

# China's Identity through a Historical Lens

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**Abstract:** This article takes a strategic culture approach to describe China's identity. It narrates how historical events of the past 150 years have shaped tensions between national feelings of superiority and inferiority, demands for development and equality, the thirst for freedom and longing for security, and China's territorial ambitions and geopolitical reality. It then discusses China's approach to two areas of potential conflict—Taiwan and the South China Sea. It concludes with reflections on Chinese ideas about international order.

**Keywords:** strategic culture, China, identity, international relations, Taiwan, Chinese Communist Party, CCP

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to give a simple description of China's identity by summarizing salient features of its history and relating them to current issues in great power competition. The importance of understanding China has never been greater, particularly for military and diplomatic leaders of the world's preeminent power, the United States. In part, this is due to rising tension in the bilateral relationship, where terms like *strategic competition* and *rivalry* increasingly displace *partnership* or *cooperation*. In part, this is due to the West's relative ignorance of China compared to China's understanding of the West. Popular understandings of China are tainted by the influence of previous generations of writers who, in the service of various imperial projects, constructed the East as exotic, effeminate, and dangerous.<sup>1</sup> This leads to two common mistakes. The first is to demonize China, regarding everything Chinese

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with suspicion, skepticism, fear, or mistrust. The second is to idealize it, treating Chinese knowledge as a source of special insights and taking too seriously some of the things that the Chinese like to say about themselves, such as “China seeks a harmonious world.” In part, the need to understand China better comes from the brute fact of China’s rise: its gross domestic product (GDP), which is second only to that of the United States, or bigger if one measures it in purchasing power parities; and its military capabilities, which while still less impressive than those of the United States and Russia, are on a rising trajectory.<sup>2</sup>

This article takes a strategic culture approach.<sup>3</sup> The author is concerned with describing the key historical events that formed China’s identity. Identity is defined as the “nation-state’s view of itself, comprising the traits of its national character, its intended regional and global roles, and its perceptions of its eventual destiny.”<sup>4</sup> The international relations approach closest to strategic culture is constructivism, which problematizes the formation and transformation of state interests and provides explanations for them in terms of historical processes of identity formation.<sup>5</sup> As Jeannie L. Johnson points out, “Values weighed by a rational actor in a cost/benefit analysis are often ideational as well as material and cannot be accurately assessed without a substantive knowledge of the actor’s preferences.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, being equipped with a rational mind and a set of internationally transferable assumptions about state behavior is often insufficient. Strategists need to ground such assumptions in a deep understanding of the identity of the actor.

China’s identity is the outcome of a series of tensions emerging from its history. China has risen as a great power in the modern world after taking several wrong turns and what it describes as a “Century of Humiliation.” Along the way, tensions have emerged between feelings of superiority and inferiority, between the needs for development and equality, between demands for freedom and order, and between China’s territorial ambitions and geopolitical reality. John Gerard Ruggie suggests a conception of time as “different temporal forms that bring deeper and wider ‘presents’ into view” and a conception of space as a “social construct that people, somehow, invent . . . [and which] generates emergent properties of its own.”<sup>7</sup> Seen in this light, China’s identity is a complex historical phenomenon, but there is no mysterious essence that one must have spent decades in China to grasp.

The structure of the article is chronological, following the broad outlines of Chinese history during the past century and a half, before opening out into a discussion of current geopolitical issues and concluding with a characterization of the tensions underlying China’s identity.

### **China’s Inferiority-Superiority Complex**

China is driven to be an overachiever. Iver B. Neumann writes that “if Russia had an inferiority complex towards Europe in 1991, a quarter-century down the road that has been inverted into a superiority complex.”<sup>8</sup> Neumann’s starting point is that all states have a need for recognition and that citizens’ beliefs

determine the grounds on which recognition may be sought. China is different from Russia in that instead of a kind of defensive pride, China continues to have feelings of superiority and inferiority simultaneously. Psychologists define “subjective overachievement” as the co-occurrence of self-doubt and anxiety over performance, which drives an individual to exert extra effort, leading to better results than expected.<sup>9</sup> Like the straight-A high school student who lacks popularity but works harder than their peers and eventually ends up with a much better income, China has made it in the material sense.

However, China’s feeling of superiority does not rest on GDP alone. As its diplomats never tire of reminding foreign journalists, Chinese civilization is 5,000 years old. It is an exaggerated claim, since not much is known about the first 2,000 years, and there were several long periods when China was split into multiple states or ruled by foreign dynasties. Nevertheless, there is a remarkable degree of cultural continuity, owing in part to the use of ideograms, which make even very ancient texts intelligible.<sup>10</sup> Admiral Zheng He’s voyages around Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the fifteenth century demonstrated China’s interest in the outside world. His ships dwarfed the one Columbus would sail to America 90 years later. Crucially, however, the purpose of the voyages was to “placate and moralize” rather than trade and conquer, and the Sino-centric tribute system demanded that Zheng He should confer gifts from the Ming emperor, thus gaining face and establishing obligation, rather than demanding trade or other concessions.<sup>11</sup> Confucianism, China’s traditional system of ethics, values social stability through hierarchy, and therefore what mattered in international relations was the establishment of a pecking order. The maps of the world prepared by Jesuits at the Ming court 200 years later prove that at the highest level, at least, China’s rulers were aware of the size and shape of the major continents, even if the zest for expensive voyages had faded.<sup>12</sup> However, the next dynasty, the Qing, turned to a policy of active self-isolation, motivated by the fear that southern China, which had seen large-scale rebellions in support of the Ming, would become too prosperous if allowed to trade freely, creating alternative power centers.<sup>13</sup> Security concerns thus lead the Qing to restrict foreign trade to just one guild, known in English as the Cohong (from the Chinese *Gonghang*), based in Guangzhou (Canton), in the far south of the country.

## Humiliation and Glory

China’s sense of inferiority comes from the “Century of Humiliation” beginning with the First Opium War (1839–42). Provoked by Chinese attempts to curtail the trade in opium, the British sent a fleet of 42 ships, including HMS *Nemesis* (1826), Britain’s first oceangoing iron warship. The Chinese had only swords, spears, primitive muskets, and seventeenth-century cannon with which to repel attacks by long-range naval artillery. The fact that they fortified Guangzhou while leaving other ports vulnerable showed a basic lack of understanding of how to fight wars at sea. The British had the ability to transport troops quick-

**Figure 1.** HMS *Nemesis* in action. Painting by William Adolphus Knell



Source: Christie's, LotFinder: entry 6231156.

ly along China's coast and the steam-powered *Nemesis* was able to maneuver in the shallow waters of Chinese rivers. The Qing dynasty's lack of preparation and strategic ignorance were not fully analyzed in China until 1995 when Mao Haijian published *Tianchao de Bengkui (Collapse of the Heavenly Dynasty)*.<sup>14</sup> The outcome of the war forced the Qing to abolish the Cohong, open five ports to international trade, accept permanent diplomatic envoys, pay an indemnity, cede Hong Kong in perpetuity, provide extraterritoriality for British subjects, fix import tariffs, and provide a most-favored nation clause to Britain.<sup>15</sup> Whatever Britain received, the United States and France also demanded.

The First Opium War set a pattern: the presentation of unreasonable demands, swift violence from the foreign powers, and the signing of an unequal treaty obliging the Chinese to make concessions and pay reparations. The Second Opium War (1856–60), the Sino-French War (1883–85), the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) form a continuing series of aggressions in the Chinese mind, all aimed at stripping China of its sovereignty and pillaging its wealth. During this period, modernization and industrialization were thrust on China by foreigners who saw the economic potential and wanted a piece of it, treating the Chinese as a colonized people. The sign “No dogs and no Chinese allowed!” which appears in Bruce Lee's 1972 film *Fist of Fury*, may not have existed in the form it appears in the film, but for the first 60 years of its existence until 1928, Huangpu Park in Shanghai did have regulations banning the admission of Chinese, unless they were police or servants accompanying a foreigner, as well as bans on dogs and bicycles.<sup>16</sup>

The end of China's civil war put an end to such humiliation, a turning of the tables best symbolized by People's Liberation Army (PLA) artillery crippling HMS *Amethyst* (F116) as the ship made its way up the Yangtze to relieve another British ship at Nanjing in the summer of 1949. Mao Zedong's speech to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in September that year—including the famous sentence “the Chinese people have stood up!”—celebrated victory over the Japanese, the European imperialist powers, and the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party, but it also warned of the need for continuing vigilance against “reactionaries.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the “liberation” did not end internal strife, which continued hand in hand with the construction of the People's Republic of China. Mao envisaged a united front under the leadership of the working class, but in reality, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stood above all classes and Mao stood above the CCP.<sup>18</sup> From that point on, the CCP identified itself with China and its propaganda conflated the two. De jure and in practice, the PLA was and remains the CCP's army.

### **Development versus Equality**

Deng Xiaoping's verdict on the founder of the PRC, echoing Mao's verdict on the Soviet Union, was that he was 70 percent good and 30 percent bad. In the same statement, Deng also said that China would never do to Mao what the Soviet Union had done to Stalin. The refusal to completely repudiate past leaders is an important feature of CCP ideology, keeping the party anchored to its past and limiting the range of possible futures. The “30 percent” is a terse admission of the suffering that Mao had inflicted to build a basic command economy. Through the Great Leap Forward (GLF), Mao tested two great *idées fixes*: that man's will rather than objective social and economic laws is the most important force in history, and that the undeveloped consciousness of the peasants conferred an advantage because their minds were like a blank sheet of paper. Mao failed to consider overreporting, a side effect of his absolute power, which meant that grain harvest statistics were inaccurate and too much food was taken out of the countryside to fund industrialization. Compounded with natural disasters, the GLF caused a famine costing about 30 million lives between the spring of 1959 and the end of 1961.<sup>19</sup>

After a decisive break with the Soviet Union, perceived as taking too soft a line with the West, Mao applied the same idea of blankness to youth, turning them into Red Guards and using them to attack the political and social elites, whom he perceived as corrupt and wavering in ideological commitment.<sup>20</sup> In the Cultural Revolution, thousands of intellectuals and officials were beaten to death and millions of city dwellers were sent into the countryside to work on farms. When Red Guard factions started fighting one another, Mao called in the army to restore order. After Mao's death, his wife, Jiang Qing, and three of her henchmen took the blame for the Cultural Revolution and were put on trial. In 1981, the so-called Gang of Four were all given long sentences and China made a decisive break with Mao's extreme leftism.

The debate within the CCP on Maoist ideas had focused on whether “relations of production” (class struggle) or “productive forces” (industrialization and technology) were the priority in building Communism. Mao’s view was that fixing relations of production came first. When the Central Committee passed a resolution in 1958 attempting to soft pedal the Great Leap Forward, warning against “impetuous actions” and “utopian dreams” and reasserting that building Communism would take considerable time and could only be done after developing the productive forces, Mao was annoyed and the next year those who disagreed with him, including the Defense Minister Marshall Peng Dehuai, were purged as members of an “anti-Party clique.”<sup>21</sup> Deng’s reevaluation of Mao meant the return to power of those holding to more orthodox interpretations of Marxism-Leninism.

However, the world in 1979 did not look the same as the world in 1959. Undemocratic but capitalist states in East Asia had started their ascent to industrialized status.<sup>22</sup> In June 1981, the *People’s Daily* carried an article entitled “Principal Problems of the Soviet Economy” in which the economist Lu Nanquan pointed out that while huge investment had helped build a sound industrial base, overreliance on this method of economic growth had reduced economic efficiency, resulting in sluggish economic growth.<sup>23</sup> A new assessment of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy had begun.

Reform and Opening Up, as Deng’s policies became known, delivered what China craved—rapid development and, at last, respect on the international stage. It was a case of “crossing the river by feeling for the stones,” as the CCP did not have an established blueprint. Hence, Deng was praised for pragmatism and a gradual, decentralized approach whereby policy ideas were tried out in small areas before being scaled up. This created a pro-reform constituency, including enterprises and regions where policies had worked, and the nonstate sectors of the economy demonstrated innovation and took up the slack when the state sector was eventually downsized.<sup>24</sup> The most important change in the early years was the introduction of the Household Responsibility System, which was a euphemism for decollectivization: family farms replaced the people’s communes.<sup>25</sup> Township and village enterprises (TVEs) and private enterprises began to account for a steadily increasing share of the value of industrial output.<sup>26</sup> Deng was happy to humor Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald W. Reagan when they lauded him as “market reformer.” Yet, in ideological terms, he was far from liberalism, as his reinterpretation of Marxism involved the assertion that China was in the “primary stage of socialism.”<sup>27</sup> In this stage, China would remain a dictatorship under the leadership of the CCP and its focus would be on economic development.

## **Freedom versus Order**

Political and economic liberalism diffused into China, and a rift developed between those who wanted to move more quickly on the economy and even experiment with political reform and hardliners who wanted to stick closely

to orthodox Marxism-Leninism. Protests broke out after the April 1989 death of General Secretary Hu Yaobang, a reformer, over a perceived failure by the party leadership to mourn him properly. Events escalated as students occupied Tiananmen Square and began to make diverse demands. At the end of May, Mikhail Gorbachev made an untimely visit, the first Sino-Soviet summit since the 1961 split, further increasing the pressure on the hardliners. On the night of 3–4 June, Deng gave the order to clear the square by force. To Western media, who were in the city to cover the summit, the narrative was clear: a pro-democracy movement had been crushed. Western governments applied sanctions and investors pulled out. Deng defended himself by saying it was a “counter-revolutionary rebellion” that was “bound to happen and was independent of man’s will.”<sup>28</sup> The “6–4 Incident,” as the Chinese call it, showed the limits of political liberalization but also brought marketization into question. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe at the end of the year and the disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later stimulated deep reflection on what had gone wrong.<sup>29</sup> Deng’s southern tour in 1992 bolstered his position against conservatives, and he was able to convince the CCP that rapid development was their only means of salvation.

From the crucible of these events, a mentality combining cynicism, materialism, and nationalism emerged among Chinese elites in the 1990s. Materialism was the obverse of Communist ideology and reflected the zeitgeist of the previous decade.<sup>30</sup> Cynicism was a response to corruption resulting from the “commodification” of state power, disappointment with the outcomes of 1989, and loss of belief in Communism.<sup>31</sup> Chinese propagandists like to frame the growth of nationalism in this period as a reaction to repeated provocations by Western powers, specifically U.S. talk about “containing” China, attempts to spread democracy through “peaceful evolution,” and memories of the century of humiliation. Indeed, nationalistic books like *China Can Say “No!”* had huge commercial success.<sup>32</sup> However, the CCP also encouraged state-led nationalism, for example, through a “patriotic education campaign” in schools and universities.<sup>33</sup> Nationalism began to replace Communism as the basis for social solidarity.

## Current Geopolitical Tensions

Chinese nationalism has a popular dimension. Citizens protested in 1999 against the accidental bombing by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, again in 2001 after a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese jet near Hainan, causing the death of the Chinese pilot, and in 2005, 2010, and 2012 against Japan over various issues. The 2005 and 2012 protests included attacks on property and individuals. Official commemoration of past humiliation at the hands of foreign powers draws mass participation but also sometimes arouses skepticism.<sup>34</sup> There is little evidence that nationalism has ever gotten out of the CCP’s control, or that the regime has ever felt pressured to modify its diplomatic stances in response to popular pres-

sure. Participation in protest activity is predicted by social network diffusion.<sup>35</sup>

After their victory over the KMT in 1949, the CCP set out to build the *Zhonghua minzu* or “Chinese people” with the Han majority at its core. This involved exoticizing 55 ethnic minorities to assimilate them, to “recognize ethnic diversity into irrelevance” by conferring autonomous status on titular minority regions and various privileges on minorities while simultaneously depriving them of their ability to self-organize.<sup>36</sup> This “first generation” ethnicity policy came under criticism after the Soviet collapse because it was perceived to have “politicized” ethnicity.<sup>37</sup> Protests in Tibet and Xinjiang, provoked by economic inequality and religious and identity issues, reinforced the regime’s perception that the first-generation policy was not working. In 2009, clashes between members of the Uighur nationality and Han Chinese in Xinjiang’s capital, Urumqi, convinced the CCP that a new approach was needed for this region. Even though violence was perpetrated by both sides, the authorities blamed the Uighurs and resorted to totalitarian methods of suppression involving mass internment, intensified surveillance, indoctrination, and restrictions on religious practice. The solution found by the regime is tantamount to cultural genocide. Uighurs are included in the *Zhonghua minzu* but at the same time prevented from feeling part of it.<sup>38</sup>

Officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan is the rump regime established by the KMT after they fled the mainland in 1949. The PRC regards it as a renegade province. China’s Anti-Secession Law of 2005 commits China to pursue peaceful reunification, but, according to Article 8, in the event of “secession” or if the “possibilities of a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted” China will use “non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”<sup>39</sup> Although the adoption of the law is sometimes portrayed as a threat, U.S.-based scholar Suisheng Zhao argues that, on the contrary, it seeks to balance emotional pressures with national interests.<sup>40</sup> War is thus the last resort to be used only after every other means has been tried. A factor preventing war is the ambiguous position of the United States. The Taiwan Relations Act (1979) does not commit the United States to defend the island, but it does allow the United States to sell arms to it or defend it if the United States president so decides. In 1992, representatives of the CCP and KMT reached a consensus recognizing the principle of “one China,” but they shelved the question of which regime, the ROC or the PRC, should constitute the state. China’s interpretation of the principle is that Taiwan should eventually join the PRC under a “one country, two systems” arrangement analogous to Hong Kong. Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan’s president since 2016 from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has not accepted the consensus as a basis for relations with China.

China claims almost the whole of the South China Sea and pursues its claims with “creeping assertiveness,” a strategy combining negotiation with occupation.<sup>41</sup> It has built runways and fortifications on disputed atolls, pouring concrete over coral reefs, which took thousands of years to grow, and used “mar-



**Map 1.** Competing claims in the South China Sea

Source: *Voice of America*, adapted by MCUP.

itime militia” to coerce other countries’ vessels into leaving the area. In 2009, China referred to the South China Sea as a “core interest,” a term used for Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. It has claimed the status of an archipelagic state so that it can treat the South China Sea as an internal sea; it applies an expansive interpretation to the land features that can be used as the basis for claiming territorial seas and an exclusive economic zone, and it claims the right to regulate military activities within these areas.<sup>42</sup> When in 2016 the Philippines won an arbitration ruling under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) supporting its claim to part of the Spratly Islands, China refused to recognize the arbitration court, even though it is an UNCLOS signatory. China’s protestations that the South China Sea islands form part of its “historic territory” do not stand up to scrutiny: indeed, when Chinese nationalists first began to

agitate for sovereignty over the Spratlys and the Paracels in the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was confusion between the two archipelagos.<sup>43</sup> There are questions about what China hopes to achieve in the South China Sea, but it appears to some military observers to be part of a wider strategy aimed at neutralizing U.S. deterrence against an operation to retake Taiwan.<sup>44</sup>

China's approach to the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands dispute is similar. They have created an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) surrounding the islands, requiring civilian aircraft to identify themselves, and regularly send an enlarged coast guard fleet to patrol the area. China believes Japan's claim to the islands is based on the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, and therefore the islands should have been returned by Japan after the Second World War.<sup>45</sup> Japan believes that the islands were part of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which was annexed by Japan in 1879, and therefore have nothing to do with the Second World War. Since the United States and Japan have a mutual defense pact, the United States could be obliged to defend the islands if China were to try to take them by force.

### **Conclusion: China's Identity**

China repeats that it does not wish to be a hegemon, at least not on a global scale. The logic of the so-called Thucydides Trap is that when a rising power challenges the existing hegemon, conflict occurs more often than not.<sup>46</sup> Scholars have pointed to the dangers that emotions can bring to a power transition: an overconfident, ambitious China makes a strategic blunder, or an insecure, even paranoid United States overreacts to a provocation.<sup>47</sup> Other scholars have argued that the United States has less to fear and can even benefit from China's rise.<sup>48</sup> Be that as it may, China is preparing for conflict and has the second largest military budget in the world. Moreover, at 1.9 percent of GDP, its spending is both easily affordable and rapidly growing.

China wants security and respect within its existing borders, the opportunity to flourish as a key player in the global economy, plus Taiwan, the Diaoyu Islands, and control over the South China Sea. The concept of *geo-body* is useful in understanding the nature and extent of China's ambitions—it refers to the constructed homeland, which is “not merely space or territory . . . [but] a component of the life of nation . . . a source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason, unreason.”<sup>49</sup> Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang are all part of China's geo-body and China will go to war to defend its claims to them. It is doubtful, however, whether the CCP would risk a war with a major power over any territories that lie beyond its geo-body. It has yet to sink a U.S. or allied vessel engaged in freedom of navigation patrols in disputed territorial waters, though the possibility cannot be excluded.

China's ideas about international order today reflect its status as the largest economy in the world, measured in terms of purchasing power parities. It is no longer interested in promoting worldwide revolution, but it does want to change those rules of the game that it perceives as being to its disadvantage.

Given its approach to unresolved territorial disputes, it is reasonable to conclude that China views the world as anarchic and makes realist calculations about what other states might do. It tends to project the traditional Confucian view that respect for hierarchy is the best guarantee of stability: small countries should know their place. However, applying Confucian ideas to international relations requires also that powerful countries live up to the ideals of “true kingship” (*wangquan*) as opposed to “hegemony” (*baquan*) by showing benevolence to lesser powers and taking their responsibilities seriously.<sup>50</sup> China is keen to claim the mantle of legitimacy for its actions by framing them in terms of its own view of international order, one that is distinct from and superior to the liberal world order defended by the West.

While some Chinese might regard Confucian ethics as an overly idealistic basis on which to conduct foreign policy, values remain important. The 18th CCP Congress in 2012 delivered a “five in one” development strategy, focusing on economic, political, cultural, and social development as well as building an “ecological civilization.”<sup>51</sup> The 19th Congress in 2017 renewed the commitment to green growth and recognized China’s responsibility to the “community with a shared future for mankind,” which was widely interpreted as a commitment to take climate change seriously.<sup>52</sup> Changes such as these, which are written into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China, represent strategic decisions taken at the highest level.

Traditional Chinese ideas challenge Western assumptions in other ways. Yaqing Qin argues that Western international relations theory is based on individual rationality, whereas China practices “relationality,” which assumes that international actors base their actions on relations. Relations are logically prior to rational calculations, whether these be instrumental or normative; contrasting elements are mutually inclusive, not wholly separate, like yin and yang; and hence the natural state of the world is harmony, not conflict.<sup>53</sup> While these propositions might seem abstruse, they inform judgments about what is right and what is rational. Berating Chinese negotiators, as the Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken did in Alaska in March 2021 at the first face-to-face high-level talks after President Joseph R. Biden’s election, shows a lack of concern for the relationship, and therefore seems irrational. China, by contrast, is scrupulous in attention to protocol and never fails to roll out the red carpet for visiting leaders of even the smallest powers. This helps it win support from other developing countries when it faces diplomatic confrontation with the West.

Russia, whom the Chinese call “the fighting nation,” has played different roles in Chinese history, but must now be seen as an ally of China. U.S. foreign policy pushed these two countries closer together, through NATO expansion, the development of missile defense systems, promotion of democracy abroad, and denial of Chinese and Russian aspirations to great power status.<sup>54</sup> Russia’s “strategic partnership” with China is a “constructive engagement and positive-sum cooperation, based on shared political, security and economic interests.”<sup>55</sup> Among these interests, security is paramount. Russia is now seen as a

reliable partner for China in the struggle to make the world safe for authoritarianism. Despite some recent American rhetoric, China is not bent on exporting its own model of government. China feels comfortable with authoritarian powers and finds them easier to deal with, but perhaps unlike Russia, it has no messianic streak driving the export of its ideology.

China seeks to enlarge its influence but has a limited appetite for responsibility. While the hegemon is answerable to the international community for everything that happens, and worries about losing its position, the great power with limited responsibility can walk away from problems where the stakes are low. China seeks absolute control over its own geo-body, but beyond those boundaries, it has not been prepared to make great sacrifices for its vision of global order. Arguably, this is a more favorable position than hegemony.

China's identity has been formed by contradictory drives: feeling at once inferior and superior, meeting the needs of development and the desire for equality, assuaging demands for freedom and ensuring order, and bridging the gap between China's geo-body and geopolitical realities. It is only by keeping such tensions in mind that we can hope to understand how its leaders are likely to behave under pressure and to avoid the twin errors of underestimating or overestimating China's strength and the scale of its ambition. China takes great pride in its recent accomplishments, seeing them as a vindication of its choices and confirmation of its values. It believes that its destiny is to dominate East Asia, and through that to play a leading role in the world. The challenge for the United States today is to find a balance between moderating and accommodating that ambition without sacrificing its own values and political influence.

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