The University of Chicago

How Historical Collective Memories Shape State Behavior In Great Power Competition

By Gongzi Chen

August 2025

Faculty Advisor: John D. Kelly

Preceptor: Kara Hooser

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Committee on International Relations

Abstract

Why does China, despite possessing growing military capabilities and global interests, maintain only one overseas military base while the United States operates approximately 800 bases worldwide? This puzzling divergence challenges dominant realist theories that predict uniform patterns of military expansion as states accumulate power. Through comparative historical analysis, this paper argues that institutionalization of collective historical memories, fundamentally shape state preferences in ways that material factors alone cannot explain. China's "Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949), marked by foreign military occupation and territorial violations, created deep institutional preferences for sovereignty and non-interference, crystallized in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In contrast, America's experiences as British colonial successor and Cold War victor institutionalized preferences for global military presence as natural expressions of security. These divergent memories became embedded in state institutions, fostering path dependencies that persist despite changing material conditions. The analysis reveals that traumatic versus triumphant historical experiences generate different strategic cultures; and that what scholarship presents as universal patterns of great power behavior actually reflects culturally specific experiences inappropriately generalized. This framework offers crucial insights for understanding contemporary great power competition and the possibilities for international orders that accommodate diverse historical experiences rather than assuming convergence toward a single model.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Great Power Politics, Strategic Culture, China, United States, Sino-US Relations, Peaceful Coexistence, Institutionalization, Historical Political Science

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor John D. Kelly, whose intellectual guidance and unwavering support have been instrumental in shaping this thesis. I am equally indebted to my preceptor, Professor Kara Hooser, whose thoughtful feedback and encouragement throughout the writing process have been invaluable.

Moreover, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my parents, Yifan Ping, and Yining Liu. I thank my parents for providing me with mental settlement. Having grown up in a stable and loving family, I have been able to focus on my academic pursuits without the burden of financial concerns. I am grateful to Yifan Ping for providing me with a physical settlement where I could complete my thesis without interruption. Last but not least, I thank Yining Liu, my beloved significant other, for being my source of spiritual settlement. Because of her presence and encouragement, I have found the determination and commitment to persevere through the challenges of this academic journey.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, US hegemony has been underpinned by a global network of approximately 800 military bases across strategic locations in the Middle East, Europe, and East Asia. China's unprecedented economic rise and military modernization over the past decade have sparked intense debate about the emergence of a "New Cold War" and the future of great power competition. Realists in international relations, who dominate the theory of great power politics claim that rising (great) powers typically seek to establish military presence globally to secure their expanding interests (Mearsheimer 2001, 30). China, as a rising power with expanding global interests, would inevitably follow the US model of establishing military bases worldwide. (Layne 2012, 205). The realists are not wrong about China's determination of military development and we indeed witness China has invested great number of resources into its military capabilities over the past decades. China's real military equipment spending has been significantly rapid, "growing at 10.2% per annum over 2 – six percentage points annum faster than the U.S.A" (Robertson 2024, 810).

China's behavior partially confirms realist expectations—it has indeed developed advanced military capabilities, including advanced missile systems, expanding nuclear capabilities, and modernized naval forces. However, where China diverges from realist predictions is in how it projects this power. Although possessing the technological and financial capacity to establish a global network of military bases, China has established only one official overseas military base in Djibouti (established in 2017), primarily to support anti-piracy operations and protect its economic interests in the region. Some realists attempt to reconcile this restraint with their theoretical framework by arguing that China avoids establishing additional bases because doing so would threaten US military installations and risk triggering global military

confrontation—essentially, that China's minimal military footprint reflects fear of American retaliation rather than genuine strategic preference.

However, the Djibouti case directly contradicts this fear-based explanation. China's base operates near American, French, and Japanese military facilities without triggering the confrontation these critics predict. If fear of US response were truly constraining Chinese base construction, Djibouti would never have been established in the first place. The base's very existence, functioning peacefully alongside Western military installations, demonstrates that China possesses both the capability and the willingness to project military power abroad when it chooses. This suggests that China's restraint stems not from intimidation but from deliberate strategic choice, limiting projection to serve specific economic and security interests rather than pursuing the expansive military footprint that realist theory would expect from a rising great power. The puzzle, then, is not why China lacks the courage to build bases, but why it lacks the desire.

What explains China's strategic restraint, which so starkly contradicts realist predictions about great power behavior? Scholars examining Chinese politics invariably encounter the profound influence of history, culture, and philosophical traditions on contemporary decision-making. But the significance runs deeper than cultural peculiarities or ancient wisdom. China's recent history presents a drastic chronicle of transformation compressed into merely two centuries—from the traumatic rupture of the Opium Wars that shattered the Middle Kingdom's self-conception, through the “Century of Humiliation” full of unequal treaties and foreign occupation, to violent internal upheavals spanning the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Republican chaos, Japanese invasion, and civil war. The establishment of the People's Republic brought its own turbulence as well: early economic crises, political purges during the Cultural Revolution,

followed by an economic miracle that transformed an impoverished nation into the world's second-largest economy with rapidly modernizing military capabilities. This dizzying succession of triumph and trauma, occurring within living memory for many Chinese, suggests that great powers may not follow universal behavioral patterns but instead act according to deeply internalized historical collective experiences.

Consider the contrasting American trajectory: from rebellious British colony asserting independence through revolutionary war, to emerging industrial power, to reluctant but decisive participant in two world wars that catapulted it to superpower status. The Cold War that followed institutionalized a global military presence initially justified by containing Soviet expansion but persisting long after that threat dissolved. These distinct historical journeys—China's marked by violation and recovery, America's by expansion and succession—hint at alternative explanations for their divergent approaches to military power projection. Rather than assuming all great powers follow identical structural imperatives, we must ask whether these collective historical experiences continue to shape state behavior in ways that transcend material calculations and structural forces. Do the memories of foreign gunboats on the Yangtze still influence Chinese strategic thinking? Does America's successful inheritance of British global influence predispose it toward military solutions? These questions compel us to examine how collective historical memories, the shared understandings of formative past experiences, become embedded in institutional practices and strategic cultures, potentially explaining variations in great power behavior that realist theories cannot adequately capture.

China's strategic restraint in establishing overseas military bases presents an essential puzzle for international relations theory vis-à-vis great power competition. This empirical anomaly exposes critical gaps in contemporary scholarship, which remains dominated by realist

frameworks that struggle to explain why a rising power would voluntarily constrain its military footprint when possessing both the means and apparent motives for global expansion. And this confusion becomes even more intriguing when we consider that the United States—the very model upon which realist theories base their predictions—maintains its vast network of bases not out of structural necessity but perhaps due to its own unique historical experiences. If collective memories of past traumas and triumphs shape how states define security, project power, and imagine their role in the world, then what appears as universal patterns of great power behavior may reflect culturally and historically specific responses inappropriately generalized as natural law. The divergence between Chinese restraint and American expansion thus raises profound questions about the role of historical experience in shaping contemporary state behavior.

Following this theoretical perplexity, this paper poses two interrelated questions: First, why does China demonstrate such constraint in establishing overseas military bases despite its rapid military modernization and expanding global interests, but United States pursue military power projection globally, despite both possessing the material capabilities for global power projection? Second, how do collective historical memories (traumatic subjugation versus triumphant expansion) explain the discrepant approaches of China and the United States to great power competition and military presence? These questions are inherently linked—understanding China's restraint requires examining not just its own historical memories but how this contrast with American experiences that produced such different strategic preferences.

To address these questions, the paper proceeds in three sections. First, I examine why dominant realist theories of great power politics prove insufficient for understanding state behaviors. Contemporary realist perspectives, developed predominantly in Western sociocultural contexts, assume that all states as rational actors share the same characteristics and that rising

powers will follow similar trajectories to those witnessed in Western history—from Napoleonic France to Imperial Germany to the Soviet Union. While theorists like Kenneth Waltz contend that states are "functionally undifferentiated" units (Waltz 1979, 97) and John Mearsheimer argues that anarchic structure inevitably drives rising powers toward military dominance (Mearsheimer 2001, 10), these frameworks—whether classical, defensive, offensive, cultural, or moral realism—fail to thoroughly explain China's restraint in establishing overseas military bases despite its significant economic and technological capabilities. This deviation exposes the limitations of structural theories that neglect historical and cultural contexts in favor of universal behavioral models based solely on rational material calculations.

Second, I innovatively integrate perspectives of sociology, anthropology, and constructivism to develop a more nuanced understanding of state behavior, with particular attention to China's distinctive approach. Moving beyond the realist emphasis on material capabilities: economic strength, military technology, and geographic position, I propose collective historical memory as a supplemental but indispensable analytical framework, defining it as shared understandings of significant past events that shape present identity and interests. The institutionalization of these memories through diplomatic doctrine and strategic planning creates tangible pathways from historical experience to contemporary state behavior.

Third, I demonstrate how collective historical memories evolvingly influence great power strategy in the 21st century through comparative analysis of China and the United States. China's collective memory, profoundly shaped by the "Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949), which is marked by unequal treaties, foreign military bases on Chinese soil, and the devastating Japanese invasion, cultivated a deep cultural aversion to foreign military presence and commitment to territorial sovereignty. This trauma was institutionalized through Zhou Enlai's Five Principles of

Peaceful Coexistence, maintaining remarkable continuity from Mao through Xi Jinping and manifesting in China's preference for the Belt and Road Initiative over military installations.

Understanding how collective memories genuinely transform state behavior requires comparative analysis. If traumatic experiences can produce peaceful strategies (as we will see with China), can triumphant experiences produce expansionist ones? The United States provides an illuminating contrast: its successful territorial expansion, profitable succession to British hegemony, and Cold War victory created positive associations with military power projection that became as deeply institutionalized as China's aversion to it. America's triumphalist historical narratives normalized global military presence as essential to great power status. This comparison reveals that great powers do not follow universal behavioral patterns but instead act according to their specific historical experiences and how these experiences are interpreted and institutionalized. The comparative historiographical framework offers greater explanatory power than traditional structural theories by examining not just material capabilities but how divergent historical experiences have constructed fundamentally different understandings of international leadership and power projection in the contemporary international system.

These cases are not randomly selected but represent opposite ends of a spectrum: traumatic versus triumphant memories, victim versus victor experiences, restraint versus expansion. By comparing how these different historical experiences became embedded in state institutions and continue to shape strategic choices, we can see that what realism presents as universal patterns reflects historically specific experiences inappropriately generalized.

Realism Understanding of International System and Great Powers' Behavior

Realist scholarship has long dominated the study of great power politics, positing that state behavior follows predictable patterns determined by the anarchic structure of the international system rather than by internal characteristics or historical experiences. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism established the foundation for this view, arguing that "system-level processes of socialization and competition lead states to behave in similar ways" regardless of their domestic attributes (Waltz 1979, 76). This structural determinism strips away cultural, historical, and ideological differences between states, reducing them to functionally identical units responding to systemic pressures. John Mearsheimer extends this logic even further, contending that "the behavior of great powers is influenced mainly by their external environment, not by their internal characteristics. The structure of the international system, which all states must deal with, largely shapes their foreign policies" (Mearsheimer 2001, 15). For realists, the diversity of human civilizations, political systems, and historical experiences becomes irrelevant—all great powers are assumed to operate according to the same inexorable logic of power pursuit.

Although Waltz's defensive realism suggests that states seek sufficient power to ensure their security and may be satisfied with maintaining the status quo, Mearsheimer's offensive realism presents a far more deterministic and pessimistic view of great power behavior. In his framework, the combination of anarchy, uncertainty about other states' intentions, and the offensive military capabilities possessed by great powers creates an inescapable tragedy where states must perpetually compete for dominance. Mearsheimer argues that in this self-help system, "states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system" (Mearsheimer 2001, 30). Security, in this view, is never absolute—it can only

be maximized through the relentless pursuit of regional hegemony and the prevention of peer competitors from achieving similar status.

The historical record appears to support his statements. From Napoleonic France's bid for European dominance to Imperial Germany's challenge to the European balance of power, from Imperial Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere to the Soviet Union's control over Eastern Europe, great powers have repeatedly sought to translate economic strength into military dominance and regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 155-215). The United States' own trajectory provides perhaps the most compelling validation of offensive realist predictions. As America's economic power burgeoned in the late nineteenth century, it systematically pursued regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere through the Monroe Doctrine and military interventions. Following World War II, the United States leveraged its unparalleled economic and military superiority to construct a global network of military bases, establishing “offshore balancing” to prevent the emergence of regional hegemons in Europe and Asia (Mearsheimer 2001, 217-247). This historical pattern, according to offensive realism, reveals an iron law of great power politics: economic ascent leads inevitably to military expansion and hegemonic ambition.

Given this theoretical framework and historical precedent, Mearsheimer's analysis of China's rise follows a similar logic. China, like all previous great powers, cannot escape the structural imperatives of the international system. As China's economy has grown to become the world's second largest and its military capabilities have modernized at an unprecedented pace, China must seek regional hegemony in Asia, expel American military presence from its periphery, and establish its own network of overseas military bases to project power globally (Mearsheimer 2001, 335). In this view, China's cultural traditions, historical experiences, or stated foreign policy principles are merely superficial factors that cannot override the deeper structural forces

compelling it toward expansionist behavior. Mearsheimer explicitly rejects the possibility that China might chart a different course, arguing that a wealthy China would not be a status quo power, but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 334-380). The anarchic structure of the international system leaves China no choice but to replicate the hegemonic patterns established by previous great powers, making military expansion through overseas bases not just likely but structurally inevitable.

Mearsheimer's deterministic predictions about China's inevitable pursuit of hegemony have provoked substantial scholarly debate, particularly among those who argue that his structural realism fails to account for the distinctive characteristics that might lead China to act differently in international politics. A growing body of literature challenges the universalist assumptions of offensive realism by highlighting how China's unique philosophical traditions and cultural frameworks could produce alternative patterns of great power behavior. Carty and Gu contend that "China's core idea of a community of shared future of humanity shows that it is aware of the need for a universal foundation for world order… Chinese philosophy and history shape its view of the nature of rules, rights, law, and of institutions which should shape relationships" (Carty & Gu 2021, 4). This perspective suggests that China's Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on harmony, reciprocity, and moral leadership, might generate a distinctly non-hegemonic approach to international relations that defies realist expectations.

Similarly, Nordin and Smith challenge the conflictual logic inherent in Western international relations theory by drawing on Chinese philosophical concepts of relationality. They contend that "Chinese thought [on friendly relations] shows that the relations between Self and Other need not be conflictual or colonial. On the contrary, they can be the basis for a dynamic and peaceful engagement" (Nordin & Smith 2018, 389). These scholars emphasize how concepts like

tianxia (all-under-heaven), *guanxi* (relationship networks), and *he* (harmony) embedded in Chinese strategic thinking could produce cooperative rather than dominating behaviors, even as China's power grows. Such culturalist arguments suggest that China's deep-rooted philosophical traditions and distinctive worldview might enable it to transcend the tragic dynamics of great power competition that Mearsheimer considers inevitable.

However, not all scholars who acknowledge China's cultural distinctiveness arrive at such optimistic conclusions. Alastair Iain Johnston and Xuetong Yan represent a nuanced position, believing that China's unique strategic culture, while ideational rooted and historically shaped, ultimately consolidates rather than transcends realpolitik behavior. Their work challenges both Mearsheimer's dismissal of culture and the idealistic culturalist position and demonstrate that China's philosophical heritage—from Sun Tzu to Legalist thought—has fostered sophisticated traditions of statecraft centered on power accumulation and strategic competition. Rather than producing pacific exceptionalism, China's behavior reinforces fundamental realist orientations toward power politics.

Alastair Iain Johnston's book *Cultural Realism* challenges the notion that Chinese strategic culture promotes uniquely peaceful or harmonious approaches to international relations. Through rigorous textual analysis and historical case studies, Johnston demonstrates that Chinese strategic thought has consistently exhibited hard realpolitik characteristics that persist across millennia of political and social change. After systematic examination of the "Seven Military Classics", the canonical texts that incorporate Chinese military thinking for over thousand years, he concludes that they "do share a preference for offensive strategies over static defensive and accommodationist options" (Johnston 1998, 30).

These classical texts of Chinese strategic mindset consistently advocate for the decisive use of force when conditions are favorable. They simultaneously emphasize the importance of destroying enemies before they grow strong and treat warfare as a natural and necessary instrument of statecraft (Johnston 1998, 62-108). This preference for offensive action when strategically advantageous appears not as an aberration but as a central tenet repeated across different texts and time periods, which suggests a deeply embedded cultural orientation in Chinese history toward power politics rather than conflict avoidance.

To test whether these strategic preferences identified in classical texts influenced strategic behavior, Johnston conducts an empirical analysis of Ming dynasty (1368-1644) grand strategy toward the Mongol threat. Although Ming dynasty is often portrayed as defensive and isolationist, there is "a great deal of congruence between the answers found in the Seven Military Classics and those provided by Ming strategists" (Johnston 1998, 175). When facing favorable military balances, Ming rulers consistently chose offensive campaigns deep into Mongol territory rather than passive defense.

Johnston's findings demonstrates that Chinese strategic culture, despite being rooted in unique philosophical traditions and cultural experiences, "shares many of the same assumptions of hard realpolitik worldviews found in some variants of western realism" (Johnston 1998, 30). His work shows that China's strategic culture, rather than moderating realist behaviors, may reinforce and legitimize power-maximizing strategies through culturally specific justifications and methods. This cultural realism thus denies China’s peaceful engagement in international relation and provides theoretical foundation for realists’ prophecy of intensified Sino-American competition, as it implies that China's rise will be guided not by Confucian ideals of harmony but

by inherited traditions of strategic competition and offensive advantage-seeking when conditions permit.

Xuetong Yan's *Leadership and The Rise of Great Powers* offers an innovative realism perspective accounting for China's rise. Built upon Hans Morgenthau's concept of morality in international relations, Yan points out an innovative idea of governmental morality. Let's start with how Hans Morgenthau perceives morality in international relations.

Morgenthau presents a pessimistic view of morality in contrast to power. Despite insisting that politics is "governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature" that are "unchanging and impervious to human preference" (Morgenthau 1978, 4-16), Morgenthau simultaneously acknowledges that "political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action" and "the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action" (Morgenthau 1978, 10). Comparing individual and state morality, he eventually put individual morality in an inferior status: "while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival" (Morgenthau 1978, 11).

Morgenthau's framework subordinates ethical considerations to the imperatives of power and survival, which spares little space for genuine moral choice in international politics. Statesmen may regret the necessity of power politics, but they cannot escape it. This suggests that even states with strong moral traditions or ethical commitments—whether rooted in Confucian harmony, Christian just war theory, or liberal human rights—will eventually prioritize power and survival when faced with existential threats. Morgenthau thus arrives at conclusions not dissimilar

from structural realism's amoral analysis: regardless of their moral preferences or cultural values, all states must play by the same rules of power politics.

Although Morgenthau subordinated ethical considerations to the imperatives of survival and prudence, Xuetong Yan's *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* boldly attempt to transcend this limitation by reconceptualizing morality not as a constraint on power but as a crucial source of it. Yan's moral realism retains core realist assumptions while fundamentally reimagining how morality functions in international politics. He provides an advanced theoretical framework that speaks directly to China's contemporary rise.

Yan acknowledges Morgenthau's contributions which identifies the morality's influence in international relations and accuses structural realists like Waltz and Mearsheimer of "expunging morality" from international relations theory entirely. Yet even Morgenthau, Yan argues, left two crucial gaps: first, he treated morality primarily as a prudential constraint rather than a positive force; second, he offered no systematic criteria for distinguishing better from worse realist foreign policies beyond mere survival. These limitations, Yan contends, render classical realism incomplete for understanding how rising powers can successfully challenge established hegemons.

Central to Yan's theoretical innovation is his reconceptualization of state capability and the role of political leadership. He argues that "a state's capability consists of four elements, namely, its politics, military, economy, and culture. Political capability is the operational element, and the other three (military, economy, and culture) are resource elements" (Yan 2019, 191). This formulation revolutionizes realist thinking by suggesting that political capability functions as a multiplier—without effective political leadership, even abundant military and economic

resources become worthless. This explains why states with similar material capabilities achieve vastly different outcomes in international competition.

The moral dimension enters through Yan's concept of "governmental morality," which he defines not in terms of abstract ethical principles but as the practical responsibility of leaders to their people. "Governmental morality is the standard by which the actions of state leaders are judged, based on their responsibility to protect national interests and uphold national capability, not on their personal beliefs or motivations" (Yan 2019, 7-10). This pragmatic approach to morality bridges the gap between realist power politics and ethical considerations by showing how moral leadership directly enhances state capability. Drawing on Chinese traditions of "humane authority" (*wangdao*) versus mere hegemony (*badao*), Yan argues that morally credible leadership generates international legitimacy, reduces resistance to a state's rise, and creates sustainable foundations for international order.

Yan's framework also provides a dynamic theory of power transitions that Morgenthau's static analysis could not offer. He contends that "an international configuration will change when the leadership of a rising state is able, through continued reform, to improve its national capability faster than the dominant state is, and when the leadership of the dominant state fails to prevent any rising state from reducing the disparity in capability between them" (Yan 2019, 166). This process depends on leadership quality and moral credibility: rising states with reform-minded, morally responsible leadership can accelerate their rise by attracting support and minimizing balancing behavior; simultaneously, declining hegemons with corrupt or incompetent leadership hemorrhage legitimacy and allies.

Unlike structural realists who see the pursuit of power as the only goal of great powers, Yan suggests that "a state's objective strategic interests are defined by its comprehensive

capability... maintaining world domination is the main strategic interest of dominant states; attaining world domination is the main strategic interest of rising states; gaining regional domination is the main strategic interest of regional powers; and protecting survival is the main strategic interest of weak states" (Yan 2019, 191). He believes that powers with different capabilities will have different strategic interests, which will not give rise to a tragic end of power competition between states with similar capabilities (economy, military and political).

Bring Sociology, Anthropology and Constructivsim into Discussion

The realist consensus on China's inevitable pursuit of hegemony, whether grounded in structural imperatives, rational calculations, or even analysis of Chinese strategic culture, represented a formidable theoretical edifice. From Mearsheimer's structural determinism to Johnston's cultural realism and Yan's moral realism, these scholars collect compelling evidence: China's growing economic strength, advancing military technology, the constraining effects of international anarchy, and deeply embedded traditions of strategic competition all seem to point toward an inexorable trajectory of military expansion. These material and ideational factors undoubtedly play crucial roles in shaping state behavior, and I do not deny their significance in understanding China’s state behavior, but I do doubt accepting realism as the "end of the conversation" in international relations theory.

In this section, I examine alternative theoretical frameworks that take seriously the constitutive role of ideas, identity, and historical collective memories in shaping state behavior. I begin by exploring how constructivist international relations theory challenges realist assumptions about fixed interests and inevitable behaviors. However, although constructivism provides crucial insights about the social construction of interests and identities, it often remains at an abstract level, failing to specify the concrete mechanisms through which collective

historical experiences translate into contemporary foreign policy choices. To address this gap, I draw on sociological and anthropological perspectives that have received insufficient attention in international relations scholarship, particularly collective memory, institutionalization of history, and the cultural transmission of trauma.

Building on these interdisciplinary insights, I argue collective historical memory as a key driver of state behavior. I argue that states do not simply learn tactical lessons from history or use historical analogies for decision-making. Rather, through processes of institutionalization, such as official narratives, commemorative practices, and bureaucratic cultures, collective memories of formative historical experiences become embedded in state identity and continuously shape how nations understand their interests, threats, and strategy preferences.

These institutionalized memories also devise path dependencies that persist across regime changes and shifting power distributions, producing distinctive patterns of state behavior that realist theories cannot adequately explain. The power of collective memory lies not in determining outcomes but in constituting the very framework through which states interpret their environment and define their objectives, producing variation in state behavior even under similar structural conditions.

As a pioneer of constructivism in IR, Alexander Wendt undermines the theoretical foundations upon which Waltz and Mearsheimer build their predictions about inevitable great power competition. His assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it" challenges the core realist claim that anarchic structure determines state behavior. As Wendt argues, "self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy" (Wendt 1992, 395), he contends that competitive behavior emerges from social processes rather than structural imperatives. This critique exposes a fatal flaw in structural realism's logic: while Waltz defines structure through

ordering principles, differentiation, and distribution of capabilities, this framework is underspecified. Material distributions of power and anarchic structure cannot predict behavior without understanding "the intersubjectively constituted structure of identities and interests in the system" (Wendt 1992, 398). The significance of China's growing military capabilities, for instance, depends on the shared meanings attached to them—whether other states view China as a threatening revisionist power or a responsible stakeholder shapes international outcomes far more than raw material capabilities alone.

Wendt's analysis unveils how structural realists commit the error of reification—treating socially constructed phenomena as immutable natural facts. By insisting that "actors do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations" (Wendt 1992, 398), Wendt implies that China's interests are not predetermined by its position in the international system but are continuously constructed through interaction with other states. The security dilemmas that Mearsheimer sees as inevitable are, in Wendt's framework, "themselves ongoing effects of, not exogenous to, the interaction" (Wendt 1992, 407). This means that China's restraint in military base construction could be understood not as a temporary deviation from structural imperatives but as part of a constitutive process where China and other states are collectively authoring new understandings of appropriate great power behavior.

Rather than being trapped in a tragic cycle of competition dictated by anarchy, states can construct different "cultures of anarchy" that fundamentally alter the meaning and implications of power distributions. Wendt's constructivism thus opens theoretical space for understanding how China might be participating in the social construction of a different kind of international order, one where military expansion is not the inevitable marker of great power status.

Going beyond Wendt's critique of anarchy's social construction, I argue there are two problems that structural realists have in their theories. First, structural realists overemphasize the deterministic force of international structure while systematically ignoring or dismissing the dynamic properties that constitute state identity and behavior—not merely the interests and identities Wendt emphasizes, but deeper historical memories, evolving sociocultural frameworks, and collective traumas that shape how states understand themselves and their place in the world. These elements cannot be reduced to structural positions or material capabilities; they represent constitutive forces that influence how states interpret threats, define security, and imagine possible futures.

Second, structural realism's pursuit of a mathematics-like universal theory of state behavior misunderstands the nature of social reality. Such approaches "inappropriately apply natural scientific methodologies to humanistic and social scientific inquiries, constituting a paradigmatic misapplication" (Zhao 2015, 296). The attempt to discover timeless laws of state behavior ignores the necessity to "provincialize the concept of security"—recognizing that "security everywhere is differently different" (Nyman 2023, 692). When realists treat their theoretical frameworks as universal laws rather than culturally specific interpretations, they are imposing "predetermined thematic frameworks...a priori upon empirical phenomena" (Zhao 2015, 299).

These methodological failures are epitomized in Mearsheimer's empirical analysis, which suffers from a temporal myopia. His selection of great power cases from roughly 1850-1950 demonstrates an extraordinarily narrow and historically exceptional period—encompassing the bloodiest century in human history with two world wars. To extract universal laws of great power behavior from this specific temporal slice is methodologically equivalent to taking a snapshot of

a moving object and claiming to understand its entire trajectory. States that Mearsheimer classifies as "great powers" during this period may not have held that status before or after, yet he treats their behavior during this window as representative of timeless patterns. This approach ignores how states become great powers, how they lose that status, and how their behavior evolves across different historical contexts. As with two mathematical functions that may intersect at a single point but follow entirely different curves, similarity in behavior at one historical moment cannot establish identical underlying logics (Zhao 2015, 36). By freezing time rather than examining the longue durée of cultural development, environmental changes, and historical contingencies that shape state behavior, Mearsheimer's analysis could become a crude generalization that mistakes temporal coincidence for causal law.

These problems have left a parochial theory masquerading as universal science, which is a Euro-American experience that has been the foundation for theorizing a concept of security that is presumed to be universal (Nyman 2023, 676), yet this presumption collapses under scrutiny. The empirical base of realist theorizing—drawing primarily on European great power politics during their most violent phase and American Cold War strategy—reflects not only a narrow geographical slice but also an exceptional historical moment. Western states share similarities in terms of their approaches to security, but these similarities do not necessarily represent something universal in the concept of security: it may simply reflect similar history, culture, and political systems (Nyman 2023, 692). When these culturally and temporally specific patterns are elevated to universal laws and applied to non-Western powers like China, the theoretical inadequacy becomes glaring.

Neverthelss, even scholars who take Chinese culture and history seriously as analytical categories often remain grappled with realist assumptions. Johnston and Yan attempt to

incorporate Chinese historical and philosophical traditions into international relations theory, but both eventually subordinate these cultural insights to power-political outcomes. Johnston's analysis of classical Chinese military texts suffers from problems of temporality and context. His equation of pre-Song dynasty military classics, which is written for domestic unification campaigns, with modern international strategy misreads their historical purpose. These texts emerged from a radically different spatial and political context where "all under heaven" (*tianxia*) represented a civilizational space rather than an international system. Similarly, his Ming-Mongol case study problematically projects modern international relations categories onto what was essentially a struggle for legitimate rule over a unified civilizational order, complicated by ethnic dimensions of Han resistance to Mongol domination. Yan's moral realism, despite claiming universal applicability, weights too much on Confucian concepts of benevolent rulership, governmental responsibility, and virtuous example that it essentially universalizes a particular Chinese philosophical tradition.

Both scholars make the possible error of analyzing Chinese culture only to demonstrate how it produces or enhances realist behaviors—Johnston arguing that Chinese strategic culture is inherently offensive, Yan that moral leadership serves as a power multiplier. This reductionist approach treats culture as simply another variable in the power equation rather than recognizing how collective historical experiences can reconstitute state identities, redefine security, and transform the very meaning of great power status.

To understand how collective historical experiences genuinely transform state behavior rather than only channeling it toward familiar realpolitik outcomes, we must look beyond the Chinese case to other nations whose traumatic pasts have changed their approach to power and security.

Thomas Berger's analysis of Germany and Japan provides fascinating empirical evidence of how historical experiences and cultural interpretations are institutionalized and reshape state behavior. Despite possessing the material capabilities and structural opportunities to remilitarize after the Cold War, both nations have "deliberately eschewed new military possibilities" (Berger 1996, 318). As a result of their historical experiences and the way in which those experiences were interpreted by domestic political actors, both countries have developed beliefs and values that make them peculiarly reluctant to resort to the use of military force (Berger 1996, 318). These antimilitarist cultures became institutionalized during the postwar period, advancing path dependencies that persist despite changing structural conditions. The German and Japanese cases reveal how collective memories of militarism's catastrophic consequences can affect state preferences, making rearmament politically unthinkable even when structural pressures might suggest otherwise.

Berger also clarify the cultural specificity by comparing great powers: "If French or American policy makers found themselves in geostrategic positions similar to Japan's or Germany's, they might be expected to be behaving in very different ways… because they come from cultural backgrounds with very different norms and values regarding the military and the use of force" (Berger 1996, 326). This insight directly challenges realist assumptions that structural position determines behavior regardless of cultural context.

More importantly, Berger emphasizes that these cultural influences are not static or deterministic. As he notes, "Cultures—and by extension, political military cultures—are not static entities hovering above society, directing behavior while they themselves remain immune to social, economic, and political forces. They are transmitted through the often imperfect mechanisms of primary and secondary socialization and are under constant pressure from both

external developments and internal contradictions" (Berger 1996, 326). This dynamic apprehension of culture explains both continuity and change: although Germany and Japan's antimilitarist cultures have shown remarkable persistence since 1945, they evolved through ongoing processes of socialization, political contestation, and adaptation to new circumstances.

This recognition demands that we move beyond contemporary universalism toward more pluralistic understandings of state behavior. As Nyman argues, "a truly global security studies is of necessity a provincial one attuned to difference and similarity" (Nyman 2023, 675), she identified how "Eurocentrism, hybridity, and mimicry have served to obscure fundamental differences in how security is understood and how it operates in different places" (Nyman 2023, 692). For China, this means taking seriously how its historical experiences of semi-colonization, civilizational continuity, and philosophical traditions create different starting points for understanding international relations. Just as Germany and Japan's traumatic experiences with militarism produced enduring antimilitarist cultures, China's “Century of Humiliation” and subsequent revolutionary transformation may have generated distinctive approaches to power projection that cannot be captured by theories derived from Western experience. Only by embracing this theoretical pluralism and examining how collective memories, cultural frameworks, and historical experiences constitute the very foundations of state behavior can we begin to comprehend why China's approach to great power status diverges so dramatically from realist predictions.

From “Century of Humiliation” to Peaceful Coexistence: China’s Case

In contrast to the United States' institutionalized preference for military expansion born from successful historical experiences, China's transformation from a victim of foreign invasion to a rising great power that restrains its military expansion embodies the case for understanding

how collective historical memory shapes contemporary state behavior. Although realist theories predict that China's growing capabilities should translate into expansive military bases and coercive power projection, China has instead institutionalized a foreign policy framework centered on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. This restraint becomes intelligible only when we trace how the traumatic memories of the “Century of Humiliation” (百年国耻, 1839-1949) inserted in Chinese institutional structures, potentially forming a sort of historical memory genes that persist across generations and leadership transitions.

Historical memory operates not merely as rhetorical device or tactical consideration but as a constitutive force that shapes how states define their interests and security. The “Century of Humiliation”—beginning with China's defeat in the First Opium War and ending with Mao's declaration that China had "stood up" in 1949—saw the dismantling of the Sinocentric order that had dominated East Asia for centuries. The experience of unequal treaties, foreign military bases on Chinese soil, extraterritorial privileges, and violent colonial interventions engendered collective traumas that would profoundly change China's approach to international relations. As noted by Imperial & Global Forum by CIGH Exeter, which features research by Dr. Tom Harper, the CCP has promoted this narrative not merely as historical remembrance but as an active framework for understanding contemporary international relations and guiding policy formulation (2019). These memories do not simply inform Chinese leaders about past dangers; they constitute the very framework through which China interprets contemporary international relations, defining what security means and what threats look like.

Understanding this transformation requires examining how China systematically institutionalized collective memories of humiliation into enduring foreign policy principles. This

institutionalization process reached its clearest expression in Zhou Enlai's articulation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954, which translated traumatic memories into positive diplomatic doctrine. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China noted, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, rooted in concepts of harmony without uniformity, convey an institutional response to historical trauma that emphasizes defensive rather than offensive strategies. These principles were not merely tactical adaptations to Cold War circumstances but represented a fundamental reimagining of international relations based on China's historical experience as a victim of power politics. The continuity of these principles, from their initial formulation through Mao's revolutionary period, Deng's reform era, and into Xi Jinping's contemporary foreign policies, demonstrates how institutionalized historical memory configures durable frameworks that transcend leadership changes and shifting power distributions.

Century of Humiliation

The "Century of Humiliation" is far more than a historical period in Chinese consciousness; more importantly, it constitutes the foundational trauma that continues to influence China's worldview and strategic behavior. The "Century of Humiliation"—a period between 1839 and 1949 when China's government lost control over large portions of its territory at the hands of foreigners—is a key element of modern China's founding narrative (Kaufman 2011, 1). This era, with "an unrelenting series of wars, occupations, and revolutions" (Mühlhahn 2019, 12), transformed China from the Middle Kingdom at the center of the East Asian order to as "a backward country, technologically backward, dismembered by foreign predators, and incapable of maintaining sovereignty over its own territory" (Davies 2017, 5).

The trauma began with China's defeat in the First Opium War (1839-1842), when British gunboats forced open Chinese markets to the opium trade, resulting in the first of many "unequal treaties" that would systematically erode Chinese sovereignty. This initiated "an extended period of pressure, dismissal, and 'disrespect' from the West and later Japan toward China's territorial integrity, legal sovereignty, and civilizational value (Scott 2008, 2). The Treaty of Nanjing (1842) not only ceded Hong Kong to Britain but established the precedent of extraterritoriality, whereby foreign nationals were exempt from Chinese law—a humiliating acknowledgment that China's legal system was deemed inferior to Western standards.

The psychological impact of these defeats extended beyond territorial losses to a profound crisis of civilizational confidence. The severe crisis of the nineteenth century came as a shock to the intellectual world of late imperial China. As it prompted a critical intellectual self-examination at the end of the Qing empire, new concepts concerning the state and the people found their way into Chinese political thinking (Mühlhahn 2019, 23). This intellectual upheaval demonstrated not only an adaptation to new circumstances but a fundamental questioning of the Confucian worldview that had sustained Chinese civilization for millennia.

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 deepened the humiliation exponentially. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895... was a further humiliation for China, as it was defeated by a neighbor it had long considered subordinate (Scott 2008, 132). Japan's victory shattered the Sinocentric order definitively—if China could be defeated by a former tributary state that had successfully modernized, what remained of Chinese civilizational superiority? The subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki saw China cede Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, though European powers forced Japan to return the latter, only to seize it themselves.

The scramble for concessions that followed saw China carved up into spheres of influence by foreign powers. The phrase “sliced like a watermelon” was used to describe the way China's territory was divided up by foreign powers (Scott 2008, 132). Germany seized Jiaozhou Bay, Russia took Port Arthur, Britain expanded from Hong Kong into the New Territories and Weihaiwei, while France claimed Guangzhouwan. The loss of territories was the most painful humiliation for China during this period... This history of the loss of sovereignty partly explains the PRC's assertive stance on sovereignty and territorial integrity (Shiqing 2024, 132).

These territorial dismemberments were accompanied by deeper forms of cultural and psychological violation. Foreign powers established concessions in major Chinese cities where Chinese law did not apply and where signs reading "No Dogs or Chinese Allowed" epitomized the racial humiliation. Christian missionaries, protected by gunboat diplomacy, penetrated the Chinese interior and challenged Confucian values and traditional social structures. The destruction of the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) by Anglo-French forces in 1860, an act of deliberate cultural vandalism, symbolized the West's contempt for Chinese civilization.

The nationalist response to these humiliations took various forms, from the Boxer Rebellion's violent xenophobia to reformist movements seeking to modernize China while preserving its essence. The sense of humiliation over the Unequal Treaties was to become the spur during the 1920s and 1930s to an ever stronger sense of nationalism that both the Guomindang (Nationalist) and Communist parties were to tap into and compete over (Scott 2008, 28). Both parties promised to restore China's dignity and sovereignty, though they differed radically in their methods.

The Japanese invasion from 1937-1945 symbolized the culmination and most brutal phase of the “Century of Humiliation”. The Rape of Nanjing, biological warfare experiments, and

systematic exploitation of Chinese resources under the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere indicates that China remained vulnerable to foreign predation even in the twentieth century. An estimated 20 million Chinese died during the war, leaving scars that persist in Sino-Japanese relations today. The end of this traumatic era came only with "Mao Zedong [standing] on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in 1949 and declar[ing] 'the Chinese people now stand up'" (Davies 2017, 5). This declaration marked not just political victory but psychological liberation—the end of a century during which China had been subjected to systematic subjugation where "Chinese nationalism is not just about celebrating the glories of Chinese civilization; it also commemorates China's weakness" (Kaufman 2010, 2).

The lasting impact of these experiences cannot be overstated and till today the best way to understand the state behaviors of China is to understand the “Century of Humiliation” narrative (Metcalf 2020, 50). The visceral Chinese reaction to any perceived slight to sovereignty, the emphasis on territorial integrity, the respect for peaceful interaction, and the determination to develop comprehensive national strength all stem from these traumatic memories. The history of the “Century of Humiliation” of the Chinese race continually tells us that foreign races invade via the sea... We must build a strong navy to guard territorial integrity, and to protect national maritime rights and privileges (Metcalf 2020, 49). These memories have been preserved and transmitted through deep historical awareness: "Chinese people are deeply aware of their history. ...In government policy, the past is drawn upon as a source of inspiration and legitimacy" (Davies 2017, 13). The “Century of Humiliation” thus serves not as mere historical background but as an active framework shaping contemporary Chinese strategic thinking, advancing "a long shadow that continues to affect Chinese foreign policy, strategic culture, and weltanschauung worldview" (Scott 2008, 2).

Peaceful Coexistence

The articulation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则) in the early 1950s marked a pivotal moment in China's transformation from victim of invasion to architect of international order. These principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, emerged not as abstract ideals but as direct responses to China's traumatic experiences during the “Century of Humiliation”. As Zhou Enlai (the former prime minister of PRC) stated in June 1953, "We advocate resolving all international disputes through peaceful negotiations.... We should practice peaceful coexistence and peaceful competition among all different systems" (Zhang 2007, 511), which represents a departure from the gunboat diplomacy China had endured.

The principles stand for translation of historical lessons into diplomatic doctrine. Each principle directly addressed a specific form of humiliation China had experienced: mutual respect for sovereignty countered the extraterritoriality and concessions; non-aggression responded to military invasions; non-interference rejected the civilizing missions and imposed reforms; equality challenged the unequal treaties; and peaceful coexistence offered an alternative to the zero-sum imperialism of the past. The Five Principles proposed by China was neither imposed forcibly upon other countries nor intended to educate others in a condescending manner with a so-called 'civilized' standard. Instead, the Five Principles started to disseminate in the process of equal interactions with the neighboring countries (Yuan & Song 2015, 66).

The genesis of these principles occurred during a critical juncture in the early People's Republic. Having just emerged from a century of foreign domination and intervention, China

faced the challenge of defining its place in a bipolar Cold War world while still consolidating domestic control. The immediate catalyst emerged from the territorial conflict between Tibet and India. Following China's assertion of sovereignty over Tibet in 1950-1951, tensions arose with India over border demarcations and Tibet's status. It was during negotiations over these sensitive issues that Zhou Enlai first articulated the Five Principles in discussions with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, seeking a framework that would allow both nations to manage their differences without resorting to the imperial methods of the past. The principles were formally incorporated into the Sino-Indian Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India (April 29, 1954), where they appeared in the preamble as the basis for managing this delicate relationship. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which Zhou Enlai presented during negotiations with India and Burma in 1954, latterly became the cornerstone of China's foreign policy (Dillon 2020, 179). The timing was not coincidental because China needed to reassure newly independent Asian nations that it would not replicate the imperial behaviors it had suffered under. Simultaneously China wanted to establish a framework that would protect its own sovereignty over Tibet from external interference. By converting a potential territorial conflict into an opportunity to articulate universal principles, Zhou Enlai demonstrated how China could translate its historical lessons into constructive diplomatic innovation.

Zhou Enlai's vision extended beyond bilateral relations to reimagining the entire international system. He declared, "We should set a model for the world with our common principles to the world, proving that different states are able to coexist peacefully" (Zhang 2007, 514). This ambition to transform international relations based on China's historical experience has found contemporary expression in concepts like "a community of shared future for mankind," which builds on the peaceful coexistence framework.

The Bandung Conference of 1955 represented the international debut of these principles, where Zhou Enlai successfully promoted them to the broader Afro-Asian community. Zhou's diplomatic tours across Asia were designed to reassure neighboring countries of China's commitment to peaceful coexistence and to dispel fears of Chinese expansionism (Dillon 2020, 196). The principles resonated deeply with nations emerging from colonialism, as they offered a framework for international relations that protected newly won sovereignty while enabling cooperation. In his meetings with leaders in South and Southeast Asia, Zhou Enlai reiterated that China sought friendship and peaceful coexistence, emphasizing common interests and the avoidance of conflict (Dillon 2020, 197).

The institutionalization of these principles has been thorough and enduring. During the past six decades, the Five Principles have served as the cornerstone of China's independent foreign policy of peace. They have been written into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and incorporated into the communiqués on the establishment of diplomatic relations or bilateral treaties that China signed with over 160 countries (Liu 2014, 478). This constitutional bonding ensures that the lessons of the “Century of Humiliation” remain institutionally encoded in China's approach to international relations, creating binding constraints on Chinese behavior that transcend individual leaders or temporal circumstances. As Liu quoting leadership stating: "China is a responsible country. We will, as always, uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, practice the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and stick to the path of peaceful development" (Liu 2014, 480). This continuity, spanning from Zhou Enlai to Xi Jinping, reflects how the historical memory of violation has shaped Chinese strategic culture. It also conveys how institutionalized memory of the “Century of Humiliation” has led to lasting path dependencies that favor diplomatic and economic engagement over military expansion, which explains China's

preference for building infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative rather than establishing military bases.

Institutionalization of Historical Memories and Collective Trauma

The "Century of Humiliation" did not produce desires for revenge or military domination, but instead cultivated institutionalized preferences for sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful development. Through systematic embedding in diplomatic doctrine and state narratives, these traumatic memories became constitutive elements of Chinese strategic culture that lasts across leadership changes and despite growing material capabilities. This internalization of traumatic memory into peaceful strategy generated preferences for peaceful coexistence rather than revanchist aggression through three reinforcing pathways. First, China's experiential learning as a victim of military occupation provided acute understanding of imperial expansion's inevitable costs. Having witnessed how foreign military bases bred local resistance, drained occupiers' resources, and ultimately hastened imperial decline—from Britain's costly colonial apparatus to Japan's catastrophic defeat—China internalized that military expansion plants seeds of future weakness rather than strength. Second, the specific nature of China's trauma—systematic sovereignty violations through unequal treaties, extraterritoriality, and foreign concessions—created heightened sensitivity to the instruments of domination themselves. This experiential knowledge fostered not merely tactical aversion but fundamental reconceptualization: military bases became symbolically associated with humiliation rather than power, making their replication culturally and politically unthinkable. Third, China recognized that responding to historical humiliation through military expansion would perpetuate cycles of retaliation that poison international relations across generations, as evidenced by the lasting tensions from Japanese occupation. Instead, by championing sovereignty and peaceful development during the

global decolonization movement, China could simultaneously heal from its trauma while building legitimacy among nations sharing similar colonial experiences. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence thus emerged not from weakness or idealism, but from hard-won wisdom that sustainable great power status requires breaking cycles of domination rather than reversing roles within them. This transformation, from victim of "might makes right" diplomacy to architect of mutual respect, demonstrates how collective trauma, when institutionalized through principled frameworks rather than revenge fantasies, can generate innovative approaches to international order that transcend the violence they seek to prevent.

This institutionalized memory creates a distinctive approach to great power status. Chinese strategic culture always sees them as violations of sovereignty reminiscent of colonial concessions since the “Century of Humiliation”; thus, China emphasizes respect for territorial integrity born from its own dismemberment. The Belt and Road Initiative, with its focus on infrastructure over military installations, represents not only tactical preference but the expression of deeply rooted lessons about legitimate forms of international influence. The China’s case illuminates how historical memory operates not as a simple repository of past grievances but as an active force shaping contemporary state behavior. Through comprehensive institutionalization, memories become rooted in the very fabric of state operation. This suggests that understanding state behavior needs scrutinizing not just current power distributions but the institutional mechanisms through which historical experiences are preserved, transmitted, and translated into contemporary strategy. For China, the “Century of Humiliation” is not just a period of history—it is a living framework, maintained through elaborate memory infrastructure, that continues to define what security means, what threats look like, and what constitutes appropriate behavior for a great power in the twenty-first century.

From British Empire to Cold War: U.S.' Case

Where China's traumatic memories of foreign domination fostered aversion to military bases, the United States' historical experiences of successful expansion created enduring institutional preferences for global military presence. The United States' global network constitutes the most extensive system of power projection in human history, surpassing even the British Empire at its zenith. Yet international relations theorists, particularly realists, have consistently treated American military expansionism as the natural behavior of any great power rather than the product of specific historical experiences and institutionalized memories. This potential analytical error has led to profound misunderstandings about both American behavior and the nature of great power politics more broadly. Where theorists see timeless patterns of hegemonic behavior, a closer examination reveals how America's strategic culture emerged from two formative historical experiences: its entangled relationship with the British Empire (as colony, competitor, and eventual successor) and its existential struggle with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Comprehending American strategic culture demands identifying how historical experiences become embedded in institutional practices, strategic doctrines, and national identity. The United States did not emerge as a military hegemon through some inevitable structural process but through conscious choices shaped by interpreted historical lessons. From the British, Americans learned both the possibilities and limitations of global military presence, by absorbing lessons about naval power, base networks, and informal empire. Americans convinced they could avoid Britain's eventual decline through superior organization and ideological appeal. From the Cold War, Americans internalized the apparent necessity of forward deployment, the dangers of isolationism, and the belief that military presence equals security and influence. These lessons,

institutionalized through military academies, strategic planning documents, and foreign policy establishments, framed powerful path dependencies that persist long after their original contexts have vanished.

Compared to China's traumatic memories of foreign military bases leading to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and a preference for economic over military instruments of power projection, America's successful experiences with military expansion—from Manifest Destiny through World War II victory to Cold War containment—might foster an institutional bias toward military solutions and forward presence. Where Chinese strategic culture emphasizes sovereignty and non-interference based on memories of invasion, American strategic culture emphasizes intervention and presence based on memories of successful expansion and the perceived costs of withdrawal.

This divergence in strategic cultures rooted in different historical experiences challenges realist assumptions about universal patterns of great power behavior. The American case demonstrates not that military expansionism is natural or inevitable, but that it shows one possible response to a particular set of historical experiences—experiences of successful territorial expansion, profitable imperial succession, and ideological victory through military containment. By examining how these experiences were interpreted, institutionalized, and transmitted across generations, we can comprehend why the United States pursues strategies that other great powers, shaped by different histories, might find counterproductive or even abhorrent. This historical specificity of American behavior has critical implications for understanding contemporary great power competition and the possibilities for alternative forms of international order.

Lessons of the British Empire

The United States' relationship with the British Empire embodies the one of history's most complex imperial transitions—from rebellious colony to rival power to eventual successor. This evolution shaped American strategic culture and built institutional memories and practices that continue to drive U.S. global military expansion. The United States came into existence by breaking away from the British Empire, but it retained many of the institutional and doctrinal traditions of its erstwhile sovereign. It marshalled these traditions to new purposes as it expanded across the continent and turned its attention abroad (Kennedy 2007, 91). This dialectical relationship: simultaneously rejecting and absorbing British imperial practices, formed the foundations for America's distinctive approach to global power projection.

Even as Americans celebrated their independence from British tyranny, they internalized fundamental aspects of British imperial practice and ideology. The westward expansion across North America unveiled these continuities. This expansion "displayed many common imperialist experiences" with British settler colonialism, "being grasping, violent and racist" (Hopkins 2007, 401). Kennedy reinforces this parallel: "this westward march across the continent bore striking similarities to settler expansion in South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, not least in terms of the settlers' harsh treatment of the indigenous inhabitants" (Kennedy 2007, 94-95). As the United States sought for overseas expansion in the late nineteenth century, it explicitly turned to the British Empire as both model and justification as well. Americans from varied political backgrounds came to recognize that the United States' new colonial empire—part of its much vaster commercial, territorial, and military empires—operated within a larger network of imperial thought and practice (Kramer 2002, 1316). The British example provided crucial legitimacy and practical guidance for American imperialism. American accepted the concept of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority as British precedents promoted. British advocates of U.S. overseas colonialism

also enlisted Anglo-Saxonism as a racial-exceptionalist argument (Kramer 2002, 1318). The Anglo-Saxon racial bond became a powerful tool for legitimizing American expansion as Americans “gained legitimacy from their resonance with the ringing racial endorsements of many prominent British interlocutors, arguably the primary arbiters of Anglo-Saxon standing" (Kramer 2002, 1334). This mutual reinforcement created an imagining of "a joint Anglo-American empire” (Kramer 2002, 1335), which paves the way for US’ future expansion.

World War II represented the decisive transition from British to American global hegemony, but this succession involved both continuity and innovation. With Britain's retreat from empire in the second half of the twentieth century, the United States became its most obvious heir, filling the economic and military vacuum that its decline left in the international arena while finding new ways to exert influence over its former colonies (Kennedy 2007, 91). The United States inherited not just geopolitical position but also strategic concepts and practices. The U.S. adopted and adapted the British model of informal empire—particularly the 'imperialism of free trade'—in its own dealings with regions like China and Latin America" (Steinmetz 2005, 352). This preference for informal over formal empire reflected both American ideological commitments and lessons learned from British experience. As Kennedy explains, "The British themselves preferred whenever possible to exert political power over other peoples through less intrusive means than direct rule" (Kennedy 2007, 96).

US’ institutional mechanisms for projecting power also showed clear British influence. The English language is the predominant language for business and science, and the English rule of law is the standard across much of the globe and resulted in a legal framework that allowed for social stability and economic growth (Swain 2008, 3803). These British legacies provided infrastructure for American hegemony, allowing the U.S. to project power through existing

channels rather than creating entirely new ones. The American study of British imperial experience produced specific lessons that became institutionalized in U.S. strategic thinking. First, the importance of naval power and global basing. The British model of using naval bases to project power globally became the template for American military strategy. Second, the value of indirect rule and client states over direct colonization. The United States has adopted similar strategies in many of its dealings with other countries. Caribbean and Central American neighbors have been the frequent targets of US gunboat diplomacy and other instruments of informal imperialism (Porter, cited in Kennedy 2007, 96-97). Also, The U.S. learned to prefer "financial assistance and military advisers for friendly governments, to economic sanctions and CIA-sponsored coups against unfriendly ones" (Kennedy 2007, 97). Third, the importance of ideological justification. The United States crafted its own technocratic version of this civilizing mission and it honed a rhetoric of development and modernization that held great appeal (Kennedy 2007, 104-105). This is an evolution of the British "civilizing mission" which is adapted to twentieth-century sensibilities but served similar legitimating functions.

Most significantly, the United States institutionalized a “contradiction” inherited from its relationship with the British Empire—presenting itself as anti-imperial while pursuing imperial policies. This paradox became institutionalized in American strategic culture and framed a preference for informal empire justified by spreading freedom and democracy. The British precedent of the "imperialism of free trade" allowed Americans to pursue imperial objectives while maintaining anti-imperial rhetoric. This created a situation where "The absence of the Ottoman and British experiences from discussion of the American invasion of Iraq reveals the dangers of not using past experience of actual, historical invasion, occupation, and imperial rule" (Hopkins 2007, 6).

The transformation from colony to successor thus gives rise to a unique strategic culture of US—one that absorbed British imperial practices but cloaked them in anti-imperial ideology. This institutionalized historical experience continues to shape American behavior till today, driving military expansion justified as spreading freedom, maintaining global stability through military presence presented as peaceful engagement, and pursuing hegemony while denying imperial ambitions. Realizing this historical evolution helps understand why the United States, unlike China with its traumatic memories of foreign bases, sees global military presence not as violation but as natural expression of benevolent power because it is a lesson learned, transformed, and institutionalized from its British imperial predecessor.

Great Power Competition with Soviet Union

The Cold War converted the United States from a nation suspicious of standing armies and foreign entanglements into a global military hegemon with permanent overseas deployments. This transformation was not merely a temporary response to Soviet power but a fundamental reshaping of American state structure and strategic culture that endures to this day. As Ernest May observed, "Washington is a headquarters for a global diplomatic-military contest with a hostile, secretive, heavily armed rival superpower…The American national government may prove one of the longer-lasting artifacts of the Cold War" (May 1992, 270). The existential competition with the Soviet Union cultivated US' institutions, habits, and assumptions about the necessity of global military presence that became self-perpetuating.

The Cold War's onset triggered a rapid and comprehensive militarization of American government and society. In Fiscal 1950 (July 1949 to June 1950), the US' military budget represented less than one third of government expenditures and less than 5 percent of GNP... By Fiscal 1953, the military accounted for more than 60 percent of government outlays and more

than 12 percent of GNP (May 1992, 275). This was not a temporary wartime mobilization but the creation of a permanent national security state. Defense and defense-related agencies came to account for 60 to 70 percent of all federal personnel, while "the intelligence community mushroomed as essentially an auxiliary of the military establishment" (May 1992, 275). The NSC-68 (a top-secret policy paper issued by the U.S. National Security Council in 1950) epitomized the decisive institutionalization of this transformation, which includes that by the mid-1950s the United States 'must have substantially increased general air, ground, and sea strength, atomic capabilities, and air and civilian defenses to deter war and to provide reasonable assurance, in the event of war, that it could survive the initial blow and go on to the eventual attainment of its objectives (Gaddis 1982, 273). The document's implementation rendered a grand strategy that "transcended" the Cold War itself, one that "the United States would have pursued or attempted to pursue, even if there had been no rivalry with the Soviet Union" (Layne 2006, 4).

The need to contain Soviet power also led to the build-up of a global network of alliances and military bases that altered American strategic culture. During the Cold War America contained the Soviet threat and influence in the world through NATO in Europe and a series of bilateral alliances in Asia (He 2010, 1132). These were not temporary expedients but became permanent features of American strategy. Porter agrees with this scenario that "The strategy of primacy and the United States' forward-leaning presence endured after specific threats dissipated. (Porter 2018, 20). This bipolar structure of the Cold War became so deeply institutionalized that bipolarity was the guiding star for everything from alliance policy and the theory and practice of deterrence to intervention in the third world and the theory and practice of arms control (Buzan 2004, 34). During the Cold War, bipolarity framed the entire understanding of what was going on, which defined Africa, Asia and Latin America as the third world, and supported a logic of

balancing that legitimized not only huge accumulations of weaponry, but also many interventions, some large and deeply destructive to the societies concerned (Buzan 2004, 2). The Soviet threat also provided both justification and organizing logic for American global expansion. U.S. officials feared that Communism offered the Soviet Union a novel means to expand its power and used ideology to justify various initiatives shaped by power concerns (Avey 2012, 152). This fear drove the advent of an imperial system where "Washington supported political pluralism among its alliance partners... organized a major alliance system and kept troops on the German frontier to confront the rival empire... [and] kept troops (and still keeps them) on the major military frontier in Asia, the 38th parallel" (Maier 2005, 16).

The great power competition cultivated American institutional and cultural path dependencies that outlived the Soviet threat. When the Cold War ended, the United States would not retrench dramatically now that its superpower rival had been vanquished. Instead, it would maintain and extend the unchallenged supremacy it had gained when the Soviet empire collapsed (Brands 2018, 9). This continuity reflected how Cold War habits had become institutionalized. Moreover, the US developed certain institutions during the Cold War that are still in use today, even though, were they non-existent under current circumstances, we might not feel the need to create them de novo (Jervis 1995, 21). The vast military-industrial complex, global basing network, and interventionist strategic culture born of competition with the Soviet Union had become self-justifying and long-lasting after the end of the cold war. The Cold War thus did more than temporarily mobilize American power against a specific threat; it transformed the American state and its relationship to the world. Through decades of competition with the Soviet Union, the United States internalized the belief that global military presence, alliance management, and readiness for intervention were not simply tactical choices but existential necessities. These

lessons, institutionalized in everything from Pentagon planning to congressional budget processes to strategic education, configured a self-reinforcing system where military expansionism became the default American response to international challenges. Comprehending this change is crucial for comprehending why the United States, unlike China with its traumatic memories of foreign military presence, views global military bases not as imperial overreach but as the natural and necessary foundation of international order.

Institutionalized Hegemony

The change of position from British colony to successor empire, reinforced by Cold War competition, fostered an American strategic culture oriented toward global military presence and intervention. Unlike China, whose traumatic experiences with foreign invasion generated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, American historical experiences cultivated powerful positive associations with military expansion and forward deployment. These experiences, successful continental expansion mimicking British settler colonialism, profitable succession to British global influence, and perceived victory through military containment of the Soviet Union, became institutionalized in ways that make military restraint seem not prudent but dangerous.

The mechanisms of this institutionalization are mutually reinforcing. The national security state born of the Cold War, consuming most federal resources and personnel, produced vast bureaucracies whose existence depends on threat inflation and global engagement. Military academies and war colleges teach the lessons of American expansion as models of successful strategy. The foreign policy establishment emerged from World War II and the Cold War convinced that American primacy represents not imperial ambition but the natural order of things. This institutionalization operates through powerful ideological frameworks that transform self-interest into moral imperative. The British "civilizing mission" evolved into American doctrines

of democratization and development, offering ethical cover for intervention. The anti-imperial rhetoric of American founding became, paradoxically, justification for an "empire of liberty" that spreads freedom through military presence. The legacy of Cold War: the division of the world into free and unfree, persists in new forms, developing a tendency toward "hypersecuritization" where every challenge becomes existential.

This historical analysis reveals the contingent nature of American military expansionism. Far from conveying universal patterns of great power behavior, American strategic culture emerged from specific historical experiences interpreted through specific ideological lenses. The British model provided templates for global influence through naval power and base networks. The Cold War transformed these tools from options to imperatives, feeding institutions and ideologies that made military presence seem essential to American survival. These historical experiences, institutionalized across government, education, and strategic planning, produced a unique strategic culture that mistakes its own peculiarities for natural law.

America's triumphant memories rendered preferences for intervention and presence. These are not natural laws but historical products, which are specific responses to specific experiences that became inserted in institutional practice. The danger lies in mistaking these American patterns for universal truths about great power behavior, thereby missing how different historical experiences can produce fundamentally different approaches to international order. Only by recognizing the historical specificity of American military expansionism can we begin to imagine alternative forms of great power behavior based on different lessons from different pasts.

Conclusion: Collective Memory and the Future of International Order

This study has demonstrated that state behavior in the international system cannot be adequately understood through material factors and structural force alone. By examining how China and the United States have institutionalized different collective memories of their historical experiences, we see that great power behavior is not governed by universal laws but shaped by particular histories interpreted through specific cultural lenses. China's "Century of Humiliation" generated enduring preferences for sovereignty and non-interference, institutionalized in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—not out of weakness but from hard-won recognition that military expansion breeds resistance, perpetuates cycles of retaliation, and ultimately undermines the expansionist power itself, as China witnessed through the decline of its own occupiers. America's successful experiences with expansion and hegemonic succession created equally lasting preferences for military presence and intervention, embodied in a global base network and permanent national security state. These divergent paths reveal the insufficiency of realist theories that predict uniform behavior based on structural position.

This research does not claim that realism is wrong, merely that it is insufficient. Material factors matter, but they gain meaning through historical interpretation. Nor does this analysis deny the reality of U.S.-China competition or the possibility of hegemonic transition. Instead, it suggests that such competition will take forms shaped by each state's collective memory rather than following predetermined patterns. China's military modernization is real and significant, but modernization need not mean projection in the American style.

Most importantly, this framework is not supposed to be limited to great powers or to China as a special civilizational case. All states are shaped by collective memories: from Rwanda's genocide to Switzerland's neutrality, from Iran's revolution to Brazil's military dictatorship. These memories cultivated enduring frameworks that influence state behavior across issue areas and

power differentials. Small states' memories of domination may be as consequential for their behavior as great powers' memories of expansion or humiliation.

By taking collective memory seriously as a constitutive force in international politics, we can move beyond sterile debates between material and ideational factors toward more nuanced understandings of state behavior. In an era of renewed great power competition, recognizing how different historical experiences produce different strategic cultures is not merely academic—it is essential for avoiding the miscalculations that arise from assuming all states play by the same rules. Only by comprehending how the past lives in the present through institutionalized memory can we build international orders that accommodate human diversity rather than imposing false universalisms.

Bibliography

Avey, Paul C. "Confronting Soviet Power: U.S. Policy during the Early Cold War." *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 151-188.

Barnum, Miriam, Christopher Rasmussen, and Charles E. Sullivan. "Measuring Arms: Introducing the Global Military Spending Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024): 560-574.

Berger, Thomas. "Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan." In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, edited by Peter J. Katzenstein, 317-356. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Black, Jeremy. *Imperial Legacies: The British Empire Around the World*. New York: Encounter Books, 2019.

Brands, Hal. "Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era." *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (2018): 8-33.

Breslin, Shaun. "Understanding China's Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and Implications." *International Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2009): 817-835. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00830.x.

Buzan, Barry. "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 1 (2010): 5-36. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pop014.

———. *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

Callahan, William A. "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 749-761. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x.

Castro, Renato Cruz De. "China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: History, Practice, and Implications." *Asian Politics & Policy* 16, no. 1 (2024): 1-20.

Connelly, Matthew. "The New Imperialists." In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, 19-33. New York: The New Press, 2006.

Danner, Lukas K., and Félix E. Martín. "China's Hegemonic Intentions and Trajectory: Will It Opt for Benevolent, Coercive, or Dutch-Style Hegemony?" *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 186-207. https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.273.

Davies, Howard. *Getting China Wrong*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

Denton, Kirk A. *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013.

Dillon, Michael. *Zhou Enlai: The Enigma Behind Chairman Mao*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2020.

Eflova, Maria, Elena Gushchina, and Olga Maximova. "Institutionalization of the Past and Tourism in the Republic of Tatarstan." *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 5 (2024): 402-414.

Fitzgerald, Michael R., and Allen Packwood, eds. *Out of the Cold: The Cold War and Its Legacy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

CIGH Exeter. "How the Century of Humiliation Influences China's Ambitions Today." *Imperial & Global Forum* (blog). July 11, 2019. https://imperialglobalexeter.com/2019/07/11/how-the-century-of-humiliation-influences-chinas-ambitions-today/.

Go, Julian. "Imperial Power and Its Limits: America's Colonial Empire in the Early Twentieth Century." In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, 135-189. New York: The New Press, 2006.

He, Kai. "Explaining the Rise of China: Realist and Liberalist Perspectives." *The China Review* 8, no. 1 (2008): 1-27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23462165.

———. "The Hegemon's Choice between Power and Security: Explaining US Policy toward Asia after the Cold War." *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 1121-1143.

Hopkins, A.G. "Comparing British and American Empires." *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 3 (2007): 395-404.

Jervis, Robert. "Legacies of the Cold War." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1995): 21-27.

Johnston, Alastair Iain. *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

———. "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5-56. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081.

Kaufman, Alison Adcock. "'Humiliation, Then and Now': The Prospects for a Resurgent China." *China Brief* 10, no. 21 (2010): 1-4.

———. *The "Century of Humiliation" and China's National Narratives*. Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2011.

Kennedy, Dane. "Essay and Reflection: On the American Empire from a British Imperial Perspective." *The International History Review* 29, no. 1 (2007): 83-108.

Kramer, Paul A. "Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880-1910." *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1315-1353.

Layne, Christopher. *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Lee, Ji-Young. *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Liu, Zhenmin. "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: China's Contribution to International Law and Global Governance." *Chinese Journal of International Law* 13, no. 3 (2014): 477-481.

Maier, Charles S. "The Cold War as an Era of Imperial Rivalry." In *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Interpretations, Periodizations*, edited by Silvio Pons and Federico Romero, 12-35. London: Frank Cass, 2005.

Mastanduno, Michael. "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War." *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 49-88.

May, Ernest R. "The U.S. Government, a Legacy of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 2 (1992): 269-277.

Mayer, Maximilian, and Anna L. Ahlers, eds. *Politics of Memory, Heritage, and Diversity in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2023.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

Metcalf, Mark. "The National Humiliation Narrative: Dealing with the Present by Fixating on the Past." *Education About Asia* 25, no. 2 (2020): 48-52.

Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 5th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

Nau, Henry R. "Ideas Have Consequences: The Cold War and Today." *International Politics* 48, no. 4-5 (2011): 460-481.

Nyman, Jonna. "Towards a Global Security Studies: What Can Looking at China Tell Us About the Concept of Security?" *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2023): 675-698.

Odgaard, Liselotte. "Peaceful Coexistence Strategy and China's Diplomatic Power." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 3 (2013): 233-272.

Osmaev, Adam D., and Elena Y. Goryushina. "Institutionalization of Tayp's Collective Memory in the Post-Conflict Chechen Republic." *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 6 (2023): 1108-1125.

Pan, Chengxin. "The 'China Threat' in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 3 (2004): 305-331. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540402900304.

Porter, Patrick. "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment." *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 9-46.

Robertson, Peter E. "The Military Rise of China: The Real Defence Budget Over Two Decades." *Defence and Peace Economics* 35, no. 6 (2024): 807-825.

Saada, Emmanuelle. "The History of Lessons: Law and Power in Modern Empires." In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, 34-48. New York: The New Press, 2006.

Scott, David. *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

Shambaugh, David. "Coping with a Conflicted China." *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2011): 7-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2011.538362.

Steinbruner, John, and Jeffrey Lewis. "The Unsettled Legacy of the Cold War." *Daedalus* 131, no. 4 (2002): 5-10.

Steinmetz, George. "Imperialism or Colonialism? From Windhoek to Washington, by Way of Basra." In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, 116-135. New York: The New Press, 2006.

———. "Return to Empire: The New U.S. Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective." *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 4 (2005): 339-367.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024*. Stockholm: SIPRI, 2024.

Stoler, Ann Laura. "Imperial Formations and the Opacities of Rule." In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, 48-63. New York: The New Press, 2006.

Swain, Judith L. "Our United States Legacy: Lessons Learned from the British Empire." *Journal of Clinical Investigation* 118, no. 11 (2008): 3802-3804.

Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

Wang, Hongying. "The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?" *International Affairs* 70, no. 1 (2012): 35-50. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.00936.x.

Wohlforth, William C. "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War." *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 28-57.

Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Yuan, Hang, and Xiaoguang Song. "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Contemporary International Law." *Hague Yearbook of International Law* 28 (2015): 65-89.

Zhang, Qingmin. "From Thinking Big to Acting Small: China's Diplomacy toward South Asia." *Contemporary International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2007): 509-527.

Zhang, Yongjin, and Barry Buzan. "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no. 1 (2012): 3-36. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/por016.

Zhao, Dingxin. *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. 《国家、战争与历史发展》[State, War, and Historical Development]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2015.

Zhao, Shiqing. "The Century of Humiliation: Historical Memory and Contemporary Chinese Politics." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 51, no. 2 (2024): 129-148.

Zhao, Suisheng. "Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 961-982. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030913.

Zhao, Tingyang. *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*. Translated by Liqing Tao. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.