, over $30 billion according to Chinese statistics. But it is also true that many of these billions have not turned as they did in the past into foreign exchange reserves because they have been taken abroad. According to some Chinese sources, as much as $20 billion may have been taken out of the country. In fact, there is an objective downward strain on the renminbi proven by the return of the black exchange rate, which gives the dollar at 9.2 yuan against the official exchange rate of 8.3 yuan.

In addition, the biggest reason that would militate for a devaluation is the situation in which Hong Kong ended 1998 with the worst recession in the postwar period. The territory is strangled by an exchange rate that is now too high compared with the rest of Asia, where all countries have devalued by 20 percent or more.

But devaluing in Hong Kong also means driving a wedge into the territory's relationship with the mainland. Bilateral trade is denominated in dollars but normally takes place in Hong Kong dollars. Shifting the exchange rate then would create an endless series of trade problems, but more broadly of relations between Beijing and the territory. Moreover, a devaluation in Hong Kong would mean importing devaluation into China.

Instead, it seems that the reasons why China did not want to devalue in '98, and does not want to devalue in 1999 either, are ultimately geopolitical in nature. On the one hand, a series of

competitive devaluations would have greatly complicated relations with Hong Kong and would have wiped out the geopolitical advantage gained since July 1997 in the region.

A devaluation, in other words, would have reopened dangerous internal and external fault lines. Hong Kong, a few months after returning to the motherland, would have been entangled in far worse than a financial crisis, would have drowned in a sea of trade, and therefore political diatribes with the mainland. This, in turn, would have opened fracture lines with Taiwan, between Guangdong and the rest of the country... In other words, the speculative attacks against the Hong Kong dollar went far beyond the financial framework: they represented a true geo-strategic attack on Chinese unity.

Moreover, a devaluation would have reopened barely healed wounds with many countries in the region. Instead, all countries in Asia know that China is damming up. By preventing its currency from falling it effectively puts its exports out of trade with those of its neighbors, gives its neighbors' exports breathing room, gives it a way to accumulate liquidity, and thus shortens the time for economic recovery.

From another point of view, one can look with alarm at the situation in Indonesia, but a 15-20% devaluation of the renminbi, in line with similar devaluations in the region, what would that mean for Jakarta? An explosion or further tightening of the situation there could directly impact the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore, and have reverberations everywhere.

There is nothing and no one to prevent this unfortunate scenario except China, which, in such a way, itself accumulates strategic influence and much gratitude, in a continent pervaded by a stronger sense of loyalty than among Westerners.

Moreover, these credentials have been confirmed by another unexpected development in the region: the atomic tests in India and Pakistan.

In early May 1998, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes, at the end of a visit to India by Chinese Chief of Staff Fu Quanyou, said that China posed a strategic threat to India. It was a very serious slap in the face for China, which was just coming out of the thicket of accusations that it was a strategic threat to everyone. Also, just days later, New Delhi announced that it had conducted five nuclear tests.

The tests then triggered Pakistan's reaction, which, by Indian admission, was authentic from China. Indeed, according to such officials, China had a greater interest in India being completely isolated in international condemnation for the tests. Conversely, Pakistan's participation in this nuclear chase as well would have inevitably divided blame and responsibility between the two neighbors.

The tests greatly complicated the reading of geostrategic events in the region. On the one hand, it was no easier to isolate China as the only major "threat" in the region, and on the other hand, Southeast Asian countries could appreciate Beijing's cold and calculated reaction in an attempt to dissuade Pakistan from its nuclear chase.

Japan, shaken in its anti-nuclear sensibilities by the tests, was to stop developing a line of cooperation with India, and even the U.S., in light of the tests, was to postpone the president's trip to New Delhi until 1999, while at first, and with great symbolic significance, it was scheduled in rapid sequence with the June trip to China. In other words, in June, after Clinton's visit, China became a point of political as well as financial stability in the region.

Japanese diplomats privately confessed to being surprised and taken aback by the extent of the strategic agreement the Americans were willing to enter into in their relationship with the Chinese. For Washington, the combined action of the financial crisis and the Indian and Pakistani tests, the deepening crisis in Indonesia, and the widening crisis in Malaysia proved China's importance and centrality in the region. Its role was irreplaceable with no other country in the region. Only Beijing could keep cool in the face of Indian outbursts; it had the influence to exert over Pakistan, North Korea, or Indonesia.

Japan has to discount its ill-digested imperialist past and its even recent practice of in-country investment, however, always aimed at economic integration of the industrial sectors of individual countries with the industrial apparatus of Japan. Thus, political, financial, or other intervention by Japan in the region lacks much political force.

Just as the Americans cannot do without some form of political, as well as financial, cooperation with China, neither can the countries of Southeast Asia. The calmness with which they reacted to the lynching of ethnic Chinese Indonesians in 1998 contrasts with the almost pan-Chinese activism of the Mao years, when the Chinese were seen tout court as a fifth column of Beijing. This is not to say that the privileged relationship between Beijing and Chinese emigration has broken down. Still, certainly, Chinese behavior at the time of the Jakarta riots confirmed a more measured attitude in which, on the one hand, the wealthy Chinese minority did not go into a frenzy. On the other hand, the Indonesian majority was aware of Beijing's political clout but had no reason to launch into indiscriminate alarms about its possible direct interference.

Even India, which had launched heavy rants against the Chinese threat, then worked hard to maintain a high level of diplomatic relations with China, while a withdrawal of the Indian ambassador to Beijing was also on the horizon after the tests. And they subsequently resumed working hard for the reopening of a dialogue on outstanding border issues. Even the existing hoped-for lines of relations between India and Japan today must triangulate through China, which, after the tests and the financial crisis, has leverage with India, which it can remind of threats, and Japan, which it can remind of its insufficient contribution to the region's economic recovery. These conditions have created a great centripetal force in Asia, China. But for now, it is a force based on two major circumstances (financial crisis and Indian atomic tests) that Beijing has ridden well, but which are not enough to polarize the region in the long run.

Here, the new military exchange and supply pacts that the U.S. has concluded with Singapore and is preparing to conclude with other countries in the region, and the adjustment of IMF aid plans, create the conditions for a new political atmosphere in Asia. In other words, the U.S. is preparing to enter into a series of bilateral security pacts in which it provides military technology and know-how, which it still charges for, and for which it ultimately remains the ultimate technology owner. Because such services rely on the continued development of U.S. technology and hooking into the satellite intelligence apparatus. Both can be shut down at any time, leaving the client-ally in the lurch.

On the other hand, U.S. financial engagement in Asia through the IMF and World Bank, even in light of past failures, remains without alternative. No European or Asian bank has proposed an alternative framework strategy to that of the IMF.

This propositional absence, which is a limitation of economic strength but also of the ability to propose an alternative strategic model of development, limits China's strength in these, albeit very favorable, conditions.

China, at the moment, has three concentrated challenges that it must be able to address in the coming years without losing its privileged status in Asia. First, it needs to equip itself with economic muscle to intervene in a positive direction in the region and not just be limited to having a damming force, halting the slide of devaluation in the region, with its commitment to the defense of the renminbi. Second, it must equip itself with a strategic model of intervention. Having the money, in fact, is not enough if, at the end of the day, it is the Americans who say what should be done with it. China today certainly cannot use the old socialist thinking, nor the fables of the Asian model, now shattered by reality. Third, it must do all this by eliminating or at least limiting the three big geostrategic suspects in the region: Japanese fears of isolation, Indian fears of Chinese containment, and Russian fears of being virtually engulfed. Solving these challenges would at once resolve China's geostrategic risks and nullify centrifugal tensions within China. While the order in which these tasks are to be addressed is as we have set out, in the order of analysis, we will begin with item three and move on to item one and then conclude with item two.

Do Not Isolate the Islanders

Japan has been plagued for much of its history by an isolation complex that in many periods has been artfully nurtured as the quintessence of national culture. Many Chinese feel the sense of isolation that besets Tokyo, ultimately fearful of an embrace

between Beijing and Washington, whose alliance humbled Japanese dreams of victory in World War II.

These fears were refreshed when, in June 1998, Clinton, during his visit to China, spoke of a strategic partnership with Beijing and especially did not stop in Tokyo on his way back to Washington. This attitude had been forced to some extent by China.

On June 17, in fact, Hong's Hang Seng index exceeded all worst predictions of a fall, and at the same time, many Chinese business newspapers launched violent attacks on Japan and the U.S., guilty of failing to act in the face of the yen's fall.

Hong Kong slumped 5.72 percent, closing at 7,462 points, below 7,500, which only a few weeks earlier appeared to be the worst-case scenario. The immediate cause of the collapse was the yen's continued slide against the dollar, which was heading toward the 150 threshold. If Washington had not intervened to support the yen, explained Liu Ji, economic adviser to President Jiang Zemin, Beijing could have become an adversary of the U.S. The next day, Washington and Tokyo spent $6 billion and brought the yen back to around 130 to the dollar. Japan calculates that with the yen at 144-145 against the dollar, its GDP could have an eased growth of 1 percent, reported the editorial in Financial News, China's central bank newspaper, on June 17. And with a strong dollar, the U.S. finances the continued success of its stock market. In fact, Washington fears that the dollar's fall due to intervention to support the yen and an interest rate cut "is likely to result in a flight of foreign capital, and thus a collapse of the U.S. stock market," Financial News continued.

At the same time, however, Japan appeared unwilling to use its $220 billion in reserves to support its currency and wants to get out of its crisis by increasing exports, the paper wrote. These choices, however, are being paid for by other Asian countries, whose

exports are losing out to more competitive Japanese goods, and China, which is maintaining the dollar-yuan exchange rate. Confirmation of that analysis then came from the Tokyo Stock Exchange's quotations, which continued to travel in those days firmly around the 16,000 mark, the margin within which banks are insured against possible capital losses.

China, in other words, threatened to stop defending the yuan and blame the new Asian crisis torment that would follow on the selfish policies of the U.S. and Japan. The geopolitical consequences of a propaganda war in Asia over responsibility for a new collapse were beyond calculation. But in such a scenario, it would have been easy for Beijing to prove numbers in hand on how much it had cost its economy so far, in terms of lost growth, to defend the Yuan.

The outcomes of such a confrontation were by no means a foregone conclusion, but certainly Japan and the U.S., especially, could have lost heavily. Japan could cite in its defense its patent economic difficulties.

Such a broadside had secured U.S. help in supporting the yen and prompted the U.S. to accept a still-growing trade deficit with China to help support the yuan. But after that, China needed to catch up with Japan, which, with the launch of a North Korean missile over its airspace, proved that it was, for the second time, exposed to possible missile threats from abroad.

Jiang's trip to Tokyo in November was supposed to reconcile the two countries on a written statement in which Tokyo would offer a formal apology for the invasion and, most importantly, the two countries could talk about security issues that so concerned Beijing.

Neither has occurred, however. Within days of the visit, it appears that the Japanese got an endorsement from Washington

and backtracked on the arrangements made. The visit, however, was made any way to avoid exacerbating tempers on the Chinese side, a move somewhat in line with Beijing's reaction toward New Delhi.

Such reasonableness reaped success in the region but did not stop what appears today as a definite Japanese rearmament program. At the end of December, Tokyo approved the study of a theater missile defense system to be organized with the U.S.

The thesis behind this study is that Japan sooner or later must take care of its defense and cannot forever delegate it to Washington. In addition, the deepening crisis in North Korea reveals the twists and turns of East Asian security. Some 100,000 American troops are concentrated in Japan and South Korea, formally against a possible North Korean threat. But if and when North Korea disbands, the Americans will have no sense of presence in the region, and then Japan will have to assume firsthand the security responsibility it has so far delegated to the U.S., with the tacit consent of China, which prefers an armed Yankee to an armed Japanese.

But such a situation cannot be dragged on forever, and while the U.S. and Japan are moving toward thinking about a security order after the North Korean collapse, China is still timid in this regard. The only thing that seems clear is that Beijing should not stress Tokyo's sense of isolation. But beyond that, it is not clear what to do.

On the other hand, this situation of mistrust between the two major Asian capitals plays in Washington's favor, and not only in strategic terms, but also in purely economic terms. Tokyo and Beijing are the world's two largest creditors, with about $220 billion in reserves for one, mostly in U.S. Treasury bonds.

America, on the other hand, is the world's largest debtor with about $1 trillion in foreign debt. Tokyo and Beijing thus control between 20 percent and 40 percent of America's foreign debt. It is true that these credits are partly a roundabout game: the Chinese and Japanese finance U.S. purchases, which pull up their trade surplus and cause reserves to accumulate. And it is true that in this strange intersection of debts and credits, trade surpluses and deficits in the end, the country's political clout is what counts, but that is precisely why if the two Asian capitals were to get closer again it would not be so convenient for Washington, not least because there are another $180 billion in reserves (again mostly in dollars) in Taiwan and Singapore. That would be too much money in the hands of too few people, which would give Asia a lot of blackmail power vis-à-vis Washington.

With these facts, the choice of policies is up to Beijing: does it want to be fiercely independent of what it publicly calls American hegemonism? Then it must seek to wrest, or at least distance Tokyo from its embrace with Washington. Does it want to come to terms with the U.S.? It can choose to act as its proconsul general in this case by wresting the primacy of the relationship from Japan. The same argument basically applies to Japan as well.

These are the two main strategic lines, although there are many other intermediate ones. In general, however, a good relationship with the U.S. is maintained by not bending completely to its will. Besides, the game is not two but three, even with India and Russia.

For China, India constitutes a problem that is strategically not as fundamental as Japan. India did not invade China and was indeed defeated by it in a border war in 1962. These were the reasons, according to Indian officials, why the border talks launched in the late 1980s did not go forward. The Indians

complained that the Chinese "did not take them seriously," and so the Indian question could safely be postponed indefinitely.

The attitude seems, in principle, to have changed after the tests. But the change in attitude also implies a rethinking of China's strategy in South Asia, a region that Beijing hitherto thought was not turbulent. In fact, there is a de facto Chinese "containment" against India. In western China, it can count on a close alliance with Pakistan, and in eastern China, it counts on an even better relationship with Burma, whose troops it is rearming, and on whose territory, it may have equipped observation points for the Indian Ocean.

Such "containment" was not working effectively. Pakistan is influenced by China but certainly not driven by it, as evidenced by the episode of nuclear testing, which was strongly discouraged by Beijing, thinking of a long-term goal of isolating New Delhi, and which Islamabad instead carried out due to internal pressure.

Similar problems exist with Burma, where the Chinese are dissatisfied with the performance of the military junta, which is failing to revive the national economy. This lack of economic achievement makes a country divided between fierce ethnic and social strife even more socially and politically unstable, a country that would represent a very important piece for any future Chinese penetration of the Indian Ocean.

With these two chessboard pieces not perfectly in place, the strategic burden returns to Tibet, a place where it is difficult to maintain troops for long because of physical conditions (it is a 4,000-meter plateau to which the Chinese are often not accustomed) and internal social conditions (an increased troop presence unnerves already delicate relations with the ethnic Tibetan population). Here, sustained economic progress in recent years seems to have weakened irredentist forces so much that

Tibetans in India are divided, and some are contemplating a return to armed struggle. This incidentally would play in favor of Beijing, which is more capable of repressing guerrillas than peaceful demonstrators. On the other hand, India has not played the internal subversion card in Tibet.

But equipping Tibet with modern weaponry and control systems is a more difficult and costly affair. New radar stations and troops in the region would be evidence of China's belligerent intentions, but on the other hand, after Fernandes's tests and declarations of fire, can China shy away from being more vigilant about this great neighbor?

For the time being, China is postponing the confrontation, taking as much time as possible and thus maximizing the advantage gained from the Indian tests. But sooner or later, it seems clear that it will have to engage in serious border negotiations with New Delhi, and from this negotiation could come fundamental news for the geostrategic arrangement of the continent. While the Kashmir issue is one that maintains Pakistan's identity, it is often forgotten that part of Kashmir is occupied by China and is a disputed area with India. A border negotiation should get to talk about Kashmir and, if approached in the right spirit, could not only solve the problems between the two giants but also help lay the groundwork for a solution or minimize the importance of the Kashmir issue to Pakistan.

More broadly, a wide-ranging negotiation between China and India could lay the groundwork for a strategic rapprochement between these two countries and put their bilateral relations on a much stronger footing than the 1950s fraternal relationship between Zhou Enlai and Nehru. While ideological issues were worth much then, today the two countries would be united by common strategic and economic goals.

Both countries need stability in the region and to proceed with rapid economic development. Both actually have the same agenda in addressing international pressures on the environmental impact of their economic growth. Moreover, over the past 15 years, India has had a growing interest in the Chinese development model, which it would like to emulate. And India, with its bureaucracy, its courts, and its democratic political system, is an unparalleled example for the delicate and slow transition to democracy that Beijing intends to follow.

The Tibet issue, which today is a thorn in China's side, could instead return to what it has been for a thousand years: a bridge between Indian and Chinese cultures. On the other hand, no civilization has had more influence in China than India.

These could be the lines of development of a new relationship in Asia, and of course, the emergence of such a relationship, with what it entails (a super-giant of 2.5 billion people) would change many geopolitical arrangements on the planet.

This, however, is throwing over many hurdles, because a border negotiation, precisely because of the immense prospects it opens, is fraught with particular and general pitfalls. The Indian government must have great strength to be able to negotiate territorial compromises, without fear that such concessions will backfire on it as a matter of domestic policy. Moreover, such a prospect could find clear opposition from many other countries, the U.S. and Japan first, which would have to completely rethink their role in Asia.

From that perspective, the Russian presence, if the country cannot get out of its current crisis, is completely irrelevant, beyond the ambitions to do so advanced in December by Premier Primakov. China already has sufficient strategic levers to penetrate Central Asia, where good relations with Kazakhstan have convinced

the local government not to support the possibly Uyghur pro-independence forces. But except for this relationship cemented by China's oil field purchases in Kazakhstan in 1997 and its related plans to build a giant pipeline, Beijing has so far not shown the same enthusiasm for investing in Siberia.

In fact, in spite of the grandiose visions flaunted by the two countries at each summit, Moscow and Beijing appear nowhere near having the desired explosion of bilateral trade. An antiquated credit system in Russia dictates that de facto bilateral transactions are handled by German or Scandinavian banks. Added to this is the fact that the Chinese complain about the commercial unreliability of the Russians. The Russian ability to export arms to China also does not seem likely to last long, as China increasingly needs sophisticated electronics that Moscow does not possess.

If natural and technological resources have ceased to be attractive, Siberia remains an ice desert with the same population as Mongolia, a country that has re-entered the Chinese sphere of influence, despite the fact that the Chinese have not, in fact, lifted a finger in this regard.

A modicum of Chinese activism toward Moscow would produce the same results on Vladivostok, where the pressure of the Chinese population is such that they are granted an entry visa valid for only a few hours. But Beijing does not press the issue, for reasons of long-standing geostrategic prudence and also little objective interest in the Deep North.

In fact, Chinese priorities today, and probably for a long time, are not in an indiscriminate enlargement of its area of influence, but in an acceleration of its economic development.

The Large Chinese Market

To date, China, the world's most populous country, has grown by leveraging direct investment, estimated at $220 billion, more than 20 percent of GDP, and through foreign trade, which accounts for about 40 percent of GDP. These proportions are more suitable for small countries, but not for an area that is potentially the largest market in the world. And market automatically means cash flow.

Moreover, thanks to the development of the past 20 years, China is not without money. At the end of the third quarter of 1998, total bank deposits were 9,442 billion yuan, 18.2% higher than the same period of the previous year, growing at more than double the rate of GDP growth. Among them, corporate deposits were 3,153 billion, 16.1 percent, and total private deposits, on the other hand, were 5,295 billion, 18 percent higher.

In fact, until late 1998, Chinese savers had virtually only one way to invest their savings, to put them in banks. This means that banks monopolize the allocation of funds for investment, but also that they take all the risk, which meant that in 1997, about 20 percent of the total domestic loan stock was in arrears to one extent or another. This proportion should have been drastically decreased with the issuance of 270 billion bonds intended for the recapitalization of state banks. But it will not be until July 1999, with the entry into force of a new framework law on the stock exchange, that savers will have more choice in their investments, that banks will not monopolize this flow, and that neither will assume all the risks.

The measure is aimed at creating a domestic market that China strategically needs to develop and strengthen its voice in Asia and the world.

China's new Stock Exchange Framework Law is expected to revolutionize and reclaim the indirect investment model and help give a more modern profile to the country's financial structure. The law will take effect on July 1, the 78th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

The roughly 214 articles divided into 12 chapters basically serve to create transparency and openness in a market that so far has remained polluted by insider trading, bribery, deals made under the table, and unscrupulous speculation that have driven away most honest savers and left on the ground people behaving on the two stock exchanges, in Shanghai and Shenzhen, as if they were at a roulette table. In fact, in the jargon here, stock trading is called "chao gupiao," cooking stocks, a delicate art in these parts, where holding stocks too long or too much causes one to lose a large part of the return.

In fact, most of the articles are focused on one primary purpose: to prevent brokers from playing on their own using the institutional funds they hold. What used to happen was that some brokers would sell or buy on their own first and then follow up with institutional trades. After they were prohibited from holding personal accounts in the stock market, many opened accounts in the name of nominees. The result was that some upward or downward movements were artificial, for the sole purpose of maximizing personal profits, perhaps to the detriment of the agency they worked for. With the new law, which includes careful control measures, this should end or at least drastically decrease.

The stock exchange law is also crucial in the country's economic transformation strategy. On the one hand, it should be used to raise funds from savers to replace today's all-state ownership of large companies. On the other hand, private companies that need financing to get off the ground should access the stock exchange.

They should also be able to safely shop on the stock exchange, including the pension funds that China is already establishing and intends to expand in a very major way from next year. This will serve to create a first nationwide welfare state system, which 50 years of "socialism" has not created. In fact, peasants are still basically without any form of pension or health care or social assistance, and social assistance for urban dwellers was not paid for by the government but paid for directly by the companies for which people worked.

This last perverse mechanism still causes the liquidation of a decayed industry to result not only in layoffs for its workers in active force, but in a drastic curtailment of pensions even for those who have already left, which means a multiplication of social discontent over ongoing reforms where, precisely, so many industries are being liquidated.

The law thus fills an immense void and takes huge slices of power away from state industries and their prominent managers. This aspect of the power struggle is, in fact, behind the long years of debate and confrontation over this law.

Other losers from the law are financial institutions, such as Itics (sort of locally based financials with often very vague powers of action), which will no longer have any margin to gamble on the exchange for funds raised in no clear way. If the stock exchange has its own transparency and efficiency, private and institutional savers will no longer have so much need to look for strange alternatives, in Itics, to the safety of bank deposits. They will be able to if they want to risk it directly on their own.

In this way, on the other hand, the state, with its presence in the banks, also takes a step backward. It will no longer be through the management of de facto bank deposits, the sole manager of savings, but will compete with more efficient industries.

However, it will not be full liberalization, nor should one dream that Shanghai or Shenzhen will be transformed as if by magic into Wall Street, and not only because of management issues, but mainly because of the continuing closure of the domestic market.

Indeed, another goal of the law is to put clarity in the two markets originally thought of as divided but now often confused: that of A shares for Chinese and B shares for foreigners. It will be much more difficult for the Chinese to buy B shares, which are more desirable, while it is not known whether, with the exchange rules in place, foreigners will soon venture into the Chinese financial market.

If, however, potentially immense Chinese pension funds do indeed enter the market soon, foreigners may be tempted to ride the wave. After all, it may still be safer to invest in the stock market than to make a direct investment in a domestic industry. If this is the case, and if the market can maintain the level of transparency it promises, the next decade could be the Shanghai Stock Exchange's.

This is where the concrete program outlined for 1999, but which in reality will be firmly in place until 2001, comes in. Indeed, the watchword for the coming years is to increase domestic consumption "through whatever means," but certainly not by opening the cataracts of easy credit and devaluation that would lead to high inflation. In fact, the introduction to the *Blue Book*, edited by Liu Guoguang, Premier Zhu Rongji's chief economic adviser, makes it clear that it is not possible to think of a reasonable rate of inflation; we must only promote growth without inflation. Liu analyzes how, in the eight years prior to the outbreak of the 1997 crisis, the inflation differential between Thailand and the U.S. created the conditions for the fixed baht-dollar exchange rate to then become unsustainable. There is, Liu concludes, no acceptable

rate of inflation, in part because the U.S. growth pattern in recent years has eliminated the Keynesian assumption that growth must entail inflation. The U.S. and the world have grown in these years by virtually defeating inflation.[75]

This is one of the strategic goals for China in the coming years, coupled with a radical change in the country's production and financial structure. China, in other words, wants from now on to grow in a healthy way, with modern models, as Europe or the U.S. grows today, without inflation. Growth over the next couple of years will be driven by this massive wave of infrastructure investment, but there will be no uncontrolled spending. On the contrary, those who win bids for work that they later conclude badly will be punished severely. The funds must be used well, the products coming out of the factories must be of competitive quality, and not just cheap. In other words, quality, so far neglected, must enter among the production criteria.

It is then a mixture of primarily administrative and secondarily financial measures, because the Chinese problem is primarily one of administrative reform and not one of simply using financial levers, as in the Japanese case.

"The development of our economy," the Blue Book states, "is in the midst of two important transitional stages (transition of the economic system and transition of the mode of economic growth [from quantity to quantity plus quality, ed.]) . . . we must pay attention not only to the pursuit of increasing the speed [of growth] but we must also promote the transition of the mode of economic

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[75] Liu Guoguang and Liu Shucheng, "Two Issues on the Current Macroeconomic Adjustment Program," in *Economics Blue Book of the People's Republic of China, 1999: Analysis and Forecast*, ed. Liu Guoguang, Wang Luolin, Li Jingwen, Liu Shucheng, and Wang Tongsan (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 9–12.

growth and promote the change and improvement of the economic structure, to create an improved macroeconomic environment and thus promote long-term sustainable economic development."[76] The *Blue Book*, on the other hand, explains that the success of many reforms in 1998 fell short of expectations because many reforms were introduced at the same time. This sudden contraction in individual spending curbed domestic market growth, which was supposed to make up for the lack of growth in exports, which contracted due to the Asian crisis last year. "People were gripped by a wave of panic," explains one of the report's drafters. "They saw that you have to put money aside for fear of being laid off, you have to put money aside for the health care reform that will go into effect this year, you have to save money to send your children to school which is now expensive, etc. There are so many reasons to save money, and at this point, there is only so much liquid left to buy the house."[77]

Housing privatization was indeed a fiasco, failing to trigger the hoped-for virtuous cycle whereby the state could simultaneously dispose of useless real estate and raise funds to finance further growth in the housing sector. Within a year of the launch of this reform, the state managed to dispose of most of its heavy real estate, but virtually gave it away at prices far below market rates. Thus, the second phase of the growth of a higher-quality real estate sector starts without the hoped-for strong liquidity base.

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[76] Liu Guoguang and Liu Shucheng, "Two Issues on the Current Macroeconomic Adjustment Program," 12.

[77] Francesco Sisci, "China's Way Out of Ukraine?," *SettimanaNews*, February 25, 2023, reproducing material originally published in abridged form as "China at the Center of Asia," *Limes*, January 8, 1999, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/china-way-out-of-ukraine/.

These structural reasons, on the whole, according to the *Blue Book*, explain why there was a phenomenon of no increase in consumption in 1998. State-owned industries continued to produce low-quality products, over-saturating consumer sectors that had already reached their ceiling, while for higher-quality products, where there is still demand, the market is occupied only by foreign or joint venture production.

Then, for the next few years, China will grow by leveraging government investment in infrastructure. The paper explains that foreign trade certainly remains most important, "but for a populous developing country like ours, domestic demand is the main force for pushing economic growth."

More investment in infrastructure should put a large mass of capital into circulation, about $1,200 billion in spending projected through 2001, which, in turn, for the next couple of years, should provide the high growth rate needed to absorb the workers laid off by state-owned companies undergoing restructuring.

Among the priorities, the paper cited the urbanization process, a first after decades of the central government trying to stem the flow of migration into the cities. So if in this way in the next few years China manages to expand its domestic market, this, in the next decade, could greatly help the regional recovery.

Moreover, such domestic development is also necessary in the face of growing American irritation over a trade deficit that is expected to touch $60 billion this year. It is not possible for the U.S. to sustain the pressure of this deficit for much longer, especially if the euro were then to actually establish itself as the second international trading currency, and this could happen with a strengthening of the euro.

Here is an accumulation of risky details for the U.S. If prices in ten years are set in euros as well as dollars, the U.S. Treasury

calculates a loss of $30 billion a year. A trifle, but add this to the fact that Frankfurt will try to finance the commerce in euros, which will result in a shift from $500 billion to $1 trillion, and the fact that at the same time the U.S. trade deficit will touch $300 billion in 1999, while the state budget deficit is stably over $1 trillion.

These facts are behind the outburst by Japanese Justice Minister Shozaburo Nakamura, who in January accused the U.S. of having an inflated economy, in essence, financing its excessive consumption with a government deficit and using its political-military levers to offset unwelcome effects of others' trade success. A clear reference to the fact that several times in the past, the U.S. has imposed measures on Japan to open its markets.

The argument can be overturned by explaining that, in reality, the U.S. finances other countries' industrial expansion with other people's money; in fact, they grow because they export precisely to the U.S., and the U.S. does not close its domestic market. But in essence, the Asian financial crisis, the entry of the euro, the new direction of travel of the Chinese economy, and the increasing pressure the U.S. is under from its trade and budget deficits seems to be tending toward the beginning of a shift in growth patterns and geostrategic models in which Asia is the big space to maneuver and where the strategic shift in the Chinese economy can play a key role.

1997–1999: China's Reform Architecture

RESTRUCTURING, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND DOMESTIC-MARKET REORIENTATION.

1997

LAYING A NEW FOUNDATION



Political and state restructuring

- 15th Party Congress
- major Central Committee turnover
- state-industry divestment and restructuring
- bureaucratic reform

1998

WEATHERING REGIONAL TURBULENCE



Asian financial crisis

- regional financial instability
- China maintains the renminbi–dollar exchange rate
- Hong Kong dollar remains stable
- Beijing presents stability as a regional contribution

1998–1999

SHIFTING TOWARD DOMESTIC GROWTH



Domestic reorientation

- government infrastructure investment
- greater emphasis on domestic demand
- urbanization becomes a policy priority
- stronger internal market

1999

BUILDING A MODERN FINANCIAL SYSTEM



Financial modernization

- Stock Exchange Framework Law
- broader investment choices
- reduced reliance on banks alone
- development of a stronger domestic capital market

A late-1990s strategic shift in China's political economy.

The Soft-War

After the hot war, the cold war, we must today prepare for the soft war. In 1996, foreign sales of entertainment and software products were estimated at $60.2 billion, more than any other major American industry. In the meantime, that amount has increased, and in addition, the export of products with a content that is not primarily cultural, such as Coke, Pepsi Cola, McDonald's hamburgers, for example, carries with it, and is successful, because of the strong cultural value of the product. Coke is certainly good to drink, but it is also true that with it one drinks a model of life, a piece of American culture.

These new products have two sides. On the one hand, they carry with them an "ideology," which should not be thought of in the old terms of communist versus capitalist ideology, but of a complex system of cultural values with a certain political content. On the other hand, they have standard production costs and infinitesimal reproduction costs, so that selling on a very large scale multiplies profits dramatically. In other words, the main cost of a film is its production, but the cost of reproducing it on film, cassette, or digital disc is close to zero, so that a larger number of reproductions of a film on cassette, etc. requires only marginal investment, compared to the initial production, and is practically all profit. The same is true of software and all other products that can be reproduced electronically.

The debate developing around the world about the knowledge-based economy and the importance of the cultural industry in a very broad sense creates a global tension in and for markets. It becomes central for every company and every country to be able to access a broad market that is as uniform as possible.

The U.S. is extremely interesting because of this; Europe is less so because it is divided among a dozen languages. India is also interesting, but not fundamental, because there too there are languages (Indo-European in the north, Dravidian in the south) and religious (Hindu and Muslim) divisions... China, with its unity of language and culture, is especially attractive. It represents what may be the largest potential market in the world, with its 1.3 billion people, and with the domestic effort to expand domestic consumption, it seeks to turn this potential into reality as soon as possible.

Regardless of limitations in terms of Malthusian projections of development, the Chinese economy is often expected to grow at a whirlwind pace over the next 70 to 80 years (and perhaps more) to reach a per capita GDP close to that of advanced countries. But already in the next two decades, China will become the single largest market in the world for so many products, and it could become so easy for cultural products, which precisely have a low cost of reproduction. Just the existence of this trend in this country makes China the focal point of development for all companies around the world. It is not possible to know whether China will stop development, but certainly, few can afford to stay out of this market. It is a bit like what is said about the Internet: today, many people are losing money on it; it is not clear when and how they will begin to make money on it, but the potential costs of staying out of this development tend to be much greater than the losses of being in it today anyway.

This may be true in general terms and is much more so for the culture industry. This implies that global control is done through the use of force, certainly, but also through an industrial cultural force, which has purely economic aspects and ideological aspects of assimilation, and also promotes global communication.

The aspect of communicating as clearly and transparently as possible is, among other things, essential to the functioning of global markets, so in this case, there is an almost magical integration between the need for information exchange, the need for new industrial developments, the efficient circulation of money and resources, and ideology. Moreover, the substantial victory in the ideological debate between East and West by the West in the Cold War shows how ideology was part of that conflict, and that the American ideological drive was an advantage for the West. After all, the Chinese know that, as Sunzi says, the first rule of warfare is deception, that is, an ideological process of capturing, winning, and persuading the mind, before comparing arms.

The analysis of the strategic consequences of this very powerful cocktail is beyond the scope of this essay and China's role. Here it suffices to say that, given the new nature of this cultural industry, China, for the reasons mentioned above, is central.

If we then add up the various factors, the political ones (China's increased weight with the Asian crisis) the economic ones (the potential to become with the development of the domestic market in X years the engine of East Asian development) and that of current industrial trends, we see that there is a concentration of the various countries of the world on China, since all may have an interest in burdening it. China, in the near future, may be destined to have increasing political and strategic weight. This situation potentially creates an infinite centripetal tension with respect to the whole world, but also centrifugal, because many in the world may have an interest in dividing up this huge market.

Globalizing China

Here again, there is an internal and then an external aspect. As for the internal China, the purpose is strategic, to save the unity of the

country on the one hand, but the means today, as 70 years ago, when the country was in the midst of civil war, is ideology. In fact, the culture industry does not live without an unregulated environment, without strong political safeguards. Just as the market works better than the planned economy, so does the culture industry work better where there is no rigid protection of what you may or may not think about.

Then China needs to renew its ideology and liberalize its control of the intellectual world if it wants to participate in the new race of the culture industry. As we have seen, the stakes are threefold: hold an industrial, ideological advantage, and secure against centrifugal pushes.

Li Shulei argues in great detail that Mao's ideological work was essential in leading the Chinese Communist Party to victory. Then Mao was successful because he defeated the pro-Soviet orthodox, and this operation of his was historically determined. That is, the real lesson to be learned from Mao is that he used the right tool at the right time. So as the times change, you have to change the tools as well, otherwise you are defeated. Li Shulei does not deal with the current industrial-cultural-strategic issue but certainly sets the stage in the right way for China to deal with this problem. Today, China needs different ideological controls if it wants to participate in this global challenge.

If it does not do so, the strategic and ideological advantage gnawed away today will quickly vanish, and the centrifugal pushes that existed at the beginning can be re-triggered. And indeed more. Because in the meantime, global interest in this market with unique conditions will have grown. Then either the government can hold it together (which is more attractive, on the other hand, for everyone) or areas of influence and fragmentation of the country may be recreated.

If China, on the other hand, succeeds in renewing its ideology, maintaining in the coming years the strategic advantage it has gained, and improving its economic and financial structure, then we will begin the next millennium truly having to set our eyes primarily on this country, which could exert a centripetal pull like never before.

Obviously, to prevent this natural centripetal pull from a market of this size and condition from creating friction and conflict, Beijing will have to be very careful and not irritate anyone. Too many are already frightened in the world by a China that is just too big.

Part VI
Chinese Grand Strategy in the Xi Jinping Era

Governance (2000s): Xi Jinping's Destructuring Power

When President Xi Jinping came to power at the 2012 Party Congress, he had to face serious and systemic challenges to the structure of the Chinese state. Put simply, these challenges were branded "corruption." It was far more than corruption; it was the deep disruption of the decision-making process of the state, coming after years of festering of long-existing problems.

It was unclear who made decisions, how, and through what process—and things could be hijacked at any moment for any given reason. The Chinese state was facing serious fissures that could disrupt the country and, by extension, also create significant problems abroad. This predicament did not happen because of ill intentions or the poor judgment of the past leaders, but because China was facing new problems that the old state structures had not been geared for since the beginning.

In 1949, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established, the new country was facing issues that were unprecedented in its long history. Unlike other dynasties established through foreign intervention (such as the Manchu-founded Qing Dynasty in the seventeenth century) or through "popular revolutions" (such as the one that brought the Ming Dynasty to power in 1368), the PRC did not want to refurbish or reenact the feudal dynastic past. That is, it did not want to reapply most of the toolkit that made the Chinese state reestablish itself over and over again during the previous 20 centuries.

The People's Republic of China was founded by a Western-inspired Communist Party that believed the old Confucian thinking was the root of decadence. The fundamental reason for the fall of past dynasties lay in imperial thinking and imperial statecraft.

Therefore, the new state had to be grounded on different rules. However, these rules were not ready-made. Arguably, China had never faced a similar situation.

Governance (2012): The 2012 Desert

Before unification, there was a situation of permanent war when states were being destroyed, and entire peoples were annihilated. Then different philosopher-sages tried to bring order by setting clear rules of engagement between existing states, as, for instance, did the Confucians or the Mohists.

Eventually, the Qin state managed to eliminate all competing states and established a short-lived tight order that lasted only a few years before plunging the country back into chaos until the Han strenuously managed to piece together a different set of rules in a newly unified empire. That empire became the paragon and example for all realms in the future.

In 2012, there was little or nothing of practical use for Xi and his allies to apply in the new situation. But the example from 25 centuries earlier may illustrate the kind of uncertain and novel situation that he was facing. The risks perhaps were not as dangerous, but the intellectual challenge to produce something new without any script to follow was there.

Of course, Xi Jinping was not literally facing the disintegration of the state, but a process of creeping meltdown was discernible. He responded that while working on the integration of the state, he had to concentrate power and establish clear channels of organization and decision-making processes.

The anti-corruption fight was the superficial reason for this process, but the deeper reason was the imperative to reorganize the state along more efficient lines. He decided to do that along contours that the official Chinese bureaucracy would be able to

understand and embrace. He took inspiration from the imperial past and ideas from the Soviet tradition.

Both are part of Chinese political culture and could help China quickly reshape itself into an effective administration. Other notional paths would have been more challenging and might have taken longer with uncertain results.

Xi Jinping prevailed: He moved forcefully against corruption. He established a new set of rules that led up to him and his personal authority for all important decision-making. He put in place a meticulously structured system for addressing internal and external problems. The system in some respects resembles the old imperial system. In it, almost everybody is subject to the law – the dictates laid down by the party, except the top leader, who can move the needle of the law, if necessary, in one direction or another.

But nobody else can, and therefore, he managed to reinforce and consolidate his power.

However, this seems to be a process that has not yet ended. There remain clear challenges to Xi's effective yet rigid way of ruling the country. China established an immense bureaucracy resting upon the Party, about 97 million members strong.

While in imperial times the official bureaucracy organized by Beijing never went below county levels, in modern China, we have two new phenomena. Bureaucracy extends down to the village level, a community which may have only 2,000–3,000 people. They were ruled for millennia by affluent landowning families who contributed massively to the national treasury through their taxes. Now, private hoarding of land has disappeared.

Moreover, for the first time in Chinese history, the countryside itself, for centuries home to some 95% of the population, is being wiped out. This is happening in two ways: by moving peasants and

farmers to the cities, which are now home to over 60% of the population; and by urbanizing the countryside, so that most counties have urban facilities and organization.

These elements created a bureaucracy that is far greater in size than any other bureaucracy in the world in a country with a population far more significant than at any other time in Chinese history. And despite the aid and the support of critical new technologies such as electronics and computers, there is only so much—or so little—that the top leadership can do and can decide in a given day.

Strategy (2020s): Will Soldiers Go to War?

In 1991 or even in 2001, Beijing would have had millions ready to become cannon fodder in any major war. By 2021, however, it was no longer so easy. In 2021, owing to advanced military systems and modern information technology, Beijing had no need to field as many rank-and-file soldiers as in the past. But a certain number of courses must still be available, especially if facing India, a similar demographic superpower with an abundance of people able to be called into combat.

It can be ok to deploy a few highly trained sailors on a South China Sea destroyer, but what if the poorly educated crews of fishing trawlers get captured or sunk by fierce Vietnamese?

Presently, in these conditions, some can risk their life on the battlefield, but these cannot be huge numbers owing to the consequences of the one-child policy. Massive body counts at the level of 40 years ago could no longer be acceptable. Today, such carnage would result in a massive social crisis. In the 2040s, with the effects of the end of the one-child policy manifesting themselves, the social equation will be different.

Soldiers of China face many new hurdles compared to the past, socially, as we have seen, and organizationally. Old corps have been disbanded and reorganized. They are no longer expected to go and fight because of long-established lines of personal loyalty, solid emotional connections stretching in convoluted cobwebs all over the PLA. They must obey just because the military and party regulations demand this.

At the same time, society has fundamentally changed. The social fabric behind the army is intent upon making money and in no way inclined to risk everything in a protracted war.

Then the short answer to the question is: soldiers could fight if the conflict is limited in time and scope, with a minimum of casualties who will be treated like heroes by the media. This would further galvanize nationalistic sentiments at home.

If the war were to be longer and larger in scale, with mounting casualties, it is unclear how the army and the civilian population would react.

Chinese soldiers are trained to act according to training and specific commands, and the PLA training and culture do not favor initiative in the field. Even a militarily intelligent suggestion might be politically wrong and thus carry potentially severe punishment from the leadership. This puts soldiers or sailors under enormous stress. Yet, in modern warfare, soldiers must understand the objective and improvise as required at the operational level. Behind them, there is a massive operational infrastructure that helps and follows them. But if soldiers are trained and encouraged to take some operational initiative, this approach might sow politically disturbing concepts of individual freedom and hence go counter to party wishes.

Therefore, Beijing is trying to increase and improve political education, to make soldiers understand the political objectives and protocols for action on the field.

Beijing knows this cannot be just a theoretical exercise, and is trying to identify ways for soldiers to gain some operational experience, illustrating the practical meaning of taking appropriate initiative in the field. It sent some "special forces" in Afghanistan to work with foreign contractors there, but the experience was not in actual battle. To make up for this lack of operational experience, a number of PLA officers were embedded with Russian troops in Syria, and they were also looking for opportunities to gain experience in Libya. Possibly, as the movie Wolf Warrior suggests, there are now officially demobilized PLA soldiers serving in Africa, mainly as elements of private security forces to protect Chinese workers living there.

China has acquired many new weapons systems over the years, but it is unclear how they might perform in a shooting war. The U.S., for its part, has abundant recent experience. The Chinese will appreciate that while the U.S. failed in its efforts to rebuild countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya as it did with Germany and Japan after World War II, it nonetheless managed in military terms to flatten those countries. The American failure there is that of the nation-building ambition. The Americans too often chose the wrong local partners, people who squandered or pocketed the help given. But it was not a failure in the sense that now a thriving Afghanistan or Libya is telling the U.S. what to do on Wall Street. The countries that opposed the U.S. and failed to turn out as the U.S. wished are still in no position to challenge the U.S.

Thus, the Chinese know or ought to know very clearly that facing enemies backed by the U.S. could be a dangerous game.

In this, if the brutality of choice were to become stark, for the PLA, toppling the domestic enemy may be less dangerous than fighting the external enemy.

This is a new complex conundrum for Xi. Even without thinking of a coup, Xi needs the active support of the PLA. Certainly, coups against the top leader have not succeeded in the PRC. There is, however, a long chain of "mini-coups" that were quite successful. Mao staged the Cultural Revolution to rid himself of his rival Liu Shaoqi. In 1971, when he got wind of Lin Biao's intentions, Mao took action against Lin Biao, Lin's family, and Lin's most prominent PLA supporters.

Similarly, Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxing, Li Xiannian, and Ye Jianying, who had all the top positions and commanded the loyalty of the army and party bureaucrats, eliminated the Gang of Four and rooted out their national network of supporters. That is: the supreme leader can move against lesser leaders and neutralize them. For all his arrests of big tigers, Xi Jinping managed to sideline influential leaders of the generation of Jiang Zemin. He has clipped the connections linking Jiang to all kinds of people in the PRC. But he did not eliminate his generation and their influence.

Then, suppose Xi is not in total control. In that case, the situation may reach a point when he might have to use the army against "foreign aggression," according to a general perception of danger in the present nationalist atmosphere of the PLA.

Then, if Xi does order the army to react to the perceived "foreign aggression," it is not clear what the soldiers will do. If they will obey, for how long, and how, and will this backfire on Chinese internal politics? If Xi doesn't order the PLA to move against the enemy, the army might think he is a traitor and act accordingly.

It is a very complex game, and possibly nobody is sure how this will play out. But to avoid being cornered, Xi needs to change his

way of thinking. Will he do it? It is not clear what could possibly trigger a turn in Xi's current path, where there are no good choices but only bad choices for him and everybody else. Xi is in a bad place if soldiers go to war or do not go to war. And with all of this, there is the problem of: will he give the order?

Before that, we may want to take a brief detour to look at the experience when the PLA was used against the civilian population, planting seeds that are possibly blooming now.

Governance (1980s to 1990s): PLA Versus the People

The PLA was never used directly against the people before the June 4, 1989, crackdown in Tiananmen Square and vicinity. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao had the PLA arm the loyal Red Guards to fight his internal enemies or other Red Guard factions. He had soldiers disguised as workers beat the opposition with clubs and sticks, but never before 1989 did the PLA fire at ordinary Chinese citizens, much less citizens who were unarmed and peacefully demonstrating. The 1989 crackdown betrayed the essence, the identity of the people's army. In theory, that crackdown should have been the assigned task of the armed police. Besides, the PLA intervention was manifestly unnecessary. Tanks, armored personnel carriers, and rifles were scarcely needed to put down a few students.

What, then, justified to Deng and his allies the use of regular PLA forces in Beijing in 1989? One answer is that the political stance of the troops guarding Beijing was uncertain; their senior commanders might well have been loyal to deposed party chief Zhao Ziyang and, hypothetically, forced their way to the "praetorian guard" protecting top leaders in the capital and staged

a coup against Deng and his fellow elderly veterans. To prevent it, Deng called in troops from other provinces whose loyalties were not in question and whose numbers were larger than those of the Beijing units potentially disposed to back Zhao Ziyang.

One sign of something amiss in the military was that in early June 1989, for days, almost a week, soldiers dispatched from Shenyang with the assigned task of seizing control of the radio station remained camped on the outskirts of Beijing, about 5 km from the building, because they had not received clear orders from their direct superior officers. These units also ignored the situation around them when the students were beaten, and the military occupied Tiananmen. In all that period, every day, I would go to talk to those soldiers.

The split in the party about Tiananmen was, in fact, a break in the army. Captains, supposed to receive orders from their colonels, were left alone, unclear about what to do.

At a crucial time in Chinese history, some soldiers obeyed the top leadership, Deng, some did not, and followed their direct superiors. It all depended on the allegiance of the generals.

Now the new system Xi has adopted undermines the power of the generals and colonels. Units have to look at Xi to find direction. Operationally, it could be chaotic.

Tiananmen had a lasting impact on the PLA. So deep that there is a sense that the army could not survive another similar crisis. Tiananmen was the point of no return for the military. Current feuds in the army and the party, in many cases, can still be traced to that time, for the network of personal loyalties groomed by Deng in the 1980s unraveled with Tiananmen. Deng had chosen Hu Yaobang to be his successor. After Hu was forced out in 1986, Deng chose Zhao to be in charge, and anointed Hu Qili as Zhao's future successor. However, Hu Qili was also demoted for siding with

Zhao in Tiananmen. Yang Shangkun was purged in 1992 for overstepping his authority, and Jiang consolidated his position. Yet Deng apparently did not fully trust Jiang either, as, in January 1992, he relaunched the program of reforms with his famous "trip to the south" 南巡. After that, the army and the party remained deeply split, and neither Jiang nor Hu Jintao managed to bring back a strong unity.

In all of this, Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, was involved. As a former minister of defense, in May 1989, before the crackdown, he penned a letter widely circulated among the students, calling on the army to support the movement. After that letter, the son could only move up in his career by drawing a line with the father. Xi Jinping had started his career with his father's friend and political ally, Geng Biao, head of military intelligence.

Presently, Xi Jinping knows that he has to keep the army united at all costs, and facing difficult times and stark opposition at home, the way he chose was to disassemble it and reassemble it according to a new model and have all be loyal just to him and not to possibly mutinous generals.

This would also make generals more cautious. They would not know whom to trust among their troops, and the troops might go against them if the general tried to move away from Xi.

But this kind of army, with deep personal distrust, is a new thing in China. This closes old rifts between warring factions, but it opens new ones among the rank and file. Will this new army ever perform smoothly in an actual war?

Still, before trying to answer this question, there is a more important one: what is a war for the Chinese and Xi Jinping?

Strategy (2020s): U.S.-China War: A Real Possibility?

Looking at things from China, the year of the Metal Rat 2020—which started with a state of siege after the announcement of the massive disaster of the first global epidemic of the modern era—was about to end well. Beijing can look at a series of its victories and the disarray of its primary opponent and competitor, the U.S.

China managed to bring the COVID epidemic under control and restart its economy, while the rest of the world and the U.S. arguably mishandled the response, unnecessarily damaged production and their economies, and were still faltering.

Moreover, after the U.S. stepped back from free-trade agreements with Asia and Europe four years ago, which would have de facto isolated China, in the past couple of months, Beijing secured politically important trade and investment deals with Asia and Europe. These now put Washington in an awkward position. Also, in 2018, the U.S. flopped in securing a massive bilateral trade treaty with China, and Washington took almost two years to move back to the idea of a multilateral strategy.

Finally, the Year of the Rat was ending with the apparent frenzy of the U.S., facing historically unprecedented challenges – a turmoil encouraged by a president who was winding up his mandate and might have been impeached for the second time, the nation bitterly divided, and no clear path ahead.

From Beijing, the idea was: could such a clumsy country really be a challenge to China? Maybe not so much, some in Beijing were thinking. These were not superficial mistakes but stemmed from deep, unsolved contradictions and fissures dating back to the U.S. Civil War over a century and a half ago.

These fissures were now fueled by a new cultural mix in the country where the old WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) backbone was becoming a smaller share of the population, where there were too many drugs and too many guns, where there were bad public schools and inadequate universal health care, decrepit infrastructure, and no plan to recover from it all. Moreover, while China had its bold international program, the BRI (Belt and Road International Initiative), and the American idea of globalization was stumbling, the U.S. had no plan to help develop the American continent, Africa, or Eurasia.

American ideals—fair democracy, respect for others, liberty, a chance to make a fortune—looked shattered by the attack on the Capitol and its stilted response. China was thinking: What do you do if it were treachery committed by President Donald Trump and his followers? There must be consequences, but this would further split the country. If there are no consequences, what will happen? The yawning gap between the two parties wouldn't seem to improve anytime soon, and this gave China an advantage in its comprehensive competition with the U.S.

The Chinese were looking at their country and saw just the opposite: Improving schools and health care, gleaming infrastructure, far fewer guns and fewer drugs, and a more cohesive sense of national unity with a Chinese dream of a good life for every Chinese and any foreigner who wishes to share the plan. What is there to fear in Beijing? But then there was to be a different assessment of the situation around China.

Strategy (2000s): Twenty Years of Distraction

Starting at least some 20 years ago, the Chinese military has gradually encountered increasing difficulties recruiting new soldiers. Until the 1990s, the PLA, an army of volunteers with no

draft, had the opposite problem: too many requests for limited positions available. Prior to approximately the mid-1990s, when young adults had been born before the 1980 one-child policy, and before the wave of urbanization, the PLA was flooded with requests. Peasants aspired to join the military to move to the city and leave a life of poverty in the rural areas forever. For them, the PLA was a shortcut to a better life.

After that, as the impact of the one-child-per-family policy was felt, the flood of applications dwindled to a trickle, and since at least the early 2000s, it has sharply declined. The PLA has had problems finding recruits. The PLA started scraping the bottom of the barrel. The PLA could no longer pick and choose whom they wanted, and they were the best and brightest of the rural areas. But then they had to be happy with what they got and encouraged sometimes minor offenders to join the army, something previously unheard of.

Now, thanks to the success of the CPC policies, families are not starving, as was the case in ancient times. They are well off. It is among the most prosperous periods in Chinese history, and the best opportunities are found in the civilian sector, not in the armed forces. So, the PLA is now increasingly a magnet for "army brats" – sons of PLA officers and enlisted men, drawn to it by the unique options tailored for veterans' children -- or the disadvantaged, uneducated rural kids.

This new social situation is something that the CPC remained quite cavalier about for almost two decades. Some generals believed that China's theoretical might, based upon millions of soldiers and investment of many billions of dollars in fancy weaponry, would be enough to deter potential adversaries, such that the PLA would only need to plan for minor, quick conflicts, easily defeated by its modern capabilities. However, China's

military and party leaders soon grasped that potential adversaries in many cases were not awed into a submissive posture. The U.S. Japan, India, and Vietnam were all prepared to go toe to toe with Beijing in clashes involving cyber or missile scenarios. In this new environment, the PLA needed new soldiers, highly trained, professional, and ready to face death in combat. But how many such potential recruits were there in a swiftly modernizing China, newly well-to-do, with stable earnings opportunities in the civilian sector?

In 2001, at the time of the EP3 incident, when the consequences of the one-child policy had not yet fully manifested themselves, there were still many families in rural areas with "children to spare." The vast majority of the population remained in rural areas, relatively poor. Memory of the tough times before the reforms was still fresh for most. Some were incentivized to sign up for a PLA career in order to preserve the gains from reform and perform a patriotic duty. There were still enough economically challenged people who judged that they had little to lose in war, and there were still families that could spare an "extra" son for potential combat.

In the early 2000s, China might have still been prepared to send waves of soldiers to die as they did in Korea and Vietnam. In October 2000, a Chinese netizen drew attention online to the testimony of a Korean war veteran who recalled that "He was in charge of shooting volunteer soldiers and officers who deserted, and if he did not shoot deserters, he would be shot himself as a traitor. If he saw any deserters, he would sweep them with his machine gun, so the volunteers were not afraid of death, and they

swooped down on the American positions like locusts, and the bodies piled up like mountains."[78]

Conversely, in the 2020s, only children were apt to be from 0 to 41 years old; moreover, those under 50 years old did not experience and recall the extreme hardships before the reforms. Who can fight in actual combat? Of course, now wars are different, and no longer rely on waves of men ready to march on under machine-gun fire. Missiles, cyberwar, and drones need highly trained engineers, not peasants with no more than a primary school education. China appears to have assumed that cyber and missile defense, and well-paid white-collar positions, would be enough for national security. But since 2018, and especially since 2022, when the invading Russian forces in Ukraine have suffered over a million casualties, another perception of war is blooming, one where China's participation in a war might not be a relatively swift and painless affair.

Then in 2001, thousands of dead soldiers could have been almost indifferent to a society where only large cities count, and deaths would be scattered among thousands of villages, but has society changed? Moreover, sustained economic development was then just beginning, Beijing and Shanghai had no traffic, cars were an extreme luxury, most people were starting to have the economic means to afford purchasing a first home, and those homes were mostly shabby state apartments previously leased by the employer and then sold to tenants at a discount.

Losing that recently acquired increment of wealth because of the economic consequences of war would have been felt by those

[78] Source cited in the author's original manuscript as an online account posted in October 2000. The original posting has not been independently located or verified.

in power as virtually negligible. Reverting to the old lack of any means or hopes of future prosperity would have been a problem only for the thin layer of people who had already attained a degree of wealth by Chinese standards of the era.

Moreover, in 2001, the colonels, the young generals, the junior-high-educated political and military leaders, people in their 40s and 50s, were veterans of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and Tiananmen (1989). Their educational grounding was patchy. Cultural Revolution era youth were sent to the countryside, "rebelled against"—betrayed—their parents and teachers, and were, in turn, betrayed by them. That generation's youth may have handled firearms in what amounted to turf wars fought by rival gangs.

These formative experiences made them prone to reckless risk-taking, and they grew to chronological maturity impoverished in wealth and ambition, afflicted with a mentality of having nothing to lose.

But by 2021, when most urban Chinese lived in comfortable apartments worth millions of RMB, an economic contraction would have hit the new middle class with particular force. The retired PLA colonels by that year were in their 60s and 70s, while the new cohort of colonels by and large had no experience of hardship and tended to fit the stereotype of only children who behaved like little emperors. They were brought up to expect material comfort, and their psychology was one of having everything to lose if there were social disruption or war. The last thing they wanted was the kind of chaos that attended the Mao years and would unquestionably upend their dreams and their middle or upper-class status; thus, they were psychologically predisposed to be extremely leery of war and its uncertainties, including large-scale casualties.

"The air force has always upheld the credo that, first, we are not afraid of hardship, and second, we are not afraid of death," [79] a PLA air force spokesman argued in response to comments by the Biden administration's U.S. Air Force secretary Frank Kendall, who said the U.S. would continue investing in leap-ahead technologies that "will be intimidating to our future enemies." That is, the PLA leadership unfailingly affirms they are ready to die in waves like in North Korea. But one can well wonder if such is nothing more than brave rhetoric.

As an example, let's look at COVID, where officially some 8,000 died. The epidemic may in truth have resulted in as many as one million deaths in China. With a far better health care system and some forewarning and ability to take basic preventive measures, the U.S. suffered at least 360,000 fatalities. In China, the epidemic went unchecked for at least two months; health care, in general, is worse than in the U.S.; strict controls were not applied in villages where often there is no clinic to speak of; the population is four times that of America, and with more elderly, unhealthy people. So the idea of one million dead seems a reasonable assumption.

This possible massive loss of Chinese lives has been hidden and contained within the extraordinary national emergency imposed by the epidemic. Could casualties in war be hidden in the same way, and how could they be justified?

An example is the border skirmishes with India. On June 15-16, 2020, uncontrolled brawling – no gunfire, but weapons such as sticks and rocks -- on the Galway River, on the contested border,

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[79] Minnie Chan, "Chinese Military Not Afraid of Suffering or Death after U.S. Vows," *South China Morning Post*, August 8, 2021, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3147065/chinese-military-not-afraid-suffering-death-after-us-vows.

resulted in approximately 20 Indian soldiers dead and 43 Chinese casualties, according to Indian sources. Beijing explained that it did not provide a total number of Chinese casualties so as to avoid further inflaming the situation. Another reason could have been that a large number of casualties could scare soldiers and their families.

The skirmish was without any resort to gunfire. In a serious battle with India employing military weapons, how many soldiers might die? What could be said to appease the families? And most importantly, what could be said to recruit more soldiers to fight that war? The same could be said of a possible armed conflict with Vietnam and even with sparsely populated Mongolia or Kazakhstan. Naval clashes involving a portion of the thousands of armed Chinese fishing vessels plying the waters of the South China Sea would plainly result in loss of life.

In short, PLA service is not akin to white-collar jobs, playing war like a video game with a joystick and computers, trying to hack and work with missiles or drones. These jobs need to be ready at any time to fight a war and require inculcation of a true martial spirit. Or at least this was the official rhetoric in the early 2020s.

Governance (2000s): Timely Rain

The challenge for the future is how to make the Chinese bureaucracy responsible and proactive in performing its duties. One answer, of course, is motivational—through political education. However, this may not be enough because of the perennial cadre fear of making mistakes or of doing something liable to draw political criticism. There is also a lack of upside—that is, there will be few or no prizes, or prizes will be extremely rare or questionable if everything goes right. Such considerations impel

officials to be loyal but to avoid taking any initiative because they cannot be certain how the top leadership thinks or how it will judge their performance. Any "correct" judgment at the time could be deemed wrong in the future, and the idea of guessing the intentions of the top leadership could also be risky, as it could create conflict and friction with other middle-ranking officials.

This presents an array of new challenges for the current government. Experience teaches that each new policy may solve some problems, but, in the long run, will spawn new problems. Since ancient times, the Chinese political tradition has regarded politics as like timely rain. It cannot rain too much; it cannot rain too little. Sometimes it does not need to rain, and sometimes it needs to rain a lot. That is, new policies create new problems, which must be addressed in a new way, opening up new solutions and perspectives for the country.

Xi Jinping has effectively concentrated power and has made decision-making cleaner and more direct. However, in directing internal and foreign problems, which are growing more and more complex, he is facing neither wrong decisions nor corruption, but rather passivity, because it is simply tricky to act in such a substantially rigid system.

The lack of proactivity in a country could be tolerated and digested if two other elements did not pressure the country. One factor is that the domestic market economy needs proactive pushes by entrepreneurs and government officials to make decisions on the spot and take risks. But if taking risks routinely results in punishment, nobody will take risks. De facto entrepreneurship will subside, and at the same time, the market economy will become less vibrant, with a massive impact on the overall economy.

The second challenge is external; the external situation for China is highly volatile, complex, and complicated. Countries around China and Western countries are increasingly dissatisfied with China and present China with new challenges almost daily.

These issues should be handled systematically, and the nation can ill afford to wait for the top decision-maker to call the shots and move ahead. These internal and external elements were very different two or three decades ago and were extremely important for the development and growth of China's economy, society, and politics.

The vibrant internal and dynamic external markets made it possible for China to open a new road and contribute to the world with great wealth.

It means that the opening internally and externally is essential to China's welfare and well-being and has contributed to the rise and consolidation of the power of President Xi. Therefore, the future of the Party and Xi Jinping's rule is to adapt this party structure to something that can fit both the internal and external situation. If, conversely, it pulls out from the international free market and suppresses the vibrant internal market, the country and the Party will suffer greatly.

The challenges then are how to adapt fast to the internal and external pressures. This is a task that Xi already faced in 2012, coming from unprecedented decisions, and now the Party should study deeply and hard, and dare to have bold ideas and make bold decisions that can project the country into the future.

Here, there is an exciting element in Xi's reforms. He created a clear division of powers between officials and enterprises for the first time. Deng's reforms transformed all officials into entrepreneurs. In the name of "getting rich is glorious," some

officials ran their administrations, and at the same time, they ran their businesses.

They did it personally at first. When limits and rules were introduced, they did it through family, friends, and supporters, and administrative and financial chaos resulted from the system, which went on unregulated and undisciplined. There is also in other nations a continuity between business and administration, and solutions are sometimes not clear-cut and definitive. Still, long-term practices and regulations impose legal and practical limits on what can and cannot be done. In China, the situation has been far more confusing.

Xi's reforms have mandated that officials can no longer take a direct role in business, and that business enterprises may deal directly with officials only in clearly delineated situations and venues. This division of competencies is one of the hallmarks of modernity. It could be one of the essential modalities for solving the new issues emerging from completing the first part of Xi's reforms.

In the imperial past, private wealth was subject to the goodwill of the emperor, but there was a basic guarantee – imperial power never penetrated down to the county level. Therefore, if someone were only rich at a lower level, the emperor would guarantee "basic affluence." Now the party can go down to the village and, in theory, strip anybody of all his means. One can lose everything for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, even inadvertently.

Moreover, modern societies must ensure that laws and institutions secure the safety of one's property and market activities. Without these safeguards, no significant economic activity can take place. Foreign and Chinese entrepreneurs enjoy such safeguards in other countries and thus expect to be protected by them in China if they risk their capital there. Otherwise, they can

idly spend their money or invest elsewhere, where they can calculate their risks more clearly.

During past "corrupt times," the risk calculus was somewhat clear. Short of a clean and transparent investment environment with laws, institutions, and procedures, an investor had to obtain the protection of a significant power broker and know the ropes in navigating the system, complex and dangerous as a jungle. The main challenge was finding the right broker and guide in the jungle to provide timely access to necessary permits and ways forward—someone who knew who's who and how's how. It was a market for opportunities and people.

The old ways have been banned, but transparent market institutions and guarantees do not yet exist. Without them, it could take decades, if ever, to have a large number of investors eager to risk their capital again on something that could change overnight, as happened at both the onset and end of the COVID crisis.

There is a significant trust deficit between the state and entrepreneurs. The trust deficit is presently managed if businesses are already in China and unable to pull out of the country, or if people have access to the top leadership and believe they can count upon them. Such cases are relatively limited and unable to expand significantly in the foreseeable future.

Resorting to the old "corrupt ways" could not really solve the present trust deficit, plus it would lead inexorably to the old risks of state and party dissolution.

Deng realized the party's power was proportionate to the wealth it generated. He let the new system unfold openly, with the direct involvement of party officials in economic activity. This, however, created chaos that was detrimental to reliable wealth creation. Xi has sought to rectify this state of affairs, but in so doing,

he cannot put wealth creation in jeopardy. The necessity for orderly process and proactive enterprise must be somewhat reconciled.

Plus, the foreign environment has dramatically changed, also conditioning the domestic investment climate. Before, it was favorable and relatively easy; now, it has grown more complicated and hostile. For this, China can hope to invent something completely new or just adapt what is already there.

Governance (2020s): Process of Power

Deng took power, sending his enemies, the notorious Gang of Four, to a public and highly political trial. He reckoned with Mao's legacy. Xi put millions under investigation and thousands on trial. But their politics were subsumed under the broad claim of corruption.

In 2020, Xi's reputation abroad was low and appeared to be dwindling at home after COVID and the weak economic performance. In May, exports tumbled. They slumped 7.5% year-on-year, much larger than the forecast 0.4% fall and the biggest decline since January. Imports contracted 4.5%, slower than the expected 8.0% decline and April's 7.9% fall. It was attributed to weak global demand and possibly because de-risking had started biting.

The cadres, beneficiaries of decades of reforms, felt their livelihoods threatened and were against Xi. But they had no alternative plan or organization, and won't turn on him. He could not fire them all and hire new ones, but could hardly rule with restive officials who dragged their feet every step of the way.

Could the party or Xi decide to take necessary and sensitive turns?

Democracies have similar problems, but the debate is public, and one can see the movement and the hope spicing up the air. In

China, everything is underwater, and only occasional bubbles tell the people on the surface what is going on 20 feet below.

China faced existential problems, unprecedented issues of identity after an appalling period of many self-inflicted pains: the massacre of the landlord owners in the 1950s land reform, the 1957 anti-rightist campaign, the 1960–61 famine following the Great Leap Forward, the 1966–76 Great Cultural Revolution, and the post-1980 one-child policy. All these policies have torn the Chinese souls. There is hardly any comparison in the world. The collective agreement on the end of so many lives, no leader had two children when one was imposed, may have marked the Chinese deeply, and they may need to forgive themselves for all of this and thus forgive all other people.

In the West, the only other similar experience in modern times was that of the Jews.

The Jews regained their historic land after the most appalling and monstrous extermination in history. People were wiped out before, but never with such systematic, methodical precision and cruelty.

The Nazis killed Jews with the pseudoscientific, "modern" idea that it was not their culture but their blood and genes that were poisonous. The notion treated Jews like an extra-species pest, using pseudo-biology to negate the biological fact that Jews bleed and cry like anybody else.

So, what will the Chinese do? They hardly overcame the massacre of their second born and apparently have left Xi with the impossible task of reviving the child who survived the miscarriage, who is not dead, and still not quite alive.

For Christians, in this situation, as the Pope has repeated time and again, there is only one way out: Let God forgive you. It is not a very communist formula, and it is undoubtedly not political. But

perhaps there might be a source of inspiration here. The party should maybe look off the beaten track and think of different ways to escape the situation.

Strategy (2020s): China's War Labyrinth

Drums of war sound louder around China. Since 2018, Beijing's propaganda has been warning that China must prepare for war, a vague formulation in China's often macho Communist Party rhetoric.

The announcements are to be taken literally, warned a Foreign Affairs article penned some three years ago by two prominent China analysts in the U.S., journalist John Pomfret and former journalist and Trump administration official Matt Pottinger. [80] Chinese President Xi Jinping has always followed through on his public pronouncements, the writers averred. General Mark Milley, then the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, shortly thereafter called for toning down the rhetoric about war with China in favor of better preparing quietly for an upcoming conflict with the Asian giant.[81]

"I do not believe war is inevitable. I do not think it's imminent," Milley remarked. "But I do think that we need to be very, very pragmatic and cautious going forward. And we will reduce the

[80] John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war.

[81] Meghann Myers, "Milley: Lower the Rhetoric on China, Prepare for Conflict," *Defense One*, March 30, 2023, https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2023/03/lower-rhetoric-china-says-milley/384693/.

likelihood of war if we remain really, really strong, relative to China, and China knows that we have the will to use it, if necessary."

Here is a red line. If the U.S. becomes weaker relative to China, the U.S. will also become more nervous. But will China accept remaining much weaker vis-à-vis the U.S.? Evidence points to the contrary. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) budget is increasing, and its equipment is improving in quality and quantity, as Beijing fears a dominant America's military might will constrain China's ambitions. From this, we can see a dangerous, vicious circle emerging very quickly.

If the vicious circle is not checked and stopped, although war is not inevitable or imminent, it is more likely and looming in the not-too-distant future. The Russian invasion of Ukraine arguably set an ominous precedent. Prior to February 2022, most observers thought Russian President Vladimir Putin sought to pressure Kyiv but would not issue the order to invade. Yet he did it. Now, nobody is willing to bet that U.S.-China friction will not devolve into a full-fledged war, especially since there are so many flash points around China: Taiwan, the South China Sea, North Korea, the Senkaku Islands, and the Indian border.

Here, America is in a good position. If China hits the brakes before it's too late, Washington can claim it has blocked China's threat. If China moves forward, a conflict around China might help the U.S. crack its domestic divisions and partially address its enormous debt and the vast trade deficit with Beijing. This doesn't mean that a war with China wouldn't be devastating for America even if it were to win easily. Moreover, it's difficult to imagine a full-scale war with China when the U.S. avoided one with the USSR and when America depends on China for many capital and consumer goods.

Before World War II, America was bitterly split. It had a Nazi party led by a national hero, aviator Charles Lindbergh, and it was mired in debt caused by the 1929 financial crisis. The war ended in a few years.

Could a war with China play a similar role? Things are very different now; international dynamics and power balances are changing. The Russian attack on Ukraine and Iran's support for the Hamas attack on Israel have rapidly created unprecedented experiences that make it unlikely to absolutely rule out the possibility of a full-fledged war around China. It doesn't mean that America wants a war. A veteran of many wars, America knows that conflicts are hard to predict. One knows how and when they start. It is much harder to see when and how they'll end. But a limited war with China might not be a total disaster for the U.S.

For China, it would be very different. Tensions are already taking a toll on the national economy. A war could have unfathomable consequences. In the best-case scenario, Beijing could follow Pyongyang's fate and become a vast hermit country. At worst, it could burst into civil war. These are extreme scenarios, but they might be useful to see what is the spectrum of possibilities for Beijing. Xi, naturally, would want to avoid this vice and forge ahead.

Is China considering all the risks and weighing all possibilities attentively? Is it then choosing consciously what way to go, or is it just stumbling along like a blind man in a cluttered room?

Leaders of the past went to war, taking conscious gambles, knowing the risks ahead. Is China fully aware of its future path?

Governance (2020s): Blindman or Warmonger?

In the past 20-plus years, China progressively strayed because of long-term neglect (believing the U.S. was declining) and short-term mistakes (ideologizing COVID policies and trusting Russia to win in

Ukraine).[82] The errors were possible due to general long-term neglect.

Every country makes mistakes and blunders, yet each does so in its own unique way.

Things went so far that people forgot how it started, and for almost two decades, voices of American decline were so solid and unfettered that they muted every other sound, and China was living in an echo chamber.

China's one-party rule certainly did not help foster different opinions and critical ideas about developments. Still, maybe something deeper was also playing a role, which should be addressed.

Western thinkers came from a priestly tradition; they dealt with gods. Chinese thinkers were trained as bureaucrats, managing up (higher officials or the emperor) and down (lower officials or ordinary people).

The Greek basic tenet was the search for truth, which is absolute and independent of any other condition. China's basic tenet was the Tao/Way, which meant finding a way to solve issues, mostly of human nature, between rulers, nature, and people.

When the Way was not followed, and conflicts erupted between rulers and people, the Way had to be recovered. The official or intellectual tried to do so by mediating or, when mediation was impossible, by siding with the people or the ruler. Tao, being relational, needs to be grounded here or there, ideally in both.

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[82] Francesco Sisci, "Chinese Balloons and U.S. Alchemic Leadership," *Asia Times*, February 2023, https://asiatimes.com/2023/02/chinese-balloons-and-us-alchemic-leadership/; and Francesco Sisci, "How to Plug the Chinese Trust Drain?," *Asia Times*, January 2023, https://asiatimes.com/2023/01/how-to-plug-the-chinese-trust-drain/.

Conflicts are rare and dramatic when they burst forth, leading to the elimination of the opponent guilty of a capital crime: breaking the Way. It leads to the extermination of the loser. In Chinese history, past dynasties were wiped out.

Conflicts about truth are constant and not necessarily too dramatic, especially in modern times. The aristocrats of past kingdoms survived. When clashes erupt, they are about principles that in modern times can be solved by leaving principles on the side and carrying on with normal life. In modern times, they have often been about wealth distribution or wealth acquisition, and trying to balance it out because the system doesn't work otherwise.

Without enough distribution, there is disruptive social conflict and no consumption, and then the economy dies; without enough reward for the rich, there is no investment and thus no innovation, and everything fails.

Being constant, conflicts do not necessarily imply the total elimination of the enemy.

The Way of modern China has been about maintaining the power of the present dynasty and the well-being of the people. Is it being broken? It is open to dispute.

However, the central point is that truth is not relational; it can go against both the king and the people, and open a totally new world. It is independent of them.

It led to a centuries-old debate about how to verify and prove the truth. It has now found a consensus on a complex search for empirical elements, cutting ties with religious truths based on sacred books. These empirical elements can prove and refute the scientific truth, which is temporary, although the method is believed to be transcendent and permanent. Thus, in a time of empirical truths, you want the survival of different truths to challenge your present position and be alert to possible changes.

The leap of faith out of religion into the territory of modern science took place when Europe was "invaded" by Chinese concepts brought in by Jesuit missionaries.[83] The Catholic Church helped bring about modernity, and so did China. It doesn't mean that China or the Church are all "included" in modernity, but they are no strangers to that.

It leads to touchy points. As Chinese intellectuals and officials deal with the relational Way, they tend first to consider how their superiors will take the report they deliver, even without considering the constraints of the one-party rule. In fact, within the party, officials in theory can voice any opinion, but they are rewarded if their leader likes what they hear. Then the whole effort is not about telling "the truth," what one really thinks, but about pleasing by second-guessing its leader.

Strategy/Worldview (2020s): Politics and Culture

Furthermore, the Way tradition and its alignment open further questions. What is China's Way of aligning itself with the world? And what does China consider the world to be? The 5.5 billion of the global south, or the 1 billion of the global north (the G7, expanded)? The buyers of China's surplus—those that provide the resources to buy energy and food—are all in the global north.

The sellers of food and energy cannot be left behind, but the buyers are the main clients. Then to wage war against one's primary source of income seems absurd, especially in China, where kids are

[83] Francesco Sisci, "China Vision of the U.S. Crisis," SettimanaNews, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/china-vision-of-the-us-crisis/.

taught to call the one who gives them milk “mom” (有奶就叫娘). The world has no perfect shape.

The path to war for China then seems a monumental screw-up coming from a short circuit of a system plus a tradition, not a calculated gamble. But then the problem is how to step back because it is not the simple decision of a man but a deep historical and political drift that was neglected for decades. Many things have been piling up on each other, which are difficult to unravel.

Politics and culture are a problem here. In the 1987 party congress, less than a decade after the crackdown on the Democracy Wall protests in Xidan, Beijing, the party decided to move to divide politics and enterprise. It was meant to be the first step of political reforms. In 1989, after the June 4 crackdown on the students' movement, party honcho and security czar Qiao Shi was rumored to have campaigned to push forward political and economic reforms.

Putting down the protests was supposed to be instrumental in implementing reforms (economic and political) at the party's tempo, not under students' pressure, and not forgetting about political reforms. Qiao pushed for greater powers in the National People's Congress until he stepped down at the 1997 party congress.

Still, 25 years later, brushing up on political reforms is not easy. Many international issues compound the party's domestic problems, and a way out of the maze seems more difficult.

Strategy (2010s): Xi’s Military Reforms

It was clear right from the beginning that Xi faced many enemies, and he did not wait for them to try to get him. He launched one of the most extensive anti-corruption campaigns in the history of the

CPC and, in the process, got rid of the senior party officials who were against him.

The first to fall was security Czar Zhou Yongkang, who had plotted with Bo against him. He was arrested and put under investigation in 2013. He was the first Politburo Standing Committee member arrested since the Cultural Revolution. In 2014 and 2015, Xi had the two vice chairmen of the military commission arrested—Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong.

The arrest of the two generals was Xi's answer to the saber-rattling of those years. Some military officials were threatening to topple Xi if he continued pushing with his anti-corruption. As of 2017, in the past five years, 35 members (full and alternate) of the Chinese Communist Party's powerful Central Committee have been disciplined. That is as many as in all the years between 1949 and 2012 (excluding the disruptive Cultural Revolution). Over one million officials had been investigated. Papers published leaked stories—of uncertain authority—that Xi and his right-hand man, Wang Qishan, chief of the disciplinary commission, had escaped over twenty attempts on their lives.

The goal of the campaign was more than getting rid of Xi's enemies. It was to build a different society. This was especially true for the PLA because if China was corrupt, the PLA was among the most corrupt bodies of China. Xi needed a whole new pattern of government to gain control of the army. For the first time in the history of the PLA, his reform did not promise soldiers new perks, power, or money. It promised only glory and nationalism. Thus, there should be a lot of it to work, and it should be for real.

As we saw in the past 40 years, the PLA was brought onboard by a political pact that took something from it (the power of the Cultural Revolution; the businesses started in the 1980s and 1990s) and gave it something else (the permission to go into business; the

chance to make money off weapons acquisitions). Even during the Cultural Revolution, the PLA backed Mao based on the idea that the great helmsman would keep the PLA primarily out of the mayhem and purges of the rest of society.

Starting in 2014, Xi held the "New Gutian Conference 古田会议" with all top military officers and emphasized the principle of "the party has absolute control over the army," first established by Mao at the 1929 Gutian Conference. It was not that the CPC was on top and the PLA below, as the two were and are entangled in one. The principle was the same in the two conferences, in 1929 and 2014: the top leader, Mao or Xi, had to have absolute power over the military.

Xi announced a reduction of 300,000 troops in 2015, bringing its size to two million soldiers. In 2016, he reduced the number of regional theater commands from seven to five. He has also abolished the four general departments of the PLA, replacing them with 15 agencies directly reporting to the Central Military Commission.

For internal reasons, the redefinition of the regional commands was fundamental. For decades, the commands were not simply a mechanism for external defense but an organization to keep in check the civilian administration of the 31 provinces and autonomous regions. The reduction and redefinition of their borders meant that Xi did not trust the existing military structure and wanted to redesign it.

It did not stop there; Xi laid off some 500,000 troops and hired 200,000 new ones, thus loyal to the new course he had set. Most of the people laid off were officers, even people quite senior. Besides, for the first time in the history of the PLA, he disassembled and reassembled corps down to the company level, breaking traditions of allegiance that went back many decades. He broke

the old brotherhood system within the army and introduced principles of discipline and obedience that would respond to Xi. Previously, there was a strong bond between members of one military unit.

In an old company, where people had been together for many years, and the officers knew each other, with relationships even spanning generations, people knew who to trust implicitly, so plotting was relatively easy. With a new company, nobody knows anybody, nobody can trust anybody, plus there are all new forms of technological control. That all makes plots and conspiracies against Xi largely unlikely. The Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Zhang Youxia, who plotted against Xi, was found out and stopped.

Xi had then basically ruled out the possibility of military coups challenging, even theoretically, his rule. This made it possible for him to announce in February 2018 the end of age limits to leadership, the one that in 1997, 20 years earlier, had forced Qiao Shi into retirement and paved the way for Jiang Zemin's full consolidation of power.

But as soldiers were estranged from one another, they could hold together only thanks to lofty nationalistic ideals that had to be continuously fed. Nationalism served the purpose, and the rhetoric of Chinese greatness was served regularly to the general population, but even more to soldiers.

This nationalism was also used to groom a new, stricter discipline in the army, one recalling the 3rd-century B.C. philosopher Han Fei Zi. In a nutshell, one story illustrates Han Fei Zi's ideas: The king falls asleep, the "keeper of the robe" fails to cover him with the robe, and the "keeper of the hat" does it in his stead. When the king wakes up, he asks about what happened, and when he learns about it, he puts both to death, the "keeper of the

hat" for overstepping his office, and the "keeper of the robe" for failing to do his duty.[84]

Nationalism was rekindled because a blend of nationalism and idealism could move soldiers away from the lures of corruption. It was a change from a system of personal loyalty to a method of obedience to the "law," the one set up and interpreted ultimately by the top leader.

This is the sense also of the present call to the PLA to follow the law. Xi had a law passed on June 10, 2021, the law to safeguard the position and rights of the national army of the PRC. It aimed to make the PLA a "first-class army," i.e., able to compete with the U.S. defense forces.[85]

The official publication China Daily explained the new law in a lengthy commentary,[86] "Further guid[ing] the whole society (italics mine) to actively participate in supporting the national defense and military construction, gathering up the majestic force to strengthen the military."

And it focuses on three points:

(1) "The first is to fully implement the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important instructions on the status of the military and the protection of rights and interests, the depth

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[84] *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, chap. 2, "Er Bing" 二柄, trans. Burton Watson, in *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

[85] "China Passes Law to Protect Status and Rights of Military Personnel," *China Daily*, August 2, 2021, https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202108/02/WS6107d9b1a3101e7ce975cc7d.html.

[86] "Further Guiding the Whole Society to Support National Defense and Military Construction," *China Daily*, August 2, 2021, https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202108/02/WS6107d9b1a3101e7ce975cc7d.html.

throughout the legislative concept, legislative purposes, guidelines and principles, institutional design and other aspects, firmly grasp the correct direction of legislation; the whole alignment with the military policy system reform deployment, so that the legal norms fully cover the major reform initiatives, to ensure that the will of the party is reflected in the will of the state, to achieve the goals of reform."

(2) The second is to adhere to the only fundamental standard of combat power *zhandouli* 戰鬥力, (italics mine), both based on peacetime and wartime, the further liberation and development of combat power as the starting and ending point of the legislation, the design and measurement of the gold content of the system with the standard of combat power, the more significant the contribution to combat power, the better the treatment and protection of the distinctive guidance, to ensure that the law has a warm temperature, but also a strong war flavor.

(3) The third is to systematically summarize and solidify the good traditions and practical experience, focusing on innovative initiatives to solve the real contradictions, relying on social resources to optimize the security mechanism, drawing on the beneficial practices of the world's military powers, the scope of security, security content, security methods, security level to make reasonable norms to enhance the scientific and contemporary institutional arrangements."

The points may be summarized. The PLA has to obey Xi; it must take action when ordered to do so, and it must further modernize technologically. Xi goes to the root of the PLA. The PLA was a highly politicized structure, the backbone of the party. Soldiers

were expected to fight for an ideal, not for money and power. Therefore, Xi reforms the essence of those political bones. He wants to re-politicize the army, inject new ideological fuels in the soldiers' veins.

In reading the Chinese from a different angle, the report may reveal that there is still work to do on these three points.

But the law is also not sufficient by itself. Why should people obey the law? Because they believe in something that the law codifies. Then why should soldiers fight?

In America, they fight for their country and in the name of the universal value of liberty. In Nazi Germany, soldiers fought for their country and their conviction that they represented a superior race, imposing a new order on the globe. In the USSR, they fought for their country and the global dream of international solidarity and egalitarianism.

In China, they are supposed to fight for their country and the Chinese dream. The precise definition of the Chinese dream is flexible. There is the ideal of having the same living standards as the developed Western countries and the sense of revenge and renaissance after two centuries of humiliation by "the West." The two can live hand in hand as long as there is no real military confrontation testing this reality. If there is a real possibility of a military conflict, what will be sacrificed? And what will be the consequences of the sacrifice? If the government prefers economic returns, then the "centuries of humiliation" rhetoric has to disappear. Conversely, if revenge is desired, then economic well-being will have to be sacrificed.

Every country faces stark choices in articulating the paramount ideals for its soldiers. Still, in China, two contradictory elements are particularly at odds, making options tricky. For soldiers, in particular, the push is certainly for recovering from 200 years of

humiliation. This can easily spill into "I try to humiliate you as you humiliated me" and into sacrificing social and economic benefits for the rest of the people. After all, if soldiers are called to be idealistic and risk their lives for the country's good without the economic benefits of the 1980s and 2000s PLA reforms, ordinary people should also be ready to be idealistic and give up their well-being.

However, this well-being is tangible evidence that China is recovering after the humiliation. Without wealth, there is no recovery; there is again humiliation. If the army then doesn't look after the people, what is the people's army?

Xi's Military Reforms

A MORE MODERN, DISCIPLINED, AND COMBAT-READY PLA

	BEFORE (Pre-2012) Larger, More Rigid, and Divided	AFTER (Post-2012) Smaller, Leaner, and More Capable
Size	Large force (about 2.3 million personnel)	Cut by 300,000 to about 2 million
Command Structure	Seven military regions and four general departments	Five theater commands and 15 CMC agencies
Focus	Political reliability more than combat power	Combat power, readiness, and modernization
Organization	Older headquarters, structure and entrenched power centers	Restructured system designed to break old power centers
Networks	Old brotherhood and allegiance networks	Old networks weakened through restructuring
Discipline	Corruption and weaker discipline	Stricter discipline, obedience, and Party control
Strategic Aim	A force not yet reshaped for Xi's agenda	Obey Xi, act when ordered, and modernize technologically



A TRANSFORMED PLA

Xi's reforms reshaped the PLA through troop cuts, command restructuring, stronger discipline, tighter Party control, and technological modernization.

HISTORY
PEOPLE
POWER
A MORE DANGEROUS CHINA?

UNDERSTANDING
CHINA
FOR A MORE STABLE
TOMORROW

Strategy (2010s): The Army and the People

As an article in the People's Daily suggests, the PLA is not just about the army; it is also very much the people, the society that has to support the military and possibly join its efforts if needed.[87] Here, the army is no trifle. As we saw in the previous pages, there has been a continuous decline in the eagerness to join the military, and in the earlier decades of reforms, the social prestige of the PLA was waning.

With Xi's military reforms also came an effort to relaunch the image of the PLA based no longer on the old anti-Japanese mystique, the bread and butter of Mao's propaganda movies, but on a newly assertive China abroad. The champion of this was the movie Wolf Warrior, released in 2015, and its sequel in 2017.[88] The American series on Rambo inspires them. They show a Chinese soldier championing the cause of poor, oppressed Africans against evil, cruel Westerners intent on looting and pillaging the continent. The idea conveyed is that the PLA needs to fight Westerners who would treat China just like Africa if they could.

The movies have been a big popular success and fed not only on the nationalistic trend but also on the new idea of building a wider positive and active sentiment for the army. The feeling for the military could help support the party and the government.

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[87] "维护军人尊崇地位 保障军人合法权益" [Uphold the Honored Status of Military Personnel and Protect Their Lawful Rights and Interests], *People's Daily*, June 15, 2021, 1.

[88] Nicole Talmacs, "Africa and Africans in *Wolf Warrior 2*: Narratives of Trust, Patriotism and Rationalized Racism among Chinese University Students," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 8 (2020): 1230–45.

This impression was reinforced in Beijing by the first mass demonstrations that occurred in Hong Kong in 2014. They convinced Beijing it needed to indoctrinate university youngsters politically via military training. Some university students could even be enrolled directly in the PLA. In 2017, for instance, the People's Daily so described the effort:

> "To improve young people's health and build up their character and team spirit, many schools in China organize military training for students during the summer vacation. In the past, the training has focused on adjusting students' standing and walking postures. Some special programs have emerged in recent years, creating remarkable memories for students who participate in them. For example, students in Hangzhou, a city in eastern China, were asked to carry wood logs, cross through water guns, and move tires, just like soldiers in the popular Wolf Warriors movie do. In Wuhan, the capital city of China's central Hubei province, students were trained to respond to the needs of "the wounded" on an arranged "battlefield." In Dalian, a. major coastal city in northeastern China's Liaoning province, students took their training on real warships and submarines and carried out duties with their teammates on deck. Military exercises of this sort can shape students' personalities.
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> Nowadays, many children are raised in 'honey jars.' They rarely have the chance to face and solve life's inevitable difficulties on their own. It's the age of the internet; the kids also have less experience communicating face-to-face with each other. Therefore, it is essential to sharpen their characters through obstacles and teamwork. Youngsters will grow stronger

and be more responsible and fearless when they conquer more difficulties along their road to the future."[89]

This is all for internal consumption. Some military training is conceived as political training, as intense teaching of party tenets. The same happened with the newborn PLA from the 1920s to the 1940s. Soldiers were taught to read and write, and, in the process, they received their political instruction.

This is part of "combat power," but it is not all about it. All of this training and restructuring and foreign posturing until 2018 seemed to be pretty much set to secure Xi's position against internal coups, and solidify internal consensus and prevent "contaminations" of subversive ideas coming from abroad, particularly from Hong Kong. But until 2018 (and especially after 2022, with the Ukrainian war) the dominant perception was that the Chinese felt there would be war games, yelling and threatening, but in the end, the U.S. could be bought off with a few more contracts. The PLA would not be used; the aircraft carriers were to go on tour as a show of power and maybe intervene in minor incidents where the Chinese industry would far overpower the local primitive army.

Even the arguments with President Trump were dismissed. Beijing believed it was just some haggling about the price to pay, and as good merchants, the Chinese were also haggling. Beijing thought it could resist American pressures to open up its market and economy with some minor concessions.

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[89] People's Daily Online, "Here's Why Young Chinese Students Go through Military Training," August 22, 2017, https://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0822/c90782-9258435.html, accessed February 1, 2026.

The perception changed suddenly in June 2018, when Vice-Prime Minister Liu He came back from Washington and told Xi that the U.S. was for real; they wanted to have a wide-open market in China. The Chinese were baffled, scared, and hurried a plan for actual market opening and full convertibility of the RMB. However, after some exhaustive preparation, the project was scuttled in March–April 2019. Beijing realized that whole-market opening and RMB convertibility also required an open political system. Currency full convertibility means that money will flow in but also flow out. When it goes away, it can be sudden and create social and political disruption. If there is a democratic system, the premier and the parliament will step down, and there will be new elections. If there is an authoritarian system, it will buckle under the pressure and start a political change. This happened with the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, which brought down dictatorships in Indonesia and the Philippines. The same could occur in China.

So, Beijing turned it down and eventually realized that the clash with the U.S. was more substantive and serious than it wished and that military preparations had to be equally intense. The PLA was not simply used for internal goals, but it could also be called for external duties. But this creates a new set of issues.

Worldview (2010s): The Brutal Tiger of Nationalism

Nationalism, used for only domestic purposes, has been a largely effective tool of internal consensus in the past two decades. This happened because Chinese nationalism was never put to a real test. The usual pattern was: You shout slogans, put on an angry face, and the foreign "aggressor" will step back. But what if the foreigner doesn't step back but rather steps forward?

Different from the past two decades, historically, nationalism has often played poorly in Chinese politics. Chinese people started blaming the foreigners for whatever slur they suffered. But then, when things did not turn out the way they wanted, they blamed their Chinese authorities for putting China in this challenging position, or for being insulted without a proper response, or for being defeated by the foreigners. In practice, only victory against the foreign enemy unites the country; defeat divides it and turns the anti-foreign sentiment into anti-government. This makes it impossible to step down from the tiger of nationalism once the government starts riding it; and, as the Chinese saying goes, if you try to dismount the tiger, she will eat you.

Then it becomes fundamental to win quickly against real or perceived foreign aggression. This was especially true for protests in Hong Kong in 2019, which some Westerners thought could ignite the fire of revolution in China. Those demonstrations were perceived in Beijing as a foreign attempt to turn the territory into a springboard for havoc in China. Beijing managed the challenge by suppressing the protests without much bloodshed, like in Tiananmen in 1989. But most importantly, its communication and propaganda apparatus prevented the actual spread of protests on the mainland.

Even cities next to Hong Kong, like Shenzhen or Zhuhai, receiving unfiltered access to news from the territory, did not show any sympathy for the plight of Hong Kong; quite the opposite. Mainlanders saw the protests of Hong Kong people as gripes against the mainland that, for decades, had sent trillions to the territory to boost its economy. Hong Kongers were portrayed and considered ungrateful, despite the fact that mainlanders had agreed to remain relatively poorer to make Hong Kong people richer.

Chinese media stressed that Hong Kong police were less violent against protesters than police in America or in France during the Yellow Vests demonstrations. Sure enough, Beijing undermined Hong Kong's status as an international financial hub, thereby weakening China's global financial reach and position, but that was a necessary price to put a lid on things.

A similar pattern was followed with COVID. The foreign press wrote cursorily that it would be China's Chernobyl moment, the one that tipped the balance for the declining USSR in 1984 and exposed to Russians and the world the failings of the system. Actually, in a few months, the table was turned around. China managed to bring the situation under control and restart production while Western countries were bogged down with a disease that had brought their economies to a halt.

Meanwhile, the U.S. also fanned the controversy on the Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang, and by suggesting that China should pay for the enormous global damages resulting from its negligent start of the COVID pandemic. It multiplied patrols in the South China Sea, supported QUAD and Japanese or Indian qualms about China. All that was for real, and there was no end in sight.

It was no longer a shouting game that would end with the foreign power backing down for the Chinese eyes. The possibility of actual war was real, and this changed all. Until June 2018, Beijing thought its population, its mass, its technology, its wealth, and its minimal but effective nuclear, missile, and cyber technology would be enough to scare people away. This would suffice to prevent any country from actually getting into a sizable war with it.

Before that, it thought inflated rhetoric would actually serve two ends – muster support at home and scare potential adversaries abroad. Before then, it would be just about a show of force, a game of chicken. After that, Beijing realized that it could come to a

moment when force might have to be used, and the death toll could not be minimized.

Sure enough, the PLA is an army of volunteers, so whoever joins knows what they are in for. But until recently, that was only theoretical. After 40 years of peace, with no fighting experience and with soldiers often being pampered by their families, the PLA was a fast track to a career. Could these people fight? Would they actually do it?

China was caught in a bind arising from its own rhetoric. It couldn't rush forward because it would trigger war. It couldn't go back because it would lose power domestically. This perception was further reinforced in the 2020 border clash with India. The Indians would not step back, nor would the Chinese.

When it was clear the U.S. would not yield in the face of Chinese bombast but would rather step up to the challenge, Beijing was uncertain about what to do next. One thing, though: China wasn't ready, and in a country good at planning, where planning and organization are the principal elements of the rule, it had to make up for it.

At the time of the EP-3 incident in 2001, 25 years ago, the PLA daily carried no discussion of zhandouli "capability/readiness to fight." This is a standard term used to evaluate troops, but also people who, first and foremost, have to have zhandouli. Now the term is used often. The real question is why it is used now and was not used 25 years ago. In fact, before the 9/11 attack, many senior officials in the Bush administration aimed to take on China, which it considered then its most important strategic rival. The Chinese were well aware of this sentiment and were very concerned, but of course were not ready to surrender. Yet, Chinese papers then did not urge improving soldiers' "capability/readiness to fight."

There was also nationalism at stake then, and the memory of the controversial bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was still fresh – and heated. Indeed, it was because there was a different disposition on dealing with the "American threat," But in the black-and-white of Chinese propaganda, the use of these martial terms reveals something else. In 2021, the PLA appeared to have little or no zhandouli, or at least the leaders seemed to fear that contemporary soldiers may be deficient in it.

Moreover, the Chinese know miracles do not happen all the time. Twenty-five years ago, 9/11 instantly reoriented the U.S. strategic calculus, and Washington shifted policy gears accordingly. Beijing was quick to perceive this and seize the opportunity to offer its assurances of support and goodwill to the Bush administration.

Such circumstances were unique and unlikely to be replicated in any form. In 2001, Beijing had a fresh memory of the massive American military power brought to bear against Iraq in 1991 and Serbia in 1999. U.S. military might pulverized Serbia and forced the ouster of Milosevic. Meanwhile, the U.S. and its Western European partners expanded NATO's membership to include nations that had once been part of the Warsaw Pact and even the Soviet Union itself. Seen from Beijing, the U.S. financial might, the flow of the international markets centered around Wall Street, had brought Asia to its knees with the Asian financial crisis. China was in awe of America.

That awe in 2021 is no longer there. The U.S. withdrew from its decades-long involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, leaving its goals unattained and rubble in its wake. Certainly, Afghanistan and Iraq were never reconstructed – if that was the purported vision of some – as Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, and Taiwan had been after the Second World War and the Korean War. The

withdrawal from Afghanistan showed images of poor and chaotic planning, leaving Americans aghast, and the Chinese confirmed in their own judgment that the U.S. was in decline. Neither were the so-called color revolutions very successful despite a presumption in places like Moscow and Beijing that the U.S. had somehow inspired and backed them. Effectively governed states failed to emerge in Tunisia and Egypt, and both soon reverted to traditional "strongman rule" in the name of battling radical Islam. The profound shock of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, with its roots in Wall Street behavior and poor oversight and supervision by federal regulatory authorities, left the Chinese disillusioned about American financial competence and thus inspired them to distance the nation from the U.S.-dominated world financial institutions and arrangements.

In China, there soon began to take shape a new idea of its role in the world and its national ambitions. The idea took the name of 大国外交, the diplomacy of great states. It was specifically conceived to be the framework of a mega international agreement between China and the U.S. This would have the advantage from Beijing's point of view of disentangling China from the meticulous and challenging management of ties with "small countries" where Beijing had always had problems coping with their problems. It tacitly proposed a new division of the world reflective of China's rise and America's perceived decline. In this concept, China would implement a kind of Asian "Monroe doctrine" to assume hegemony or at least predominant influence over all of Asia up to Iran, including Japan and India, while the U.S. could exercise predominant influence over the rest of the world. The Chinese sphere would encompass some 60% of the world's population and about the same percentage of economic growth. This, in 10-20

years, was expected to give China the objective power base to dominate the world.

The U.S. rejected this type of vision, making clear that it is a "resident Asian power"; that it had no intention of distancing itself from its old Asian friends and allies; and that without the stabilizing presence of the U.S., Asian countries would face greater friction, not reduced potential for conflict, with China.

Beijing saw the situation differently. From the experience of its millennia of imperial reach, it believed that even Japan and India would succumb to Chinese power and incentives without American backing. Therefore, the U.S. was the only real obstacle to fulfilling its legitimate dream of recovering its own imperial position and prestige.

That gives new flesh and bones to Chinese nationalism; China is rising, is the message in Beijing, a very different frame of mind from that of a quarter century earlier.

Now, the Chinese look at America and see a decaying infrastructure far worse than theirs; a stagnant standard of living; and deepening divisions centered on politics, wealth, and race.

Before COVID, many Chinese felt happy about themselves; those who traveled came back with memories and told stories. Russians traveling to the West were a massive propaganda boost for the West in the USSR during the Cold War. Traveling to the West is a gigantic propaganda boost for China presently. It shows that China was doing much better, and it should look down on those pretentious foreigners.

Twenty years ago, nationalism was made of hot air; now, in 2026, it has a lot of substance. It feeds on two elements that were not there 25 years ago: strong perceptions of racism and envy from America and other Western countries. Here, there is a mix of propaganda, lies, and truth, but it is the end result that matters.

Chinese people sense that Western people are racist toward the Chinese, and that they are envious because the Chinese are beating the West at its own game of "getting rich."

They minimize the cases of Chinese businesses cutting corners, stealing IPR, exploiting workers, et cetera, arguing that all economic development globally has manifested similar phenomena through the ages. They tend to argue that if it was legitimate for America or Germany to spur domestic economic progress by such methods in the 19th and early 20th centuries, why should China now refrain from similar methods? Many conclude in an angry nationalistic judgment: It's envy; it's a malevolent intention of keeping China down. This sentiment is spreading very fast, also because, as a cacophony of voices is coming from "the west," racist voices are present. Then it's easy to pick and choose the most fitting, not simply the propaganda goals, but also the hidden fears of many ordinary Chinese.

A quarter century ago, America was still seen in China as the model, the paragon of development. People protested against the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, but the same people would have lined up in great numbers if the U.S. embassy had announced a plan to issue free visas to all. Most importantly, they do feel the U.S. is declining, is losing out in the world where China is expanding, and it is just a matter of time before it wanes and implodes, as the UK did before it.

This wave is building up with unfathomable consequences.

Thus, at a given time, soldiers might be ready to fight and die. Now, because people live such a good life, why should they die? If the political leaders force them to go out and fight, aren't they also taking away their good life? Yes, foreigners can be arrogant and mean, but Chinese leaders should preserve Chinese well-being.

Still, the management of the COVID-19 epidemic gave a colossal boost of trust to the government. It forced draconian measures on the population; they grudgingly followed, at first, then, seeing the results at home, and the reporting of the situation abroad, came fully on board. This could also happen in the case of a war.

Still, it is not clear how far Xi can push his people, his soldiers, in this situation. The constant mentioning of zhandouli seems to indicate he is not sure about it.

Strategy (2020s): Combat Readiness

In 2020 and 2021, Xi Jinping called many times for "combat readiness", literally "be ready any time to fight a war," and even more often for "martial spirit". He is the paramount leader, chairman of the Military Commission of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as well as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In the usual prima facie "black into white" "political translation" of CPC propaganda, one can see that by calling for war readiness, Xi believes that the PLA is not ready for war and needs to be alerted to it because the possibility of war is becoming more present. He may also feel the PLA soldiers have little or no willingness to fight. They are disengaged, leaving off the army perks. In other words, Xi believes China must be ready to go to war but feels its soldiers must be prepared to go for it.

But is this all because of an imperial dream to have an efficient army to take on the world? Namely, would it be to take on the U.S., the thinly veiled enemy at the gate? Or is it just an admission of weakness – the PLA is ineffective and could be defeated in a clash with some of its neighbors or the U.S.?

Perhaps there is some of both and more because there is more than meets the eye behind these statements. And for this, we have to take a little journey through the systemic challenges facing China and its Army now.

Strategy (2020s): Competitive Peace or Kissingerian War?

China is at a perilous crossroads between war and peace in a world led by the U.S. But perhaps there are still elements the two countries could look at to try to defuse the situation. One is a crucial understanding of competition and war.

There are tensions around China. As Henry Kissinger commented in an interview, China is not set on Hitlerian world domination.[90] It is not revamping old European colonialism in Africa. But something is happening there; it is not insignificant. As Kissinger remarked, one should look at it and clarify it pitilessly to address and possibly solve the issue.

From an American point of view, China's "hegemony" is to put China at the center of the world; the rest of the world will be at China's service in hierarchical positioning, where China is at the top, America and Europe are notionally on a second rung, and then there is everybody else.

This perception is reinforced by China's mercantilist policies, which want open markets abroad while keeping a closed domestic market. Then who wants to be in this pyramid of power where your needs come second to the needs of the top? Some may. The wobbly elites of "lesser states" were lured in by promises of money

[90] Henry Kissinger, "A Conversation with Henry Kissinger," *The Economist*, accessed February 1, 2026, https://www.economist.com/kissinger-transcript.

and stabilization coming from the aspirational top of the pyramid. But most countries and people would rather have a different order.

From China's point of view, its position is similar to the U.S. "hegemony." The world is at America's service, only less transparently. However, even if one admits this American position, the U.S. doesn't have an openly hierarchical system and mercantilist trade approach. The U.S. may tilt the playing field in its favor, but it has traditionally employed the rhetoric of equal positive competition. Moreover, the American system is in place; therefore, replacing it won't be simple because everybody is used to it.

There are problems with the present U.S. "hegemony." There is mistrust among the allies about the U.S.'s long-term intentions and lack of long-term global architecture. The attempt to reestablish a world order around the World Trade Organization (WTO) failed; the U.S. scuttled a free trade agreement with Asia; it is unclear what "decoupling" will mean for countries heavily invested in China; and there is always the hazard of sudden changes in U.S. policies dominated by domestic concerns.

Conversely, like it or not, China has an architecture, a plan, and a tradition of keeping its long-term commitments. There are more disconcerting elements in the U.S. America views some of its problems in terms of race or gender. But you cannot change race, and gender issues decouple sex from reproduction and the actual body from intentions. Until a few years ago, there was only one way to have children, copulation. One could love people of the same sex but could not change one's body. Now it is possible.

Actually, in America, the divide is about class, i.e., income and opportunities. It should be addressed by admitting the elephant in the room: poor people (whatever their skin color) in America need options, and the first opportunity is access to better education;

people need to read and write well, have sound mathematics, and ideally even speak a second language.

Seen from a Chinese perspective, quotas for races are upending competition and performance. Improving opportunities for people with poorer incomes enhances everything.

This new cultural sentiment is coupled with a different sense of international order. The West proposes one of constant competition, where each side may have a niche, and the provisional winner can bend the existing rules in its favor a little, but even it cannot totally subvert them. Competition, if not well channeled and controlled, can turn into war, almost a continuation of competition.

Strategy (2020s): Is Competition Good or Bad?

The differences between China and the rest of the Westernized world that convened in Hiroshima in mid-May 2023 for the G7 are not religious but arguably profound. In a nutshell, it is about competition. Is it positive or not? And if competition is accepted, how can it be relatively fair without tripping into a war?

America knows this book well; China doesn't. It is unfair, says China. Unlike any other country, we gave China 50 years to learn competition, but it did not; it cheated on the exams and did not learn, says the U.S. But why should we learn your rules in the first place? Why shouldn't you learn ours? Retorts China. You led us to believe you would learn, and now you say you did not mean to learn in the first place? Lying is cheating in a competition that should result in stopping authentic communication and attempts to understand, concludes the U.S. on its own.

This competition has, in effect, drifted towards confrontation, and it doesn't matter what China's "real" intentions were; whoever tries to understand China becomes a collaborationist and traitor.

The room for dialogue becomes extremely thin, but the Kissingerian defense of China's intentions possibly fuels the fire; it doesn't help a peaceful solution. China should recognize that and seek a different path if it wants peace.

Strategy (2023): China's Legacy of Innocent Blood

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken went to China in June 2023 to establish guardrails for bilateral relations, prevent incidents, and avoid escalation that can get out of control.

The bilateral situation was very uneven at the time. America had developed a whole strategy for China. It set up "de-risking," securing technology and crucial supply lines out of Beijing's reach. It is more viable than decoupling (the idea of separating China's economy from the rest of the world) and has the EU and G7 support.

At the May 19, 2023, Hiroshima meeting, America expanded the G7, also inviting India, Indonesia, South Korea, Brazil, and others. It almost transformed the forum into a network for an anti-China coalition. It had India join a quasi-military alliance with a significant agreement on a bilateral defense industry ostensibly aimed at Beijing. The U.S. then supported the summer 2023 Ukrainian offensive against Russia, while China from the outset supported Russia politically and, more quietly, materially in its ill-conceived invasion.

The U.S. has established a complex set of political instruments that move military, economic, and technological pressures against China. On the other side, what did China do? China protested air force or navy incursions in its self-proclaimed airspace or waters.

It protested technological exclusion. It opposed an expanded G7, et cetera. It said "no" to U.S. initiatives, but apparently had few attractive initiatives of its own to put forward.

This state of affairs arises from cultural tradition also. For centuries, the unspoken presupposition in China was that the foreign world wouldn't matter if you secured domestic stability. The U.S. is just the opposite. With its written and unspoken rules, the domestic balance is in constant motion and hard to tweak. But foreign policy is the element that projects internal stability. It has been so since America's forefathers, the ancient Greek city-states, and the Roman Empire.

The U.S. can usually move swiftly to formulate and implement foreign policies, but China has experienced difficulty in achieving this. Yet now more than ever, foreign affairs increasingly dominate the attention and action of the world's major and middle powers. This accords with America's tradition but not China's. It thus imposes a colossal burden on China.

Strategy (2023): Blinken in China

Blinken went to Beijing to put a floor under the sinking bilateral confrontation. China's political space became tighter by the day. Germany, one of China's main economic partners and investors, agreed to supply approximately $5.8 billion worth of diesel submarines to India. They are extra silent, would potentially make the Chinese Navy vulnerable and even deny access to the growing fleet of Chinese aircraft carriers, and would threaten to push the Chinese Navy out of the Indian Ocean and away from the sensitive African trading routes.

To the north, Russia is utterly preoccupied with Ukraine, suffering unimaginable human losses and significant damage to its

civilian economy and many important international relationships. China is cognizant of the risks that it could wind up surrounded by weak powers and adversaries.

There seems to be great difficulty in reversing even domestic decisions. China should have changed its demographic policy over a decade ago.

That should have also been the case with the real estate sector, which has now crowded the market with an estimated hundred million unsold finished apartments. Some estimates say real estate debt makes up as much as 60% of all outstanding loans.

Internal debt difficulties and full RMB convertibility are issues that should have been addressed 20 years ago. The cost of holding foreign currency to trade abroad and expand domestic M2, almost unrelated to the international financial world, is exceptionally high, chaotic, and tricky.

China could not make decisions two decades ago, and now President Xi Jinping has to deal with it all. He also cannot blame past leaders because those were judgment calls; they were wrong or complex, but there was no corruption or ill intention. These decisions were upheld by mighty state machinery that had its self-interest in preserving the status quo and its power.

Moreover, Xi owes his present position to the achievements of past leaders; it is difficult and tricky to call out their political mistakes. It was challenging to turn the massive machinery then; it's difficult now because he rules through a vast bureaucracy, expressing a social consensus.

Xi's unique contribution to China's progress was to lead massive reforms in the party and state organization. He concentrated power to an unprecedented extent. But even power concentration needs public support at home and friendly international partners, ideally both.

Governance/Strategy (2000s): Is China Cornered?

As the reality of the new Cold War with China looms larger by the day, assessments of Beijing's position there vary. In the first Cold War, the USSR was mighty. Still, its position was also lionized by the Allies and by Moscow's propaganda for opposite reasons – to spur drama and competitiveness on the Western Front or boost confidence in the Soviet homes.

Then what is the actual situation of China presently? Here is an attempt at a dispassionate perception of the Chinese position now. What we see is a kaleidoscope of alternatives between bad choices.

China is a trade superpower, and as David Goldman noted, its position is growing, and the great reshoring is not happening.[91] But are the threats against China's commerce just a charade? China is a trade superpower, which is good if buttressed by soft power (laws, culture), financial might, political alliances, and the military.

But China, on all other fronts, is weaker than the U.S. Its surpluses can become a liability in the blink of an eye. Purchase orders can be transferred slowly elsewhere or cut off suddenly by force majeure, as happened with gas supplies from Russia. After all, cars aren't as necessary as gas. I can still drive an old vehicle, but cannot turn on my lights without gas.

China is pushing for a greater trade surplus in the apparent belief that greater foreign dependency on its goods is a bigger reassurance of its political security. At the same time, it wants yuan internationalization against the dollar and a military that is better

[91] David P. Goldman, "The Great Re-shoring Charade," *Asia Times*, April 2023, https://asiatimes.com/2023/04/the-great-re-shoring-charade/.

matched against the U.S. All of this opens a challenge on multiple fronts where China's surplus can be targeted against Beijing at any given time.

In fact, the surplus bubble can burst when it is bigger, and it may hurt China more. If it hurts the U.S., the American pain can be useful to be directed against the Communist Party and fuel resentment. China should then explain that its exports are not a way to blackmail or bind the U.S., but that may be difficult because of China's competing ambitions against the dollar and the U.S. military.

If China, seeing this, cuts surpluses, it will also cut its income while the domestic market of individual consumers is not picking up at the desired speed. At the same time, one of the main drivers of growth, real estate, is collapsing, and the other driver, infrastructure, is cratering domestic coffers with ever-bigger debts.

In Russia, Moscow's triumph is impossible. If the war stops, the U.S. will call it a victory, and Russia will be turned against China, or it will be a burden, sandbagging China for the foreseeable future. If the war drags on, this will bleed China's credibility, as Beijing is trying to move out of its domestic public support for Russia, but it cannot shed it too fast.

Domestically, China has done fine with the end of the zero-COVID policy and fine with the new appeal to entrepreneurs and recalibrating EU ties… but far from enough.

Foreign and domestic investors have been burned in China in the past and see the gloomy prospects of the country increasingly at odds with the U.S. They will take years, if not decades, to be reassured to return unless great opportunities are provided. After 1989, Hong Kong and Taiwan businessmen, formerly ousted from China, were called in and given top opportunities to make fast

money, mainly in real estate and electronics. They embraced these opportunities and stayed on.

The problem is, are there sufficient lucrative opportunities available to be gifted to potentially loyal billionaires? After 1989, there was no open and paramount hostility from the U.S. or neighboring countries; many in those countries were of two minds about Beijing. China was not a threat, and the world grappled with the messy Soviet fallout. Now the situation is very different.

Something can be attempted, and something can also work, but most likely not on the scale of the 1990s. It is the second time capitalists were promised everything, but things turned sour due to the whims of the unfathomable and mysterious political leadership. Of course, sudden turns are not unique to China. There are also political and financial crashes in capitalist countries, but the mechanism is fairly transparent, there is an open debate, and one can forecast and prepare.

China's efforts with Europe are positive but signal a cleavage in the EU over Russia. Some want to talk to Moscow, while others do not. But Beijing's failure to deliver a clear result to Macron about Moscow will have weakened its hand. Moreover, France can strain its transatlantic ties to the limit because of its history with the U.S. But France will never break these ties for another country. So, if push comes to shove, in 2026, it seemed unlikely that either France or any other European country would choose China over the U.S. despite all their concerns about Trump's America.

Beijing's difficult predicament can be exemplified by the periodic military drills around Taiwan, which ring eerily in Western Christian ears since Easter is the time for peace. Chinese military drills around Taiwan are a dull instrument and may backfire: They are just propaganda for Taiwan's president. Still, China cannot just do nothing; its domestic audience will get angry at the inaction.

It has to do something, but what can it do in the present circumstances? Threaten Taiwan, which will goad the island and other countries to search for closer ties with the U.S., prodding China to more PLA posturing, and so forth.

It is also about how to frame the present friction with the U.S. China wants a state-to-state discussion where the two countries split interests, almost like a second Yalta. The U.S. didn't want that; it wanted to talk about international rules, which Beijing should first abide by. Trump changed the discourse, but it is still uncertain whether America will revert to trying to build an international consensus or it will stick to transactional politics.

China seems to think something like this: The U.S. split the world with the USSR in Yalta; it can do it now with us.

America seems to think that the USSR was not an integral part of global trade and was confined to its own bloc. Plus, the U.S. fought a cruel war with the Soviets against the Nazis; the U.S. agreed on some basic ground rules, and Russians are culturally Westerners, so the U.S. and Russia understood each other. China is now a commercially integral part of the world and still doesn't open its market, and its currency is not fully convertible.

This is the real problem—an issue with international market rules that, at the time, Washington did not have with Moscow. Plus, no recent war was fought with China, and the Chinese, being of a different culture, are more difficult to understand; thus, how can we split something with them when we do not understand them in the first place?

China is in a corner and may struggle to get more breathing space. But this struggle could also turn against it, as its failure to accept the existing rules could be portrayed as China's obstinate bad faith.

In some ways, this is like the old Chinese story of the tricky monkey trying to fight the Buddha just to find out it is playing into Buddha's hand.

The Journey to the West (Xiyouji) is also the story of the difficult conversion of China to Buddhism in the first centuries of the Christian era, culminating in the 7th-century Tang dynasty. Perhaps the same is happening now with Western modernity.

The real question is, how can China become a Buddha, too? The answer in *Xiyouji* was to surrender to Buddha. Who is Buddha now, and what would be surrendering to him now?

China needs to find a new idea to get out of its corner. Americans simply do not believe whatever the Chinese are saying and want facts that Beijing is presently unable to deliver.

Surely China can still bet on the collapse of the American system, a transatlantic split with Europe, the political surge of the global south, et cetera. Plenty of evidence points in this direction – a systemic failure of America, the collapse of capitalism. Surely capitalism and America will fail sooner or later, but when exactly? In a couple of years or a century? All these bets failed in the past; there is no certainty they will succeed in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, time could not be on China's side and could be short. The West's double feats against COVID and Russia have convinced many that Washington is on a winning streak, and U.S. domestic priorities, the potentially divisive presidential elections next year, might push America into pressing on its only unifying agenda – opposition to China.

Then, perhaps, it should consider what it can do to hedge these bets. But this has to be sorted with all its domestic priorities, and things get very tangled in many contradictory necessities. Here, more struggle for more breathing space could be the most likely response, waiting for the dust to settle on the Russian front and

observing how the post-COVID policies will be faring with the economy. After all, there is no imminent danger, and Beijing might still have some time to deliberate over these thorny subjects, which can be extremely tricky to handle and lead to wrong decisions, as happened with the zero-COVID policy or with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It could last until the summer or autumn, when Russia and the domestic economy will present a clearer, possibly rosier picture. But if the picture then becomes darker, Beijing will have wasted even more time.

Worldview (2020s): China's Vision of the U.S. "Crisis."

Is China right in believing America is in a mortal crisis? For many years, openly or not, many Chinese pundits have been thinking that China was rising and America was declining, because of a mortal crisis. This is one of the important elements conditioning Chinese strategy; however, is the assessment correct?

A different set of cultural values may have impaired the Chinese vision of the U.S. and the world. It is very critical for everybody to do a cold assessment.

The Chinese see the following.

America is falling behind on the international scene. It did not perform well in the Middle East and Central Asia; most of all, its U.S. dollar is no longer what it used to be.

It is feeding a massive financial crisis with its enormous trade deficit, creating a colossal imbalance in global commerce. Its companies and entrepreneurs want to move out of the country, seeking better returns, and, as a result, the country has been deindustrialized over the past three decades.

America is an empty shell; it no longer has blue-collar workers, and no longer creates industrial, practical, and day-to-day innovation. There may be technological leaps and bounds, but the manufacturing is done elsewhere at the end of the day.

Its society is divided, bickering with one another, turning more violent and more acrimonious; it is as if Latin America is eating up the U.S. The U.S. of America is turning into a larger Mexico, as Mexico is also falling into greater chaos with the growing political influence of criminal gangs and organizations. Law and order are in the hands of a few semi-criminal organizations.

Looking at things from China, the U.S. faces horrible infrastructure decay and disarray, and drug culture has infected all social layers with legal or illegal supplements. The idea is that every social contradiction and problem can be fixed by giving medication and tablets, even to children.

The appalling state of the suburbs and the equally appalling luxury of the rich send a clear message to China that America is like China during the Qing dynasty's final stages—total decadence, ready to fall apart.

In this Chinese viewpoint, the overall impression may be true or may be false. It may have some valid points, or it may not be entirely accurate. However, China's idea of replacing America as the number-one global power needs to have more than a simple concept of replacement as if in a race.

Still, even if that were totally true, there would be the issue of what kind of world China wants to build and who would follow it.

It needs a global overview because America emerged from 500 years of a certain kind of rule over the world. As China is unwilling to take on that 500-year legacy and is eager to turn to its own rules, it's worth looking deeply into what China is apparently thinking of the world.

Governance (2010s-2020s): Xi, the Juggler

A reader of the legalist tradition, Xi knows full well that the ruler's intentions must be kept hidden, something that enhances the shi 势 (leverage points in the situation). As 4th-century philosopher Shen Buhai put it:

"If the superior's cleverness is visible, people will guard against it. If his stupidity is visible, people will bewilder him. If his knowledge is visible, people will disguise themselves."[92]

And more extensively:

The monarch is the most revered individual, but also the weakest link in the government apparatus. He can be duped by his underlings, is prone to misjudging them, and his actions may frequently endanger the very foundations of political order that he is supposed to safeguard. Hence, the thinker repeatedly urges the ruler to refrain from any personal activities, any reliance on personal knowledge, and any manifestation of personal likes and dislikes. "He who relies on personal abilities is the worst ruler"; "When the sovereign abandons the law and behaves selfishly, there is no difference between the rulers and the ruled"; "When the ruler has selfish kindness, the ruled have selfish desires" (Han Feizi 48: 432; 6: 32; 45: 414 et saepe). The ruler should refrain from any action; echoing the Laozi, Han Fei urges him to remain empty and tranquil (Han Feizi 5: 27). The thinker summarizes his recommendations:

"The ruler does not reveal his desires; should he do so, the minister will carve and embellish them. He does not reveal his views; should he do so, the minister will use them to present his

[92] Xueshi Guo, The Politics of the Core Leader in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 144–45.

different [opinion]. … The way of the enlightened sovereign is to let the knowledgeable completely exhaust their contemplations—then the ruler relies on them to decide on matters and is not depleted of knowledge; to let the worthy utilize their talents—then the ruler relies on them, assigns tasks, and is not depleted of abilities. When there is success, the ruler possesses a worthy [name]; when there is failure, the minister bears the responsibility." (Han Feizi 5: 27)[93]

Xi knows he has to hide his true self, and throughout his career, he has been very successful in that. Until his final promotion in 2012, senior leaders believed he would be their docile puppet. During his first trip to the U.S. as vice president, Americans who received him were said to be under-impressed by his performance. Then is he now still playing a part? And what part? This mystery is also part of a basic concept of Chinese strategic thinking: "deception/ misdirection" (gui 詭), which is also a basic principle of any fight. I feign to move with a left jab and actually hit with a right hook.

So far, Xi has juggled between public fanning of the nationalist flame and actual caution in handling international affairs. Despite the official rhetoric, China is still buying U.S. Treasury bonds. This is to finance its exports (without Chinese purchase of U.S. bonds, the U.S. would not buy Chinese goods), but it is also a sign of commitment.

It might resemble a little what Mao did with Nixon's first visit to China, parading him through crowds in the streets with banners "down with the American imperialists." But those were different

[93] Paul R. Goldin, "Legalism in Chinese Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified July 3, 2011, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-legalism/.

times, and it was a different China. Then the U.S. wanted to make a friend of China and deploy it efficiently against the main enemy -- the USSR. Now the U.S. feels it doesn't have to swallow much of the Chinese postures any further. So, it may be ok with the bonds and the cheap exports, but the U.S. is not putting up with much else.

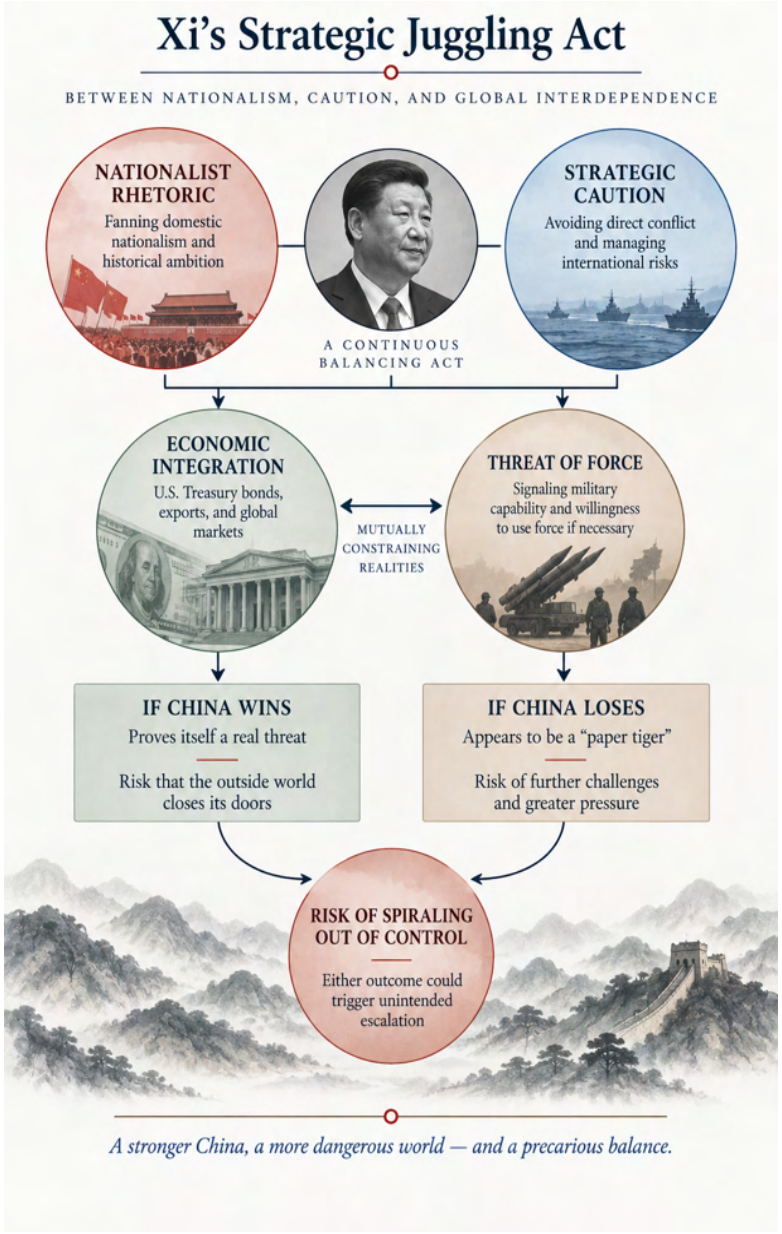
Then it is not clear how long Xi's juggling can go on. The juggling also works with the possibility of the use of force. Xi so far threatens the use of force, but has never gone so far as using it because it would open a stark alternative.

If in a significant encounter, China wins, it proves it is a real threat, and the world can close its doors to China because of it. If it loses the engagement, it proves it is a paper tiger, and some nations could attack China. Both alternatives entail spiraling out of control with unforeseeable consequences. Moreover, China knows it emerged as a victor from WW2 and the Cold War by piggybacking on the U.S. The U.S. managed to win those wars and also carry China and other countries along. China doesn't have any experience relevant to actions and expectations after a success or a failure in a significant military conflict.

The British and other Western nations made no effort to topple the dynasty after defeating it in the first Opium War (1839–42), the second Opium War (1856–1860), and the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. The British even sent military experts and some soldiers to assist the dynasty in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), and it dispatched experts in the latter half of the 19th century to assist the dynasty in undertaking a variety of modernizing reforms.

For China, there is another more attractive scenario. In the past two decades, the U.S. has experienced a number of significant setbacks: In Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the reversal of democratic advances after the "Arab Spring," the

descent of Libya into anarchy, the never-ending domestic battle against drug use, etc. All this encourages some Chinese to think this is the time to sit on the riverbank and wait for events to take their course "on the other side of the river." The basic strategy is to wait for the inevitable U.S. collapse in a Chinese version of the Western aphorism "When your enemy is digging a hole for himself, do nothing to impede him."



Daily news from America appears to confirm this analysis. There are bitter partisan divisions about obscure quarrels on issues of gender and so-called political correctness. This tells Beijing that China should simply not act, precisely as Han Fei Zi recommended,

quoting the Dao De Jing. Tiny North Korea successfully resisted and endured for over 70 years despite being isolated; China, much bigger, much more technologically advanced, much more integrated into the global economy, could withstand foreign pressures indefinitely.

However, to withstand this new siege, China must build better walls. At the beginning of 2021, Hu Xijin, editor of the nationalistic Global Times, raised the possibility of increasing its military arsenal.[94] The U.S. reported the construction of many silos for nuclear missiles. On August 7th, Hu, responding to these reports, wrote:

"It is important to note that China has never abandoned its minimum deterrence nuclear strategy. However, due to the comprehensive strategic threat that the U.S. keeps posing to China, the nuclear capabilities Beijing needs to achieve "minimum deterrence" are now different from the past. As the potential risk stemming from U.S. nuclear coercion against China is clearly increasing, China needs to have sufficient nuclear forces to contain such a risk.

Even many ordinary Chinese people feel that the urgency of strengthening China's nuclear deterrent is common sense. We do not know if those structures shown in the satellite photos in Yumen and Hami are silos or the foundations of wind power plants, as some scholars have speculated. But if it does turn out that they are silos, Chinese public opinion will support their construction unconditionally. (italics mine)

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[94] Hu Xijin, "China Urged to Increase Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrent amid US Intensified Strategic Threat," *Global Times*, May 12, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1224773.shtml.

Washington is in no moral position to accuse China of this. China has only a fraction of the number of nuclear warheads that the U.S. has. China is also the only nuclear power that has pledged not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. The U.S. has never indicated that it would consider making the same commitment.

There is no information from Beijing on whether it is strengthening its nuclear buildup in the face of a plausible threat from Washington. But even if we were doing that, it would have nothing to do with Southeast Asian countries, or even with Japan and Australia, because China's nuclear policy also includes another firm commitment of not using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapon state.

Once China substantially strengthens its nuclear forces, its only purpose will be to deter the U.S. Since there is already no mutual trust between China and the U.S., Chinese society is fully convinced that the U.S.'s ultimate strategic goal is to bring China down. While not giving up on maintaining peace between the two countries, we must be prepared for the possibility that a war could eventually occur (italics mine) in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Sea. (bold and italics mine)."[95]

Then, according to Hu, the response to the possibility of war is to increase nuclear deterrence, that is, avoid a clash or minimize the size of a possible conflict by threatening a nuclear escalation and retaliation.

In other words, the drive to expand and modernize China's nuclear arsenal is to gain more space and wiggle room for Xi, thus avoiding all-out war requiring the massive involvement of Chinese

[95] Hu Xijin, "China needs to increase nuclear capacity to maintain minimum deterrence against rising US coercion," Global Times, August 12, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1230817.shtml.

troops. Here we have another confirmation that the political leadership believes the PLA may not have *zhandouli*. It is better to avoid the test of fire.

Moreover, the Chinese have a long memory. They saw in Vietnam the U.S. being politically crippled and sapped in their spirit in a protracted war that resulted in over 50,000 Americans killed in action and a couple of hundred thousand wounded. On top of everything in China, there would be "only child" men who would go home broken inside, and the state would need to take care of them and their families. The Chinese also saw something similar happening with Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan.

In both cases, the Chinese were on the winners' side, Vietnam first and Afghanistan later. In the first case, they had already clinched a deal with the U.S.; in the second case, they supported the anti-Soviet forces with America. The Chinese know what the bleeding of a protracted war can do to a country. They know that this would impose a massive burden on the Chinese economy. Its trade could shrink, imports of fuel, food, and raw material would become more complex, and the middle class, which thought life would constantly improve, could face a dramatic downturn.

At present, the most significant opposition to Xi's rule resides within the upper class. They owe their wealth to the previous rulers, Jiang Zemin's people. They are scions of prominent families or linked with big families that have a sense of entitlement in their fortunes. They have contacts abroad, networks in China and out of China, drive a big chunk of the Chinese economy, and the anti-corruption campaign has limited their ambition; it did not help them. Therefore, they are an objective limit upon, if not open opposition to, Xi's policy vision and authority.

But their ambitions run against the perspective and aims of the new middle class, which sees itself as doing better, but still

remaining far behind the ultra-rich. Xi's move to clip the wings of the ultra-rich has then broadened the domestic consensus in favor of his policies and leadership. The Party launched in summer 2021 a campaign to promote the "common wealth" 共同富裕. Mao and Deng Xiaoping used the phrase to bolster their egalitarian pushes. Here, it reminds people of the past jargon but is aimed at the middle class. It communicates to them that they are the focus of the government policies, and that they will become better off under the government's watch, as substantial social inequalities are curbed. This enhances Xi's popularity with the majority of the population and goes against the ultra-rich. But unlike in a free society where the ultra-rich have enormous sway owing in part to influence over mass media, in China, they do not and thus cannot defend themselves in a battle to win favor in public opinion; The ultra-rich are furthermore reminded that they are wealthy as long as the Party wishes them to be.

Beijing thinks that juggling and playing with a minimal nuclear deterrent, avoiding a massive arms race with the U.S. like the one that bankrupted the USSR, will suffice. After all, Beijing sees no need to plan for the destruction of the enemy. To deter and constrain the enemy's actions, it is enough to ensure that at least one of the U.S.'s big cities is vulnerable to a Chinese nuclear strike. Moreover, if push comes to shove and a full-fledged nuclear arms race is required, and this could extend over ten to 20 years, it is not impossible to think that China might beat the U.S. into bankruptcy, as the production cost for its weapons is smaller than for the U.S. These calculations are abstact and projected in a too distant future, but can they relly be put out? Then China's minimal deterrence gives Xi something to play with politically, internally, and externally, without moving a soldier.

Governance (2020s): Preparing for the Worst

The Chinese are now taking measures in response to "decoupling" measures announced and anticipated by the most significant Western economies. As described at the last Central Committee meeting, the idea of dual circulation is that China will continue exporting and trading with the world as long as the world is willing to. But China is already preparing to expand its domestic demand for a possible decoupling. The real challenge for America and the Western society vis-à-vis China is offering a new development system that learns from the strong points of China.

The Western world has to have better healthcare and better-educated people in the future because this is the basis for long-term growth and human capital. If kids are sick and go to bad schools, the end of the country is already set for doom.

Besides, there are also issues that China has to consider on its own. If China were a more open society, with a more democratic and transparent system, and if China did not have so many border issues with its neighbors, its problems would not be as urgent as they are now.

Indeed, China is concerned about its rise and the difference in its "civilization." But these are enhanced by the different political systems and their assertiveness on their borders. In a way, China then creates a complex algorithm that makes it look even more threatening because it is thriving and resilient, yet different and assertive. If China had been less successful in its system, it would not look as menacing. With all things equal, its assertive foreign policy, authoritarian political system, and success in controlling COVID scare the world even more.

China seems oblivious to its effect on the Western world and sometimes even boasts about it, which is adequate for internal

propaganda purposes. Still, it is pouring salt on Western wounds. Then, as the U.S. and Europe may not fully understand the mechanisms, complexities, and effectiveness of China, China seems not to understand the effect it has on the world.

This mix is a recipe for what could become a disaster. The recent calls in the West for politicians to calm down and step away from the ongoing collision course tell the exact opposite. They underscore that many Americans and many Europeans firmly believe that a collision with China is almost inevitable if the brakes are not applied.

Even if an agreement is reached between the U.S. and China, without touching the Chinese political system and Chinese assertiveness on its borders, this could create a situation whereby a clash by military means could be more, not less, probable. This is because political differences, military assertiveness, and civilization issues are of paramount importance in deciding peace or war. Europe, until World War I, was far more integrated between different states than China with the rest of the world now. Most kings and aristocrats were closely related, yet Europe fought bitter wars for centuries.

Trade agreements are helpful, but they are not a vaccine against military clashes, which occur according to a different logic. China, however, seems to believe that a trade agreement with Europe or America can be a partial antidote to the poison of war. With this antidote, it can carry on with its political system and its assertive behavior with its neighbors. This may be a very wrong evaluation.

On the other hand, America may wait for the collapse of China behind the "malign" Communist Party and would therefore miss the strength and the solidity of the present Chinese system. The U.S., if it wants to avoid war and win the comprehensive confrontation with China, has to take different initiatives and

deeply reform itself to match and surpass China's achievements. Short of these two initiatives, the path to a military clash would short-circuit the complex dynamics that could grow closer.

Some in China and the U.S. may think that a military clash between the two is better now than tomorrow. From the Chinese side, people may believe that clashing with the U.S. now, before it has effectively built a military alliance, could be better because it would scare some neighbors into turning toward China in a bloc or at least into neutrality. Some people may think that a clash now, before China grows too big and too technologically advanced, would be better in America.

In both countries, people may also think differently, favoring the avoidance or at least deferral of a military clash. In China, some may want to grow even stronger economically. In the U.S., some may wish to take the time to build a global alliance. In both cases, this thinking proves that the military option is still very present in the minds of decision-makers, and then once you have the opportunity, you may want to exercise it.

It should be necessary to take radical steps to forgo this military option and integrate China into the world. This can happen only if China rethinks its past two decades and becomes more like the rest of the world. Democracy can grow in China because—unlike war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan or the poor and illiterate masses in Egypt—the Chinese have enjoyed peace and growing wealth—as examples in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan suggest—their "civilization" may be receptive to Western democracy up to a point. How to get there is an issue, and there are huge risks[96], but possibly there is no alternative.

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[96] Francesco Sisci, "The Cost of Victory—Chinese Interest Rates," *SettimanaNews*, December 29, 2020,

Strategy (B.C.): The Sounds of a Chinese War

War sounds nearer for China while its contours remain somewhat foggy. Hu Xijin 胡锡进, the editor of the Global Times, in 2020 broached the possibility of a real war.[97]

"Chinese people do not want war, but we have territorial disputes with several neighboring countries, encouraged by the U.S., to confront China. Some of these countries believe that the U.S. support provides them with a strategic opportunity and try to treat China outrageously. They believe that China, under the U.S.'s strategic pressure, is afraid, unwilling, or unable to engage in military conflict with them. Thus, they want to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. Considering that there is also the Taiwan question, the risk of the Chinese mainland being forced into a war has risen sharply in recent times," he writes.

In this context, Hu makes some interesting and important points. The war must have a solid moral justification; thus, China would not fire the first shot, and it should be clear that it is the victim, not the aggressor.

The point harks back to ancient times: Mozi, an ancient philosopher who deals with the reasons for war, condemns the aggressive war of big states against small ones (gong) but supports the actions sanctioned by the supreme Son of Heaven who punishes (zhu 誅) unruly rulers.

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https://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/the-cost-of-victory-chinese-interest-rates/.

[97] Hu Xijin, "China Must Be Militarily and Morally Ready for a Potential War," *Global Times*, May 9, 2020, https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200595.shtml.

The warring lords would gloss over (their conduct) with arguments to refute Mozi, saying: "Do you condemn attacks and assaults as unrighteous and not beneficial? But, in ancient times, Yu made war on the Prince of Miao, Tang on Jie, and King Wu on Zhou. Yet, these are regarded as sages. What is your explanation for this?" Mozi said: "You have not examined the terminology of my teaching, and you do not understand its motive. What they did is not to be called attack but punishment."[98]

The issue is crucial for Mozi, and we are different from Sunzi, who has no moral qualms but wants to win the military engagement. He utters:

Attack him with superior forces where he is unprepared, and appear where you are not expected. These military devices, leading to victory, must not be divulged beforehand. [99]

Hu Xijin, like Mozi and unlike Sunzi, is not concerned here with real military success, but with a critical and delicate point that helps to lead to military success: how to build a moral case justifying military intervention. If the moral issue is well made, it will help to reinforce domestic consensus and undermine enemy consensus, both crucial elements for a victory.

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[98] Mozi, Against Offensive War III, trans. Y. P. Mei, in The Ethical and Political Works of Motse, repr. ed. (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1963), 192–195.

[99] Sunzi, The Art of War, chap. 1 ("Laying Plans"), trans. Lionel Giles, adapted, in The Art of War, trans. Lionel Giles (London: Luzac & Co., 1910), https://ctext.org/art-of-war/laying-plans.

Strategy (2020s): Build International Consensus from an Authoritarian State

This point is how to build a domestic consensus in an authoritarian society and take it abroad successfully. In theory, the first part is simple. The government has a monopoly on information, and what it says is presented as true. It should be enough not to be too rough and naive with the use of its tools.

The problem is how to export the authoritarian truth to an open world. In theory, this was already done. Communist governments effectively engaged free capitalist societies over the span of many decades. For example, in the Vietnam War, they positively helped to undermine the enemy's will to fight. This was no simple effort. Communism was a complex ideology with a body of articulated and fascinating literature promising to improve the lives of people and the structure of the state and society. It built a church and a theology in which all elements of the socialist life were encoded. The coding was fine-looking and so attractive that it was persuasive to many in Western capitalist societies.

The ideological "capitalist" answer to the communist philosophical/propaganda offensive was highly complex, mixing theoretical elements with practical results, i.e., tangible improvement of livelihood in the capitalist West versus dwindling economic performance in the communist East. Most importantly, both "capitalist" and "socialist" ideologies had no spatial border. Both were concerned with the well-being of everybody in the world, and both wanted to change the whole world.

China now doesn't want to export its socialist system; it wants to defend what it deems are its sovereign rights against perceived aggression on many fronts of its frontiers: India, Vietnam, Japan, a "splittist" Taiwan, the U.S., and possibly other countries. But its size

and its different system by themselves undermine the global U.S.-dominated system.

This scares many countries at its borders, which may feel that if China's ambitions are not territorially restrained, they will fall under Beijing's sustained economic and political hegemony.

Beijing may believe these concerns are unwarranted. It may want to assuage them and win over public opinion in these countries, just as they may try to do with Chinese public opinion.

Yet China doesn't have a global philosophical outlook developed through decades of international debate. Russian communism, battling international physical and intellectual assaults in the 1920s, inherited communist literature dating back to the 1848 Marx-Engels Manifesto. China has nothing similar.

Moreover, its stress on patriotism, borders, and protection gives a sense that China's interests and neighbors are at odds over specific nationalistic issues. In a nationalistic brawl, everybody sticks to their nation. Lastly, in a world mainly adhering to free opinions, ideas from an authoritarian, possibly nationalistic society lack persuasive force. Conversely, they appear to be compelling proof of the Chinese harmful and deceptive intentions.

To change this situation—that is, to have an effective philosophical/propaganda machine—China must develop an internationalist reach, like communism or "capitalism," or stop being an authoritarian regime. For a better result, it should do both.[100]

Short of that, Beijing finds itself painted in a corner. It doesn't matter if India, Taiwan, Japan, or anybody else is right or wrong with their grievances against China; Beijing's rationale has little or

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[100] Francesco Sisci, *Ling yi ge Zhongguo* [*Another China*] (Beijing: Beijing Dangdai Hanyu Yanjiusuo, 2002).

no appeal outside of China. Its reasons for entertaining the prospect of war will work effectively domestically and only as long as its monopoly on information holds.

Internal morale can be easily undermined in a public information onslaught by its enemies. They, in theory, can construct a false but seemingly plausible reason to attack China and will succeed in persuading others because Beijing will have no credible voice. Fake news is nothing new,[101] but battling it is a very sophisticated game that a monopoly on information can sort out only if imposed on a global and absolute scale. On top of that, Beijing may be wrong.

Worldview (2020s): Xi's Intentions for a Siege

Still, what if Beijing is not wrong? But this is beside the point. Even if Beijing is in the right, so long as it lacks an open debate platform, without an appealing internationalist ideology, it will need to rely upon brute force and financial resources to fend for itself and its morale. If strength and money were enough to hold power, Mao would have died in a ditch, and Chiang Kai-shek's grandson would rule China now.

Then this leaves the final, practical point: what did Hu Xijin want to say in the article? Possibly by arguing about the moral issues in going to war, he is building an argument that seeks to cool down the nationalistic ardor of the domestic hardliners. They are growing angry and nervous about what some in China perceive to be a continual state of siege led by the U.S. Hu is saying it is impossible

[101] Francesco Sisci, "The Fake Problem with Fake News," Limes Online, May 19, 2017, https://www.limesonline.com/en/global-issues/the-fake-problem-with-fake-news-14720818/.

to go to war if we do not have a clear-cut case, and to have that, we cannot be the ones who move first. It appears as an internal message against the Chinese warmongers to at least wait for more time. It is a command not to rush things and ponder them.

But, as soon as China speaks of war, many countries are impatient about the details of the arguments. They simply shrug, taking it as naive braggadocio. Conversely, some in Beijing may believe that this grand talk could intimidate certain foreign parties.

Given the international mood around China and the long shadow of events in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and other fronts, it is possible that, outside of China, the message will be simply received as "Beijing is talking of going to war." China may be seen as trying to build a case to start a war and be provocative. Then, the foreign parties may think: this must be taken seriously, and countermeasures must be arranged.

In this way, we are all one step closer to a slippery slope of massive misunderstandings leading to a war.

This reading of the situation is grafted into a concept that the report described as:

> The PLA views protecting Chinese sovereignty and security as a sacred duty. China traditionally viewed military resistance as an affair for the entire population: mass resistance, guerrilla warfare, and winning a war of attrition. This understanding has evolved in the modern age. A PLA enabled by technology, well-trained personnel, and a whole-of-government defense-in-depth approach deters conflict before it ever happens and protects China and the CPC from foreign aggression

and internal tumult. The basic concept of active defense informs every level of PLA operations and acquisitions[102]

In all of this, Xi looks at the external situation, thinking there is total continuity between "war-as-combat" and "war by other means." The media attacks on Chinese politics, the pressure on Chinese foreign interests, Afghanistan, Burma, the controversies on COVID, its origin and the way to control it, the technological decoupling, the new rules on Chinese companies listed in the U.S, are all war by other means. Many in China believe the nation is de facto already in a war; the only problem is how to wage it and what kind of war it will be. China may feel that it may compete outside in any of these areas, but it can sustain a siege, even a very long one, in all of these areas.

The August 7, 2021, Central News Agency announcement adopts this direction.

"On August 3, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission issued the 'Shanghai Elementary and Secondary School Curriculum Plan for the 2021 School Year.' The Plan specifies that the elementary school version of 'Xi Jinping's Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' will be taught in the first semester of the 3rd and the 5th grades. The middle school version will be taught in the third semester of junior high school, and the high school version will be taught in the first semester of senior high school. The course is mandatory. Each course is to be taught for one hour per week.

The notice emphasized that the city's primary and secondary schools should not use the original or modified version of foreign

[102] U.S. Department of the Army, Chinese Tactics (ATP 7-100.3) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2021).

teaching materials without getting approval from the city's educational authorities. At the same time, the notice requires that the 'revolutionary culture and the socialist culture' be incorporated into the whole process of primary and secondary education."

These may be signs of a coming second Cultural Revolution. It won't be reckless like the first one. It will be more controlled, managed, and systematic. But Xi's new "Red Catechism" to be taught from primary schools to universities could have an even more lasting impact than Mao's Red Book. In the short term, one can see that the Party sees a war coming and aims to ensure that there are no fifth columns or people simply resisting in a passive way. It can be an ideological "stay-behind", whatever happens with the present clash in the long term. Mao's Red Book conditioned a generation of people in China, with "revolutionary" fervor but ultimately in a manner wild and confusing. A more systematic, better articulated effort could guide Chinese people's behavior for much longer.

The new education goes beyond a simple "Xi-ism." At the end of September 2021, Xinhua news agency announced the necessity of improving Marxist education, which recommended that authorities:

> Invest in building a high-quality teacher team with strong faith, solid theoretical skills, adequate quantity, and optimized structure, and effectively enhance the sense of mission, identity, and access. Improve the quality of professional training and continuously cultivate Marxist theory reserve talents[103]

[103] Xinhua News Agency, "中共中央强调加强马克思主义教育、建设高素质师资队伍," People's Daily Online, September 21, 2021, http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0921/c1001-32232415.html.

Militarily, this could work "better" and more thoroughly than some weekend Balilla activity, of the kind Mussolini devised during his power to make Italians more "martial." Then the idea was to dress up small kids in uniform and give them toy weapons. Now it is more complex. It is not just about being "ready to fight." It seems to be more about rebuilding a national identity that will also impact "defense-defense." If war is a 360-degree effort, its preparation is also 360 degrees, starting with ideological preparation.

Strategy (2020s): Short-term, Will Xi Give the Order?

All these preparations need time. It needs time to turn around the effects of the 40 years of the one-child policy. It needs time to shape the thinking of hundreds of millions with Xi's thought and the need to fight despite the possibility of a sharp downturn in their middle-class life and expectations about the future. It needs time to mold the PLA from an army of personal loyalty to the commanding general to sole allegiance to the top leader. It needs time to build a sizeable nuclear arsenal sufficient to dissuade the U.S. from crossing any clear red line. China also needs time to prepare to withstand a long siege, and ideally would, as mentioned previously, patiently "sit on the banks of the river" watching developments take their course, in this instance, the inevitable collapse of the U.S. society.

But the pressure on Xi is now, when China is not yet prepared. What can Xi do to navigate safely through these troubled waters?

At present, regular PLA soldiers can be used to suppress demobilized soldiers or other rioters who may rise in protest against a particular policy. In such a case, the new, stricter discipline may well be successful. Assured success is imperative in light of the fact that there are persistent indications that demobilized soldiers are unhappy about their situation.[104] Army veterans once received desirable jobs after retirement as a reward for service. They became drivers, mechanics, or engineers in a country where the overwhelming majority of the population was still farmers and untrained in the use of any machine except basic farm machinery.

This is no longer the case. Demobilized PLA soldiers are usually ill-equipped by educational level and training to take good jobs in society. Instead, they are left to their own devices with tiny retirement packages. They used to be honored as the party backbone. The army gave them political education that helped them join the Party and make a career. Now the party focuses its recruitment efforts in universities, on educated and technically sophisticated students. That is: the party with its progress has changed the relationship with the army. Now, veterans protest in relatively small groups. Many are elderly, but some are still fit and have military training.

But could they fight the Americans or Japanese directly for a sustained time? Mixed impressions arise from the contemporary situation.

Regarding the August 2021 military exercises in the South China Sea conducted separately by the Chinese and by the U.S. and

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[104] Jayadeva Ranade, "PLA Unrest: Why Xi Is Worried," Rediff.com, September 22, 2021, https://www.rediff.com/news/column/jayadeva-ranade-pla-unrest-why-xi-is-worried/20210922.htm.

many allies, the SCMP wrote: "This recent uptick in activities seems unprecedented, going by the intensity within a short time ... The rival parties would conduct exercises as a form of posturing and counter-posturing to signal political sentiments, but that won't unduly mean crossing the threshold (italics mine) to threaten or use force."[105]

A few days later, the newspaper, with apparently excellent sources in Beijing, reported:

"The meeting between U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Chinese ambassador Qin Gang, who arrived in Washington in late July, would give both countries a chance to build on Sherman's trip to China last month and maintain regular communication, Liu Weidong, a U.S. affairs expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said.

During her stop in Tianjin, Sherman was given a list of demands, including the withdrawal of a U.S. request to extradite Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou from Canada. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also told Sherman that the U.S. should not cross China's red lines (italics mine), which include Taiwan."[106]

Then, with respect to military exercises, China maintains that it will cross no lines, but it "demands" that the U.S. not cross China's

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[105] Minnie Chan, "US-China Rivalry Puts Pacific Centre Stage as World's Navies Flex Muscles," South China Morning Post, August 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3144116/us-china-rivalry-puts-pacific-centre-stage-worlds-navies.

[106] Laura Zhou, "US-China Relations: Envoys Aim to Build on Sherman's Tianjin Talks," South China Morning Post, July 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3144832/us-china-relations-envoys-aim-build-shermans-tianjin-talks.

red lines on Taiwan. Are these "demands" just for domestic consumption, or are they more modest "requests"? Demands pose an obvious dilemma for those making them. If they aren't met, retaliation is required – but in what form exactly? Is China thinking along these lines? If so, is China pushing ahead without a safety net?

In August, veteran China expert Paul Haenle[107] warned that, despite repeated U.S. urging, mil-to-mil talks had virtually ceased to take place. These are important to establish at least protocols between militaries and defuse potentially explosive situations. During the Cold War, there were protocols between the U.S. and USSR that helped to avert possible escalations. The message here is not crystal clear.

My impression is that there is a red thread tying all of this together. China doesn't want any escalation, at least not now. It seeks credible assurances about Taiwan, possibly along the lines that the island would not go as far as declaring formal independence from the mainland, something that would make Beijing lose face internally and be forced to take action. China plainly resists regular meetings with the U.S. armed forces, no doubt for a variety of reasons, often stated as well as unstated.

Conceding the desirability of establishing agreed formal protocols for engagement in the South China Sea, for instance, would be tantamount to conceding either an American right to be there or the inability of China to dissuade it from being there. Thus, it would diminish Chinese claims in the disputed areas. Moreover, it would push China onto shaky terrain regarding the legal

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[107] Paul Haenle, "Why the U.S. and Chinese Militaries Aren't Talking Much Anymore," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2021,https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/85123.

parameters of permissible actions. Beijing sees nothing to be gained by accommodating the U.S. by holding bilateral discussions on legal matters. It considers the legal landscape to be skewed in America's favor, as the U.S. drew the laws and had far more experience than China in dealing with legal issues. Plus, leaving matters undefined could restrain the American navy, which would remain in the dark regarding China's intended actions, and thus increases the latitude for China to adopt measures on a case-by-case basis, according to its requirements and capabilities.

Also, on the positive side, such opacity gives room to Beijing for a possible tactical withdrawal as circumstances warrant. Nevertheless, Beijing's approach prompts a few questions.

China adopted a one-child policy, something that went against every grain of the Chinese soul, defied and trampled on the most intimate beliefs of Chinese people, who have traditionally no God but a strong belief in the need to honor and appease their ancestors. They worshiped and respected their ancestors, and ultimately themselves, who will become "ancestors" for thousands of years by assuring their progeny, future, and immortality through their children. Giving up on them means giving up on their hope, their most mystical and practical belief. Yet they did this beginning in 1980.

The fresh memories of an unprecedented famine, scarring every single family (the 1957–1960 Great Leap Forward) and the exceptional internal fights that turned children against their fathers and teachers, the most sacred bond of Chinese society for millennia, incarnating in the present the religious ancestor-progeny bond (the 1966-1976 Great Cultural Revolution) left them almost annihilated. They felt that one child was the only way forward and thought that one child was better than no child at all.

Yet now, memories of the tough times are fading. Most of the population now grew up in happier, more prosperous, and more hopeful times. Parents and grandparents will be highly reluctant to risk the life in combat of a single male expected to continue the family line. One child is better than no child at all, but the "no child" or "child killed for the motherland" leaves people with nothing to lose, takes the family 家 out of the country 國家 (literally: state-family).

On the other hand, the logic of the party is ruthless, and it is not personal. Xi Jinping suffered as a young man because of his father and then had to step up in his career after 1989, distancing himself from his father, who had openly supported the demonstrating students. The party's top leaders surely never aimed for a massacre in Tiananmen, but they assigned the highest priority to preserving "stability" – the continued unchallenged rule of the party – and were thus prepared to witness bloodshed in order to achieve that. It is doubtful that this fundamental logic has altered today. Should the party/army feel cornered in facing what it deems to be an existential threat, it would very likely accept the necessity of bloodshed in order to assure/defend the party's survival.

If ordinary citizens and soldiers grasp these political realities, however, especially with the memory of 1989 still fresh in many minds, they may stop fighting and desert, as KMT troops did 70 years ago.

In 1999, after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, while authorities expected just a symbolic demonstration, tens of thousands took to the streets in Beijing and other cities. The universities were in turmoil, and authorities were genuinely taken by surprise by the widespread popular reaction. American stores were attacked, and U.S. popular chains were boycotted. With nothing to lose, those people, still quite poor in comparison with

the American level of wealth, seemed ready or even eager to go for a fight.

In 2021, there was a lot of anti-American invective and bombast on the internet, but no real calls to action. The universities are quiet; there is virtually no widespread boycott, no active, direct move of actual people against American interests. It is as if, yes, people are anti-American, but they do not want to go to the trouble or take the personal risk of actually fighting the Americans face-to-face. These are armchair warriors, apparently unwilling to become foot soldiers in a real fight. This may also be because, in 2021, there was more social control than in 1999, but still not enough.

It is as if in 1999, the people were ready to fight, but the leaders were scared of it. In 2021, the leaders might be prepared to fight, but people, while emotionally and rhetorically supportive, were not too keen on being dragged into a shooting war.

But there is another complicated twist in all of this. In 1999, after the anti-American demonstrations, there was a massive hike in visa requests for America. In 1999, the U.S. was the model, the ideal country. If the U.S. had given out visas during the days of the protests, there would have been an even bigger crowd. 20-25 years later, America is no longer the dream, the ideal. A couple of decades of failure in the Middle East and the financial crisis have undermined Chinese trust in American power. Chinese tourists traveling to America come home very underwhelmed and thinking China is faring much better, with better roads, better cities, better airports, and even better houses. This feeds the sentiment that Americans are envious and want a war to stop China's growth, so China should better wait it out and let the U.S. crumble by itself. In the meantime, China has to build up its defenses and fend off

possible American attacks. This leads to the final turn: who will man Chinese ramparts with so many armchair warriors?

Here, many theorists announce that an AI revolution in military affairs would, in practice, obviate any need for China to plan for future wars that rely heavily upon foot soldiers.[108] It is unclear how real this Chinese capability will be, but it could well be part of a policy of deception, Soviet-style maskirovka, to intimidate and dissuade potential enemies for a few years. These assumptions were widely challenged, in any case, by the slaughters in Ukraine and the destruction in Gaza. Even future wars will entail high mortality rates.

Still, there could be use for the 6th of the 36 stratagems 声东击西, make a sound in the east and attack in the west. That is, direct confrontation with the U.S. would be damning for all sorts of reasons, in the South China Sea, in the Senkaku Islands, or over Taiwan. On the Indian border, it could be even worse because it would pit the Chinese army against the Indians without any direct American involvement. If China wins, it would be seen as performing only as it had in 1962. If it loses, it will invite suggestions that its relative capability has declined since 1962.

Then some basic questions: how many Chinese troops are really "combat ready"? What does it mean to be combat-ready in a new war fought, perhaps with new integrated tactics with swarms of drones and very advanced intelligence? These questions imply the modern irrelevance of the traditional Chinese concept of war, which was grounded on two pillars: (1) lure the enemy into a

[108] See a comprehensive report on the Chinese discussion and its sources: Elsa B. Kania, "How Chinese Strategists Think AI Will Power Military Leap Ahead," Defense One, September 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/09/how-chinese-strategists-think-ai-will-power-military-leap-ahead/185409/.

difficult position and attack him with overwhelming force, and, failing that, (2) cow him with a posture of readiness to fight and prevail.

Here, the Korean peninsula could extricate China from many difficult choices. Since the 2020 reported disappearance of Kim Jong-un, Beijing had gained better control of North Korea. The country was starving, without a future, and its army was willing to fight and attack (or engage in gradual escalation) South Korea for a price. A similar war could have many advantages from the Chinese perspective. It could endanger a vital piece of the global economy, South Korea, and it would engage/endanger U.S. troops (stationed in South Korea) without committing Chinese forces. China could keep aloof in the process. North Korea, which supplied some 10,000 troops to Russia's war efforts, had in 2026 developed a massive nuclear arsenal that could count about 200 warheads by 2030. It's unclear how he will play this new power, but as of 2026, its ties to Beijing were apparently still very strong, and the two seemed to depend on each other. Kim was ceremoniously seated next to Xi and Putin, and Beijing's 80th anniversary of the victory of WWII to follow it, which is presently perhaps Xi's and the PLA's most significant problem.

In the meantime, the PLA is afraid to be caught "with its pants down" in a large conflict. It is feared there could be a massive clash when not only is China's population not prepared, but also its army is not ready, as the military reform is not finished. To speed the process, at the end of October 2021, Beijing announced a new mobilization law.[109] It is de facto an admission that the country is

[109] Global Times, "Chinese legislators adjust national defense mobilization laws amid tense China-US ties," October 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1237188.shtml.

not ready for a full-scale war; it fears war will happen and wants to prepare. But in this situation, Chinese leaders must be careful to avoid setting in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Governance (2020s): Or Another Kind of War

China perceives the economy, politics, and military as intertwined and part of the same continuum, dominated by what is perceived as a naked will of power. The 1997–98 Asian financial crisis was read as a way for the U.S. to reaffirm power in Asia by cutting down to size ambitious Asian countries and reaffirming Wall Street – and U.S. -- dominance. The fall of old dictatorships, like those in Indonesia or the Philippines, confirmed the political dangers of uncontrolled financial markets. The crisis underlined the unmatched strength and capabilities of the United States.

However, the 2008 financial crisis, seen in conjunction with the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the evaporation of Washington's hopes aroused by the "Arab Spring" and "Jasmine Revolution," persuaded many Chinese that the U.S. lacks coherent strategic planning, is overextended internationally, and, despite its military and technological advantages, is susceptible to a variety of challenges by international competitors and adversaries. At the most rudimentary level, the U.S. no longer demonstrates, as China sees it, an acute analytical ability to assess and forecast the overall strategic situation in terms of all elements comprising net national power. In the traditional Chinese way of thinking, a failure of adequate strategic planning will be fatal. There are many signs suggesting to Chinese scholars and strategists that American planning in general, and about China, is deficient.

On August 31, 2021, the People's Daily announced a "profound revolution" 深刻革命 to counter the perceived threats from the U.S.:

"China is currently facing an increasingly severe and complex international environment, as the U.S. is implementing increasingly severe military threats, economic and technological blockades, financial attacks, and political and diplomatic encirclement against China, and is waging biological warfare, cyber warfare, public opinion warfare, and space warfare against China, with increasing intensity to launch a color revolution against China through an internal fifth column. If at this time we still rely on the big capitalists as the main force against imperialism and hegemony, and still answer to the US "titty entertainment" strategy, and let our young generation lose their toughness and virility, then we will succumb without action by our enemies, just like the Soviet Union did back then, letting the country collapse, letting the country's wealth be looted, and letting the people fall into a deep disaster. Therefore, the profound changes that are currently taking place in China are precisely to deal with the current severe and complex international situation, and precisely to deal with the savage and ferocious attacks that the U.S. has begun to launch against China. Each of us can feel that a profound social change has begun, not only in the realm of capital, but also in the entertainment circle, not only to destroy and heal the bones, but also to clean the house, to freshen the air, to make our society healthier, so that members of our society can feel physically and mentally happy."[110]

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[110] Li Guangman 李光满, "每个人都能感受到，一场深刻的变革正在进行！" ["Everyone Can Feel That a Profound Transformation Is Underway!"], People's Daily Online (人民网), August 29, 2021, http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0829/c1001-32211523.html. The original Chinese passage reads:当前中国面临着越来越严峻复杂的国际环境，美国正在对中国实施越来越严厉的军事威胁、经济及科技封锁、金融打击、政治及外交围剿，正在对中国发动生物战、网络战、舆论战、太空战，力度越来越大地通过中国内部的第五纵队对中国发动颜色革命。如果这个时候，我们还

A war is already in progress, according to Chinese leaders. Therefore, China should just keep America at bay as long as possible and ensure a credible retaliatory capability through what they say is a limited but effective nuclear arsenal (approximately 1,000-1,500 nuclear warheads advanced cyber capabilities). The sense that China's position is impaired by ineffective political leadership, insufficient military strength, and uncertainty about its retaliatory capabilities pairs with a couple of Chinese internal assessments – the growing ideological pressure of rising nationalism and optimism about China's present and future performances. Combining all these elements could prompt the Chinese decision-makers to spread in any direction as much as possible, to conquer space (political, commercial, technological, etc.), a step, an inch at a time. This way of thinking, then, could lead Beijing to move one step too many and irk not only the U.S. but virtually any other country that may feel it's being smothered by the growing Chinese presence. This seems to be a clear strategy of Chinese encroachment.

Its approach, and the way of thinking underlying it, must be exposed as mistaken. First and foremost is the mistrust of American internal and international political solidity.

If the Chinese perception of the U.S. decline is rapidly dented and changed, it can impact Chinese nationalism and overconfidence and start different processes in China. Without this,

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要依靠那些大资本家作为反帝国主义、反霸权主义的主力、还在迎合美国的奶头乐战略，让我们的青年一代失去强悍和阳刚的雄风，那么我们不用敌人来打就自己先倒下了，就像当年苏联一样，任国家崩溃、任国家财富被洗劫、任人民陷入深重灾难。因此当前我们中国正在发生的这场深刻变革，正是为了应对当前严峻而复杂的国际形势，正是为了应对美国已经开始对中国发动的野蛮而凶猛的攻击。

China may carry on with its policies; sure, it will find little or no resistance.

The re-election of President Donald Trump, despite his support for the attack on Capitol Hill, proved to China that U.S. democracy is a game of a few players, subverted one way or another against the general interests of the state and of the majority of the population. This model is flawed and may ultimately implode, as all growing controversies in America demonstrate.

Conversely, a Party attentive to the needs of the ordinary people, on its toes about the country's general direction, is a much better alternative for governance, one that is expected to prevail should America fracture in a few years or decades.

Moreover, the Chinese were aware that the possibility of a Trump return would alienate many allies, especially in Europe, and then it would be one of the U.S.'s main assets – its soft power, its charm.

Political misjudgment failed Hitler and Germany in World War II. He did not believe the U.S. and Russia would be together with their patchy alliance; he may have thought that America, with its recent large group of Nazi sympathizers and racists, would turn against the USSR and ally itself with Germany. Hitler failed to understand American psychology. In this, he was backed by a very disciplined party and armed force, a gimmicky arsenal of new weapons (the first ballistic missile, the progress for the atomic bomb) that promised they could turn the tide of war. He thus destroyed Germany's 300 years of slow and constant Prussian rise.

Will the U.S. change to adapt to China's political-cultural sensitivity? The issue is the backbone of the American system, the division of powers, and it's impossible the U.S. would give in on that without being defeated in an actual clash or some kind of coup

where a Trump-like man takes all the power. Then the whole world will be different.

Governance and Strategy (2020s): Xi Jinping's Military and Foreign Politics Shifts

In 2020, a substantial shift in China's foreign approach was underway, showing what was possibly hubris. President Xi Jinping promoted a new Minister of Defense, Dong Jun, sacked nine senior generals, and set a new path for foreign politics. Xi vowed to "seize strategic opportunities and further enhance China's 'international influence, appeal, and power' to shape a rapidly changing world by strengthening Communist Party control of foreign affairs and standing firm against 'bullying' and 'hegemonism' from the West."[111]

The rare closed-door party meeting on future foreign policy direction ended on December 28, coinciding with the military reshuffle. Xi reportedly urged diplomats and officials to "break new ground," "rally the overwhelming majority" of the world, and adhere to the "fighting spirit." In fact, Beijing appears to believe that "with the Ukraine war and the Israel-Gaza conflict, China faces strategic opportunities to act as a peace broker and leader of the Global South."

The nine demoted generals are connected to the Second Artillery, the army department in charge of the rocket force and the

[111] South China Morning Post, " 'Fighting Spirit': Xi Jinping Reveals China's Push for Global Power after Rare Closed-Door Meeting on Foreign Policy," December 29, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3246631/fighting-spirit-xi-jinping-reveals-chinas-push-global-power-after-rare-closed-door-meeting-foreign.

space program, including the weather balloons. One Chinese weather balloon drifting off at lower altitudes in U.S. airspace in February 2023 caused a dispute between the U.S. and China. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken canceled his scheduled trip to China, and bilateral ties spun into turmoil for months until the November summit in San Francisco between Xi and U.S. President Joseph Biden reset the course.

In June, Foreign Minister Qin Gang was sacked without much explanation, and in August, Defense Minister Li Shangfu, a veteran of the Second Artillery, faced the same fate. It is unclear whether their demotions are related to the balloon incident.

Dong was not part of the seven-man strong PLA (People's Liberation Army) Central Military Commission but was chosen outside of it. This might hint at further purges in the military leadership. Xi serves as the chairman of the Commission. The present reshuffle has often been attributed to corruption and misallocation of funds. The expensive missile and satellite program could not then perform as well as intended.

Dong is the first official with actual Navy experience to assume the role of Minister of Defense. The Navy oversees the two most delicate and urgent theaters for China: Taiwan and the South China Sea. These may be considered regional challenges in theory, although they have global implications.

The Second Artillery, with its nuclear missile force and satellites, is responsible for broader strategies, including the potential for a nuclear strike against the U.S. The change in leadership between the two men could bring different perspectives to the helm of the military, charged with envisioning comprehensive foreign affairs scenarios. Dong's semi-official biographies highlight his diplomatic experience handling issues with foreign countries.

Li Shangfu's diplomatic efforts were hindered from the beginning, as the U.S. had previously blacklisted him for arms trafficking. During the balloon incident, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin reportedly attempted but failed to reach Li by phone for clarification.

Traditionally, in China's system, the military is primarily responsible for analyzing foreign politics, while diplomats handle its implementation.

Xi appears to have carried out these significant personnel and direction changes without apparent opposition from within the party and without recourse to a Central Committee plenum. A plenum usually ensures that the entire party is aligned with significant movements. The absence of one could indicate Xi's firm grasp on crucial policies.

Xi's *Odyssey* through Western Confusion

The 2027 party congress could expand the president's powers. He is winning but has internal and external pressures. The international muddle helps him but it's very tricky.

The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Congress scheduled for autumn of next year, 2027, could be one of the most delicate and significant in its history. President Xi Jinping will extend his role for a fourth 5-year term and, for the first time, bring an entire generation of "Young" cadres up. They are born in the 1960s, roughly ten years younger than him, who will join the Standing Committee (5 to 7 people) or the Politburo (21-25 people).

In the three previous Congresses, Xi (b. in 1953), who rose to power in 2012, had to make his way among officials his own age or older. He succeeded with clearly brilliant results. A Politburo made

up of younger people who owe everything to him will further increase his clout in the country.

He has over a year to prepare, and no challengers on the horizon. He has completed an unprecedented purge of the military without any pushback from any party organization. The CPC was practically born out of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the military had always been the political kingmaker. By zeroing out the PLA's political power, Xi has concentrated a degree of authority that none of his predecessors, including Mao, ever had. Mao's power was based on the PLA's support and his successes in surviving and winning the Civil War against the KMT nationalists. Xi's power apparently came from fighting and winning a vastly underground internal party struggle against all other factions.

He can claim some strong accomplishments. For the first time in almost two centuries, he confronted the US and forced it to yield in a delicate tariff dispute with broad political implications. He waded through a dangerous COVID outbreak while keeping the country steady. None of his predecessors in China (not only in the CPC) can boast something similar in well over a century.

He did it by shifting the paradigm by which ruling performances are considered. In Mao's time, it was only 'politics', ideological purity, adherence to Maoist official creed. Officials were promoted or demoted based on their adherence to 'communist orthodoxy'. With Deng, it was about the economy and growth. Officials went up or down depending on the business data they provided.

Now it is a new mix. There is economic growth, but it is not the absolute gauge. It must be tempered with party loyalty and political wile.

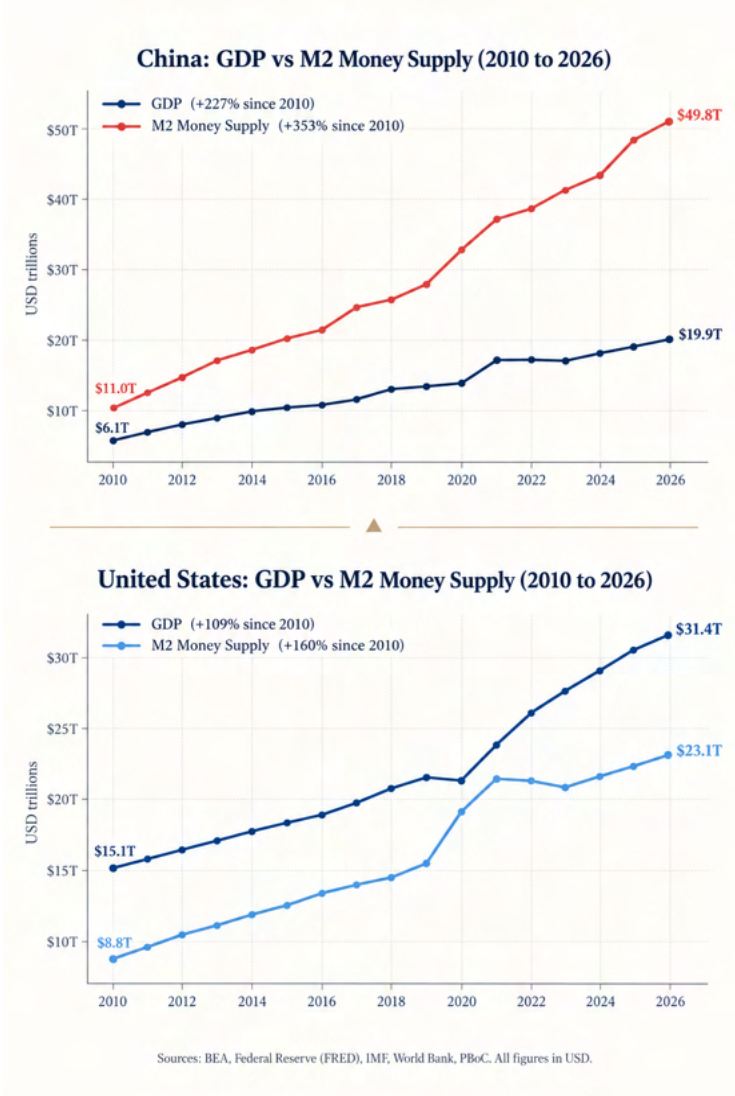
This paradigm has allowed Xi to position China as a direct competitor to the existing superpower, the USA.

Long term: Democracy, Neighbors, Arms ... and Debt

Yet, despite these results, China still faces a set of long- and short-term problems in its global positioning. They should not impact the 2027 Party Congress. The short-term ones might. China has four long-term issues: 1. democracy, 2. relations with its neighbors, 3. excess of armed forces, 4. public debt.

1. Democracy is a lingering headache, straggling internal and external vulnerabilities. Being undemocratic cripples China's external position and also its international voice. Its media have no weight in the global debate, seen just as Xi's loudspeakers. This undermines its potential influence. To be an undemocratic world leader when most other major countries are democratic is, to say the least, odd. Internally, China needs to create a genuine domestic consumption market, and to do so, it needs a better welfare state and a fiscal overhaul. Yet these are all agencies for controversial political reform. In many democratic countries, there's growing annoyance with democratic rule, and this, in time, could obscure China's democratic faults, but internal economic pressures will continue to grow.
2. China has bad relations with almost all of its neighbors. It doesn't have any allies or friends, and things aren't improving. Without going into the reasons for this, it complicates all commercial and political ventures. In the short term, nobody has an interest in exacerbating tensions and rocking the boat. But in the long term, this pressure could lead to an unpleasant outcome for China.

3. China has massive and growing armed forces, worrying everybody and kindling a regional arms race. The US also has massive armed forces, but they are aimed at US enemies (which can vary). Still, the US has a vast network of allies. No ally believes the US will attack them, and officially, they have a goal beyond US interests. These armed forces serve global security. The problem is the opposite of China's: allies complain because the US armed forces aren't used enough, or aren't used against their own enemies. But no country, near or far from China, feels secure that Chinese forces won't be used against their own state. Moreover, Chinese armed forces serve only Chinese security, not anyone else's. In reality, there are only two large, comprehensive military apparatuses: the US and China. For instance, Japan not only will not attack the US militarily, but it also *couldn't*, because it's tied into the American defense platform
4. And then there's the most complicated issue – internal debt.



The first graph shows that China's economy is faltering, and it has been doing so since well before Xi came to power. China is pouring money, almost three times its GDP, into the economy to achieve less than 5% growth per year.

The money is not wasted; the results are visible: massive constructions, huge infrastructure, unparalleled industrial capabilities, and almost 30% of all industrial output[112]. No other country comes close to matching China's combination of scale, breadth (from steel and textiles to EVs, robotics, and semiconductors), and integrated supply chains. No single country yet matches China's full industrial range.

But there is a relatively puny economic return for all of that. Many are monuments, cathedrals, beautiful things with little or no economic sense. In these numbers could be hidden one of the largest public debt black holes in human history, capable of crushing China and taking the whole world with it.

China's difficulties are even more evident in comparison with the second graph.

The US has a smaller money supply in absolute and relative terms and produces more growth. The two graphs show that China has built a wall of concrete and steel that yields little return for itself and has accumulated much internal debt. Plus, the simple upkeep of all these industries and infrastructures could be an important drain on the State's coffers. On top of that, China is experiencing deflation, while America is experiencing inflation.

This is sustained by Chinese savings ("taxed" at low interest rates by banks) and Chinese exports, which continue to grow at an unsustainable pace (in 2025, they were US$ 1.2 T). But Chinese people are earning less over time and thus save less. Even in the best world, the global market can't close all its factories to make room for Chinese production.

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[112] Arendse Huld and Qian Zhou, "China Manufacturing Tracker 2026," China Briefing, September 7, 2026, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-manufacturing-industry-tracker/.

In 2012, Xi might have wanted to address the problem confronting the State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), but they resisted and opposed him. He didn't succeed. Will he be able to tackle it in 2027? Now, although there is no power group able to oppose Xi, can anybody sandbag his reforms? The international situation has dramatically changed, however.

All four of these elements reinforce each other and complicate peaceful solutions.

In China, some may shrug off these issues. They might believe that they are in the long term and that time is on China's side. The present US power is declining, and without US opposition, it's a different ball game, and China can get away with much.

Some Chinese may believe that the emerging situation is one of many small and medium powers contending with each other, almost like China's 4th–3rd century BC Warring States period. Here is an arcane ancient Chinese parenthesis with modern impacts.

Back to the 4th century

In the 4th century BC, the Later Mohists (in the *Mohist Canons*) developed a genuinely sophisticated apparatus of disputation (*bian*)—theories of naming, criteria for class inclusion, rules for distinguishing "this/that" (*shi/fei*), and rules for valid argument. Zhuangzi, especially in the "Qiwulun" (Chapter 2, "Discourse on Making All Things Equal" in Graham's translation), engages with that tradition—and with Hui Shi's paradoxes in particular—but does so *skeptically*. He's not ***out-logicing*** the Mohists with a superior logic; he's questioning whether disputation can ever ground itself, since every "this" implies a "that," every affirmation a rival denial, and every standard of judgment (*shi/fei*) is perspectival, arising from a particular position rather than any Archimedean point outside all positions.

Graham's Zhuangzi relativizes the whole project of disputation—suggesting that deeper wisdom lies in recognizing the limits of *bian* and in a kind of responsiveness to circumstance (something Graham links to his broader reading of early Daoism as a philosophy of spontaneity, *ziran*, rather than fixed rule-following). It's closer to a *critique from outside logic* than a rival logic that wins the argument on logic's own terms.[113]

Graham argues that this is why China was not dominated by systematic logic, as seen in the Western tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle.

It could be not just an issue of 'logic' but of political necessity. Zhuangzi's friend and fellow logical maverick, Hui Shi, invented a system that revolutionized the Sinic world forever and set aside Mohist logic. As prime minister of Wei, he suggested setting aside the role of the Zhou Son of Heaven, which was still used ceremonially and diplomatically, and having two rulers recognize each other as 'kings'.

Andrew Seth Meyer writes[114]

> "The meeting between Tian Yinqi and Wei Ying (the rulers of Qi and Wei, respectively) at Xuzhou in 334 C, in which both men acknowledged one another as 'kings,' ushered in a new era for the Zhou world… In just over a decade following 334 BC, most of the powerful rulers of the Yellow River plain followed suit in acquiring the title of king… The ruler who rose from marquis to king during the

[113] A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 107–235.

[114] Andrew Seth Meyer, To Rule All under Heaven: A History of Classical China, from Confucius to the First Emperor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026), 243–49.

> Warring States found that he possessed significant new powers. These new powers had many complex forms and ramifications, but they generally fell into two discrete realms… After 334 BC, the Zhou world moved from being the domain of a single king into one populated by many, and the nature of interstate relations rapidly transformed, accelerating developments that had been in process for decades. It is at this point that the most powerful of the Warring States can accurately be called 'kingdoms,' because they openly, explicitly, and consistently assumed fully sovereign control over geopolitical and social policy. Kings no longer acknowledged any obligation to inform the Zhou Son of Heaven (who was now their peer) of matters of state. They could negotiate swiftly and in secret, with no fear that any counterpart (king or not) could invoke the authority of 'the king' to back out of a deal".

Enthroning one another proved the arbitrariness of logic, plied by practical needs, without much 'truth', tradition, behind. Previous thinkers tried to fix the Zhou system, addressing this or that problem, and wanted to return to a golden age.

The Mohists might have been the strongest force pushing to strengthen the role of the Zhou Son of Heaven. Hui Shi cast him aside, seeing him as a hindrance rather than a solution. He overhauled the whole cultural and political system of the ancient Sinic koine, using the same words but purposely giving them very different content, a new, arbitrary meaning suited to the new political necessities.

The Son of Heaven and the Zhou order were simply chucked away with no explanation needed. Zhuangzi took a further turn: if words had no meaning, nothing had meaning. The tradition and continuity didn't exist.

The Mediterranean

It is a very different environment from the Western tradition that came from the Roman Empire. Rome, originally an outsider in the ancient Mediterranean power game, sought tradition in antiquity, hooking itself to Greece, Egypt, and Babylonia. In the late Second Millennium and first Millennium BC, the Mediterranean was not a cultural koine, but a civilization crossroads of strong and ambitious empires.

The Egyptian empire clashed with the Hittites in the Battle of Kadesh (c. 1274 BC, modern-day Lebanon-Syria border). The battle was inconclusive, and the two empires stood against one another, splitting the eastern coast from the Anatolian peninsula to the Sinai. The foundational stories of Western civilization, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are based on episodes from these conflicts.

There were different languages and very different cultures chafing against each other, recognizing no common ground.

The first Mediterranean koine was created by Alexander the Great and Aristotle and lasted basically until the 17th–18th-century liberal and Industrial Revolution. For all this time, some 2000 years, spanning from the third-century Roman conquest of the Mediterranean to the Enlightenment, a vertical system in which knowledge, politics, and religious/cosmological vision were aligned.

After that, and especially after the American and French revolutions, the whole systemic logic was set aside without grand gestures, and everything was in motion.

The 2027 Party Congress will have to confront the new, unprecedented environment and might need grand ideas to explain to China and to the world what it wants to do. Almost like

Hui Shi devised in 334 BC. Congresses before had to think about how to fit into and suit an existing stable environment.

Short-term concerns

Still, there are short-term risks that could scuttle many CPC programs. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East de facto serve China's interests because they distract the USA and the rest of the world from Beijing. But things are turning and could go south for Beijing.

It's unlikely that Ukraine will give up to Russia, or that Israel will surrender to Iran. But there is a possibility that over the next year Russia or Iran (or both) will cave and thus one or both countries will turn into a failed state or an American ally.

If that happens, China could be more isolated, and this could reflect badly on Xi on the eve of the party congress. Therefore, maybe Beijing now has an interest in facilitating some kind of peace or ceasefire that at least dodges utter disaster.

Beijing's support for Russia soured relations with Europe, which had been much warmer before. Securing peace on one or two fronts could help China position itself better amid a moment of grand confusion in the West.

If China does it actively, then it can claim it as a victory. If wars go south for China's friends, Beijing might be in trouble.

New Western Paradigms

At the moment, the situation is not totally negative for China. The West is looking for a path forward, and it's not finding it. In a recent interview with *The Economist* editor-in-chief Zanny Minton Beddoes, trillionaire Elon Musk opposed the view that the UK is more peaceful and has less crime than the US. He argued that the growing immigrant and Islamic population poses a threat to the UK's security. The editor was talking of present factual reality. Musk

made a prediction based on the assumption that migrants, and particularly Muslims, are irreconcilable with the UK identity.

But Musk's prescription, supporting the radical right, may be like curing a headache with a guillotine, as Alfredo Costa (a global expert on headaches) quipped to me.

The recourse to the extreme right could exacerbate social tensions, scorch the earth, and potentially leave only the escape to Mars as an option. Maybe before reaching for the guillotine, there can be other tools to treat a headache, including simply living with the headache. There are people who died past age 90 having lived with headaches the whole way.

The West's dramas (broadly speaking) should be taken seriously today, but many of the doctors at the West's bedside seem like quacks more interested, for one reason or another, in letting it die than in keeping it alive.

Xi may not want to fret about his many intractable problems while the West is fighting with its demons. It's very unclear what will come out of it. Depending on the outcome, Xi may decide to go one way or another, but there is no reason to hurry.

Still, China might want to have one calculation open. Despite all the prophets of doom, the West may be in good health. This turmoil is the bread and butter of modernity. The West finds nourishment in it, not doom. America might end up with a different kind of dominance, but still dominance, and China should be prepared for every eventuality.

Perhaps an extension of American power on different foundations—no longer white and old-Western, but multi-ethnic and liberal. The Pope and various monarchs (once the paragon of conservation) seem to be moving in this direction.

Perhaps we all need to think in different terms and focus on a short-term necessity. Then, over the next year, China should help pull the plug on both wars.

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Afterword

The Historical Life of Institutions

"People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors."

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

Some books answer questions. Others change the questions we ask. *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear: Military Power, Political Order, and the Making of China's Grand Strategy* belongs to the latter category.

At first reading, Francesco Sisci's manuscript appears to be a work about China. It reconstructs the historical evolution of Chinese statecraft through centuries of political conflict, philosophical debate, institutional innovation, and military experience. Its enduring contribution lies in its method. Sisci changes where strategic inquiry begins.

Contemporary scholarship often examines strategy through the decisions of governments, political leaders, military capabilities, or the institutions of the modern state.[115] Sisci begins with civilization. He shows that strategy emerges from the long historical development of governance, philosophical worldview, and political order. Institutions carry assumptions about authority, legitimacy, and political purpose across generations, giving strategic behavior a historical continuity that extends far beyond the circumstances of any particular moment. Strategy becomes the expression of

[115] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Colin S. Gray, The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

institutions shaped over centuries by recurring political, social, and intellectual challenges.

This perspective reshapes the study of strategy. Strategic thought resides within institutions whose histories long predate the modern state. Those institutions define political purpose, confer legitimacy, and establish the boundaries of collective action before policy is formulated or geopolitical competition unfolds. Sisci restores history to the center of strategic inquiry as one of its principal sources. Historical experience becomes the medium through which institutions acquire judgment, continuity, and strategic direction.

One of the remarkable qualities of this manuscript is its intellectual discipline. Sisci does not seek to construct a universal theory of governance or present China's historical experience as a model for every civilization. He explains China on its own historical terms. That discipline gives his argument its authority because it resists the temptation, common in comparative scholarship, to universalize before understanding.

Important scholarly works always generate questions beyond those they answer. Their lasting value lies in the conversations they open and the inquiries they invite. Sisci's historical reconstruction does precisely this. His account of strategy as the product of governance, institutions, and historical experience naturally extends to a broader question: what sustains institutions across time?

The enduring question is one of institutional continuity. Institutions persist because they preserve their identity while responding to changing historical circumstances. Endurance is the capacity to carry purpose through change.

Every enduring institution lives within this reality. Universities revise their curricula while remaining faithful to their educational

mission. Governments reform constitutions and public administration while preserving the political purposes from which their legitimacy derives. Corporations innovate while sustaining the values that define their identity. Religious communities reinterpret ancient traditions while remaining rooted in the beliefs that give them meaning.

These institutions differ in structure, authority, and purpose. They share the work of continuity. Each generation inherits an institution, interprets its purposes under new conditions, and prepares it for those who follow. Adaptation becomes the means through which institutional identity is preserved.

China offers one of history's richest examples of this enduring process. Across more than two millennia, dynasties rose and fell, administrative systems evolved, philosophical traditions competed, military doctrines changed, and political authority was repeatedly reconstituted. Throughout these transformations, enduring questions of legitimacy, order, authority, and political purpose continued to shape public life. Sisci illuminates this remarkable continuity, showing how institutions carry a civilization through successive periods of historical change.

China serves a larger intellectual purpose. Its history provides a lens through which the enduring character of institutions comes into view. The study of China becomes an inquiry into the historical life of institutions themselves.

Governance is the continuing stewardship of institutional inheritance across generations of historical change. Stewardship directs attention to governance as an interpretive practice rather than a collection of structures, procedures, or regulatory mechanisms. Institutions are interpretive communities. They receive an inheritance from the past, reinterpret it in the present,

and transmit it to the future. Their continuity depends upon renewing the purposes that give inherited structures meaning.

Contemporary governance scholarship rightly devotes considerable attention to institutional effectiveness.[116] It asks whether institutions are accountable, whether decisions are transparent, whether stakeholders are represented, whether boards function well, and whether policies achieve their intended outcomes. These questions strengthen institutional performance. They situate governance largely within the horizon of the present. Sisci broadens that horizon by restoring time to the center of governance. Institutions carry purposes inherited from earlier generations while preparing for challenges they cannot yet foresee.

Governance requires judgment before it requires administration. Every generation inherits an institution it did not create. That inheritance includes constitutions, legal authorities, and organizational structures. It includes traditions, narratives, symbols, assumptions, and understandings of legitimacy that resist codification because they live within institutional memory. Governance gives each generation responsibility for interpreting that inheritance under changing historical conditions. New technologies emerge. Political orders evolve. Social expectations shift. Institutions remain vital by renewing inherited purposes within a changing world.

The work of governance unfolds through the continual relationship between continuity and adaptation. Every enduring institution must preserve purpose while responding to changing

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[116] R. A. W. Rhodes, Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997); Mark Bevir, *Governance: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

historical circumstances. Governance does not eliminate this tension. It holds continuity and adaptation together through prudent judgment.

Governance sustains institutional continuity through historical change. Institutions remain recognizable because they preserve enduring purposes, and they remain effective because they adapt those purposes to changing circumstances. Stewardship joins continuity and adaptation through the exercise of judgment. Every generation receives responsibility for carrying institutions forward while responding to the demands of its own historical moment.

Sisci's historical reconstruction demonstrates this process with exceptional clarity. Continuity emerges not as institutional permanence but as the preservation of enduring purposes through successive acts of institutional renewal. His work therefore reaches well beyond China studies by revealing the historical conditions through which institutions sustain their identity across time.

This perspective reorients the study of governance. Institutions exercise authority, allocate resources, and ensure accountability in pursuit of larger purposes. Those purposes give coherence to every measure of institutional effectiveness. Governance begins with the question of institutional purpose because purpose defines what authority serves, what accountability protects, and what strategy seeks to accomplish. Institutions that lose sight of purpose gradually reduce governance to procedure, legitimacy to transaction, and strategy to reaction. Stewardship restores those practices to the larger horizon of institutional meaning.

Leadership follows the same historical logic. Contemporary leadership literature often celebrates innovation, disruption, and

transformational change.[117] These priorities reflect an era shaped by rapid technological and political change. Leaders, however, always govern within institutions that possess their own histories. They inherit purposes accumulated over decades and, in many cases, centuries. Leadership begins with understanding that inheritance. Its enduring responsibility is to discern which elements of an institution's identity must be carried forward so that the future remains connected to its past.

History gives institutions continuity. Every generation confronts circumstances its predecessors could neither anticipate nor control, yet remains responsible for preserving institutional purpose under new conditions. Governance depends upon judgment informed by memory and directed toward renewal.

Governance is fundamentally a discipline of judgment. Its central question is neither procedural nor technical. It asks: What must be preserved so that meaningful change remains possible?

Every generation answers that question anew. The answer grows from historical understanding, institutional memory, and the recognition that each decision becomes part of a conversation extending beyond the present generation. History is one of governance's principal resources. Institutions govern wisely because they learn to interpret the past as they prepare for the future.

This, I believe, is the central implication of Sisci's historical reconstruction. Strategic thought develops within an ongoing conversation about authority, legitimacy, and political order that extends across generations. Every enduring institution participates

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[117] James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

in such a conversation, even as its traditions, language, and historical experience remain distinctive. Governance sustains that conversation. It gives institutions the capacity to remember, to interpret, and to carry their purposes forward through time.

Institutions think historically before they act strategically. Long before policies are formulated or decisions are made, they inherit assumptions about authority, legitimacy, obligation, and political purpose that shape what later appears as strategic choice. Strategy carries the accumulated weight of institutional history.

Governance scholarship studies institutions as communities of historical judgment. Governance is the continuing work through which institutions draw upon their history, clarify their purposes, and carry those purposes into an uncertain future. Institutional life unfolds across successive generations, each receiving an inheritance and preparing it for the next.

Governance scholarship benefits from a broader understanding of institutional diversity. Enduring institutions do not converge toward a single model of design because their purposes differ. Whether cultivating knowledge, creating economic value, sustaining faith, ordering political life, or coordinating among sovereign states, institutions derive their form from the purposes they exist to serve.

Despite these differences, enduring institutions share a common human responsibility. They sustain continuity, earn trust, and renew their purposes as historical circumstances change. Governance gives institutions the capacity to carry that responsibility across generations through thoughtful judgment.

Leadership shares the same historical character. Leaders inherit institutions before they shape them. Their first responsibility is to discern the meaning of institutional inheritance with historical sensitivity and practical judgment. They distinguish between

traditions that express an institution's enduring purpose and practices that belong to an earlier historical moment. Leadership depends upon judgment informed by history, attentive to institutional identity, and directed toward purposes that extend beyond individual careers or political cycles.

Institutions are among the principal means through which civilizations remember themselves. They preserve inherited traditions by placing them in conversation with changing historical realities. Universities carry intellectual traditions that long predate their present faculties. Courts inherit legal principles refined across centuries of jurisprudence. Governments embody constitutional understandings that define the relationship between authority and citizenship across time.

Institutional life depends upon this continuing conversation between inheritance and renewal. Every generation confronts questions that require both historical memory and present judgment. Governance sustains that conversation. It enables institutions to renew inherited purposes while remaining faithful to the identities that give those purposes meaning.

Governance fulfills its work through interpretation. Institutions inherit purposes rather than instructions. They receive the past as experience, memory, and accumulated judgment, discovering their identity through successive acts of historical judgment. Governance calls for leaders who combine decisiveness with historical understanding. Their responsibility is to preserve institutional purpose by renewing inherited traditions with fidelity, imagination, and practical judgment under conditions their predecessors could never have anticipated.

This interpretive responsibility points toward a concept that has become surprisingly rare in contemporary governance scholarship: wisdom. Information tells institutions what is happening. Analysis

explains why. Wisdom asks what ought to be carried forward. It tempers confidence with humility because every generation governs within circumstances it did not create and whose consequences it cannot fully foresee.

This explains why Sisci's manuscript feels so timely despite the centuries it traverses. At a moment when political life is increasingly shaped by immediacy, disruption, and acceleration, *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear* reminds us that strategic judgment develops slowly. It grows through generations of institutional learning, philosophical reflection, political experimentation, and practical experience. The historical life of institutions cultivates strategy long before individual leaders are called upon to exercise it.

The significance of this insight extends beyond governance scholarship. Contemporary institutions confront a common challenge of purpose and public confidence. Democratic governments face declining trust.[118] Universities struggle to articulate their distinctive mission amid competing political and economic expectations. Corporations navigate expanding obligations to stakeholders whose expectations frequently diverge. International organizations encounter renewed questions of legitimacy in an increasingly fragmented world. These developments invite renewed reflection on the purposes institutions exist to serve.

This temporal dimension, I believe, is the most significant implication of Sisci's work for governance scholarship. His history shows that strategy grows from the accumulated life of institutions. My argument has extended that insight to governance.

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[118] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Government at a Glance 2023 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).

That perspective invites governance scholarship to adopt a longer historical horizon. Institutions function through structures and procedures, yet they also remember, interpret, and preserve purpose across generations. Governance scholarship asks how institutions sustain legitimacy through time, how they carry inherited purposes into changing circumstances, and how they prepare an inheritance for those who will follow. Every enduring institution lives simultaneously in three dimensions of time: receiving an inheritance from the past, exercising judgment in the present, and preparing an inheritance for the future.

This is the most enduring lesson I take from *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear*. Francesco Sisci has written far more than a history of Chinese statecraft. He has shown that strategy emerges from the historical life of institutions and the civilizations that sustain them. His work restores history to its rightful place as one of strategy's principal sources.

This essay extends that insight one step further. Sisci's historical reconstruction points naturally toward governance. If strategy emerges from institutions shaped across generations, governance bears responsibility for sustaining their historical life. Institutions endure because successive generations renew their purposes, preserve their identity, and prepare them for those who follow. Leadership becomes an act of stewardship, accountability reaches across past, present, and future generations, and strategy expresses institutions that have learned through history how to remain faithful to their purposes while responding wisely to changing circumstances.

Institutions stand among humanity's greatest achievements. They allow knowledge to outlive scholars, justice to outlive judges, faith to outlive believers, and political communities to outlive

individual rulers. They make it possible for one generation to contribute to another without ever meeting it.

For that reason, *Thinking from the Tip of the Spear* deserves attention well beyond the boundaries of China studies. It invites us to recover a fundamental understanding of how institutions carry human purposes across time. It reminds us that strategy begins long before decisions are made and that governance extends across generations of institutional life. Together, they express humanity's enduring effort to receive the past faithfully, govern the present wisely, and prepare the future responsibly.

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