It is now evident that the People's Republic of China (PRC) seeks to revise the balance of power in East Asia and eventually become the region's hegemon. Over the past decade Beijing has accelerated its military modernization program, aggressively pressed its maritime claims in the South and East China Seas, coerced and isolated Taiwan, and continued to challenge the United States for control of what is known as “the first island chain”: countries and islets from Japan to parts of Indonesia that to China appear as a potentially linked fence locking it out of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

This chapter will explore four features of the PRC’s revisionism. First, China's rise is actually a resurgence to power or, as Party General Secretary Xi Jinping has put it, a “national rejuvenation.” The country has a long imperial history as the central power in Asia. China sees itself as returning to its once-dominant imperial preeminence. Given China's thousands of years of history, Chinese leaders view their loss of power and influence less than 200 years ago as an aberration from the natural order of things—an order with China at its center.

Second, China seeks a new order based on this imperial Sinosphere, both in its physical boundaries and its worldview. In a sense, that order already exists. Beijing rules over the world's last remaining multiethnic empire, having reacquired most of its territories after the Qing dynasty's collapse. While the Ottoman and various European empires were divided into separate nation-states that we now know as Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, this was never fully the case with China. However, its ambitions do not end there. Beijing views maritime East Asia partly through imperial lenses,
claiming historic rights to Taiwan and what others view as international waters or their own sovereign territory.

Third, though China must often behave in accord with the norms and historic patterns of a “normal” nation-state, its dominant personality is that of an empire. With more power and prestige, it seeks to reorder the Asian political order to its liking. This means that China not only wants to do what any rising power would do—create more strategic depth, gain more influence in its surrounding seas, and dilute the influence of the extant hegemon—but also believes that the territories it claims and the countries that contest them should be deferential to the Middle Kingdom and should not be regarded as equals.

Fourth, there are constraints on China’s global ambitions, in particular its embrace of the global economic order. For the time being, it accepts US management of the international financial system and the global US military presence that keeps the world safe for maritime trade. While Beijing has become more active in the Middle East (including constructing a naval base in Djibouti), its major territorial ambitions and bid for power primacy are presently limited to the Asia-Pacific. China could challenge the global order more directly if, for example, it found that order threatening to the continued primacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). For now, China lives uncomfortably within that order, garnering its benefits and using them to build up its instruments of power while also guarding against the most intrusive elements. While the focus of China’s revisionism is Asia, if it succeeds in rejuvenating itself to Asia predominance, it will inevitably become a global competitor to the United States.

Resurgence to Power

The political challenge for all Chinese leaders since the fall of the Qing dynasty has been that China is an empire operating inside a world order meant for nation-states. Or, as Lucian Pye wrote in 1990, China is still more of a “civilization pretending to be a nation state.” Since the Western powers began to challenge the Qing Empire in the late 18th century, China’s most basic strategic need has been to “make the world safe” for the Chinese empire.

Many aspects of China’s core political, social, and cultural mores, developed over thousands of years of Chinese history, still shape its geostrategic
actions. These include the quasi-religious beliefs that Chinese rulers have a Mandate of Heaven to rule "all under heaven"; that Chinese civilization is superior, more virtuous, and more benign than that of the West; that hierarchy leads to order; and that sometimes the state needs to use great violence to quell uprisings, drive back invaders, and gain the compliance of tributaries. In particular, Chinese elites have learned that the greatest threat to Chinese dynasties has been when internal uprising and external pressure have coincided. When "harmony" is threatened, such as a country in the Sinosphere not acting with due deference to Beijing, violence can be used to restore it.

The CCP's ideological foundation was revolutionary Leninism, and therefore Mao sought to purge China of the vestiges of what he derided as the weakness of the old Confucian political order. Even so, Mao ruled a multiethnic empire that had similar borders to those of the Qing and expected deference from the Asian periphery. The idea of Middle Kingdom centrality would not be purged from China's strategic DNA.

Further, the CCP today derives its legitimacy in part from its economic performance and in part from its claim to reverse the "century of humiliation," which, in China's view, is a historical aberration that needs to be avenged as China restores itself to its rightful place of greatness. Party Secretary Xi Jinping's "China Dream" doctrine has made the latter more explicit: He promises to rejuvenate China. Moreover, the CCP now openly celebrates China's imperial past. Xi announced his new national plans at the national museum that now proudly exhibits China's imperial history:

The "revival" narrated in the museum exhibit is also built on a new kind of memory of China's imperial past (from roughly 221 BCE to 1911). In the Mao era, China's long dynastic history was usually denigrated as a time when the Chinese people suffered under the yoke of feudalism and the aristocratic, land-owning class—in league with the ruling imperial houses—oppressed the peasants. Today, this Maoist view of the imperial past has been replaced with a much more positive and lustrous image that reflects China's new global, "imperial" aspirations in the present . . . what is being "revived" in China today is the greatness and ancient glory of China's past lost to Western and Japanese imperialism. The
restoration of Confucianism . . . both in Party and popular discourse, parallels this revisionist view of the imperial past.\(^7\)

### What Is the Imperial Past? The Height of Chinese Power

To understand what the CCP is attempting to reclaim, one must understand China at the height of its power. Modern China’s boundaries are loosely based on those established at the peak of the Qing dynasty, which ruled from 1636 until 1911. The Qing dynasty was founded by the Manchus, a nomadic tribal people from the Asiatic steppe, who toppled the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), reconquered lost Ming lands, and expanded the Chinese empire.

To expand outward from the Han heartland, successive emperors mounted military campaigns. Kangxi, the first great Manchu/Qing emperor, pushed the empire north, establishing new borders with Russia, fighting the Mongols, and stationing troops in Tibet.

China had the unique ability to “Sinify” both peripheral territories and its own invaders, such as the Manchus. The Manchu ruling elite maintained a distinct identity from the Han Chinese, but they also adopted important dimensions of traditional Chinese political culture. They did this in part to pacify the majority Han population and in part because the Confucian political-social structure seemed an efficient means to rule an empire.

After their initial conquest of China, the Qing emperors possessed a large battle-hardened military but worried that these very troops would cause unrest or start a civil war.\(^8\) Thus, the Qing emperors turned to the traditional “Chinese” Confucian-based examination and civil-service system to gain social and political control.

In foreign affairs, as with past Chinese dynasties, the Manchus used a host of military and diplomatic means to conquer, govern, and defend the empire and its domain. Beijing reestablished a tributary model of relations within a core Sinic zone—Korea, Siam (Thailand), Vietnam, Burma, and the Ryukyu Islands. These states were Sinic in that elites often spoke Chinese, adulated Chinese culture, and accepted the ethics and norms of a Confucian state. The elites and much of the population practiced the same quasi-religious rituals and internalized many of the same Confucian and Buddhist beliefs of the Han. Tributary emissaries interacted with the Chinese court through
a set of elaborate rituals, including the kowtow, meant to acknowledge Chinese supremacy.

What is now known as maritime East Asia was thus Sino-centric. Here is how the historian John Fairbank puts it:

The Chinese tended to think of their foreign relations as giving expression externally to the same principles of social and political order that was manifested internally. . . . China's foreign relations were accordingly hierarchic and non-egalitarian.9

As long as his rule was consistent with Confucian notions of virtue, the Chinese emperor was the universal ruler of “all under heaven.” This way of thinking left no room for a plurality of sovereigns in international relations, let alone the new European concept of sovereign equality among nations. Chinese leaders believed that as long as they ruled “virtuously,” they had the legitimacy to treat other nations as a Chinese father would a son.

“Sinicization” was an important tool of statecraft, but shared cultural ties alone did not preserve the tributary system. Instead, vassal states were cowed by Chinese power as well. The Qing dynasty twice invaded Korea to remove leaders who continued to support the Ming dynasty's claim to be the true rulers in Beijing. When the Koreans finally bowed to the Qing, it was largely out of fear of Chinese military might rather than respect for Chinese cultural norms.

Outside the Sinic zone, the Manchus marched west, seeking to create a multiethnic empire comprised of Mongols, Tibetans, Turkic peoples, Han Chinese, and dozens of smaller tribes that accepted the precepts of Chinese civilization. To expand from the Han heartland—modern China’s eastern seaboard—successive Qing emperors mounted campaigns of conquest.

The Qing relied on their strict banner system of military organization to expand the empire's western reaches. The banners were military units akin to Roman legions. During wartime, each banner acted as a self-contained military force. Moreover, the banners’ bureaucratic structure allowed the emperor to pay salaries, distribute land, and administer justice to his troops. Conquered forces, such as the Mongols, were incorporated into the Chinese imperial army, organized into their own banner units, and commanded by Manchu officers.
Under the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722), Qing banner men brought the Chinese empire to the height of its power and prestige. At the beginning of his rule, Kangxi consolidated power, putting down rival feudal lords in southern China. With the center of the empire unified, he turned to invade Taiwan, seizing it from a former and recalcitrant Ming military leader, Gen. Zheng Chenggong. Next, the emperor pushed the empire northward and westward, establishing a border with Russia, campaigning against the Mongols, and stationing troops in Tibet.

Qing foreign policy in Central Asia did not fit neatly into the tributary system. Instead, Qing statecraft turned to what moderns would call realpolitik—conquest, diplomacy, and alliances with local elites based on power, as well as acceptance and pandering to Central Asian cultural norms. The historian Peter Perdue writes:

Tributary views were only one of a variety of Chinese world views. . . . Before the 1750s (when the continental threat had been exterminated), Qing elites knew, quite well, that they were engaged in a long-term military struggle with rival Central Eurasian states which had equal claims to legitimacy. The Kangxi emperor, in appealing for Mongolian support, most frequently invoked the common heritage of the Manchus and Mongols as Central Eurasians, or he appealed to Buddhist conceptions of universal benevolence, rather than Confucian hierarchy. He knew that these appeals were more convincing than invoking his stature as the Son of Heaven.10

Although they could adapt their diplomacy to the diverse political cultures they sought to dominate, Kangxi and his grandson Qianlong could be extremely violent. For example, the Mongols eventually were crushed. In the 1750s, Qianlong imposed his final solution, killing Mongol Zunghar elites and incorporating their territories into one region, which he called Xinjiang—a new Chinese frontier. Under Qianlong, China was at the height of its power. As historian Odd Arne Westad writes:

By the 1750s it [China] had crushed the political and military independence of all the smaller nations on its northern frontier
and begun incorporating them into a much-enlarged China. It had regulated its relations with its remaining neighbors, from the Russian empire in the north to the kingdoms in Southeast Asia and in the Himalayas, according to Chinese preconditions and based on a Chinese sense of superiority. By the middle part of the eighteenth century, the Qing empire had created a world in eastern Asia that was almost entirely its own.¹¹

Indeed, the Qianlong emperor was renowned for his Ten Great Campaigns to exert control and subdue dissent in Burma, Mongolia, Sichuan China, Taiwan, Tibet, Vietnam, and Xinjiang.¹² He was willing to pay great costs and take great risks on behalf of expansion. For example, the Chinese lost 70,000 soldiers in an unsuccessful campaign in Burma. A similar outcome occurred in Vietnam in the late 1780s, when the Qing lost thousands of soldiers in an attempt to intervene in the Vietnamese civil war on behalf of their favored rulers.

While imperial statecraft imposed a softer tributary system on the Sinic core, getting foreign elites to accept Beijing’s superiority sometimes required massive violence. Qing statecraft was successful until the West turned its gaze to China.

**Imperial Downfall**

The empire’s worldview, however, carried the roots of its own destruction. The Chinese empire refused to accept any country as a sovereign equal. This was problematic particularly because the West was undergoing a revolution in international relations, wherein the principle of state equality was a pillar of a new European system. For this system to work, the West needed a modern diplomatic core that could conduct new relations among nations, professional militaries, and other institutions and instruments that we long ago have come to accept as the pillars of statehood.

In contrast, Chinese rulers saw no need for a modern diplomatic corps or ministry of foreign affairs. Instead, separate ministries were assigned to manage different types of “barbarians.” For example, the Office of Border Affairs managed relations with the Mongols, Zunghars, and Russians—the areas
from which so many invaders had entered China. The Imperial Household dealt with European missionaries, while the Ministry of Rituals dealt with the neighboring vassal states of Korea, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Ryukyu Islands. The latter arrangement meant that, with a few important exceptions such as relations with Russia, China saw its most intensive contact with foreigners as a set of rituals that had to be managed.

Chinese concepts of world order were useless against changing global geopolitics, increasingly defined by a quickly industrializing West. Britain was the first to challenge the Qing world order, and Qing mismanagement catalyzed the loss of its sovereignty and much of its territory. In 1784, British Prime Minister William Pitt dispatched the diplomat Lord George Macartney to secure free trade with a restrictive China. It had been over a century since the Qing had negotiated as an equal (with Russia), and unlike his grandfather, the emperor Qianlong did not possess the skill to do so.

Qianlong had no conceptual framework to guide diplomacy with King George. The Qing required of his emissaries the same kowtowing rituals they would have expected from any other mission. The Qing rules and customs required treating the mission as that of another “submissive nation that came bearing tribute and request[ed] benefits from the emperor in return.” The Qing seemed to know little about how quickly Britain had industrialized and how powerful it had become.

Macartney would not kowtow. He came as an equal and offered to treat the emperor with the same respect as he would his own king by kneeling before him on one knee. In turn, Qianlong refused all of Macartney’s substantive requests. The British would get no permanent embassy and no trade agreement. For the emperor, England was another arrogant barbarian.

Expressing the cultural arrogance and geopolitical ignorance of the Qing world order, Qianlong speculated that perhaps the British had come, like so many Chinese neighbors, to learn Chinese superior ways: “You could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil,” he wrote the king. He sympathized with the “lonely remoteness” of the British Isles as compared to Beijing, “the hub and center about which all quarters of the globe revolve.” For an emperor who had succeeded in consolidating and even expanding beyond the reach of his conquering grandfather, the lack of knowledge about the West was stunning and ultimately disastrous.
The British concluded that the Qing dynasty was not only arrogant and remote but also weak and that it did not understand Western power. The British returned after the Napoleonic wars and eventually fought the Opium Wars, which secured for London ports of trade and extraterritorial legal rights. It inspired the rest of the European colonialists to demand the same from China, and the century of humiliation began.

Qing statecraft was useless against this new challenge. Beijing could not Sinify the British or the rest of Europe, nor did it have the professional military to fight them. These industrialized nations were different from the conquered Qing lands to the west or the Sinosphere to the south and east. Finally, since the Qing did not see the British as sovereign equals, they would not negotiate nor compromise to find common ground.

The Qing’s inability to defend itself against the rapacious colonialists and the concurrent rise of anti-Qing/Manchu internal rebellions sent China into a downward spiral of foreign humiliation and internal dissent. These internal challenges sapped the resources the Qing so badly needed for external defense. This helps explain why contemporary China ruthlessly puts down any form of internal dissent today.

These periods, both when the Qing was at the height of their power and when the empire began to collapse under the weight of outside pressure, still significantly influence the CCP. Indeed, the emotional driver of contemporary Chinese foreign policy is the need to assuage China’s great humiliation, recapture lost territories, and avenge the treachery of Japan, an Asian country that had never accepted Chinese superiority and had used its great power to crush China.16

**The Project of Resurgence Begins**

In the early 20th century, the collapse of empires was common. The new “republican” government of China would not accept that fate. China’s case was unique in that the successor state to the Qing Empire, the Republic of China, succeeded in regaining the Qing Empire’s lost territories. While China holds onto a narrative of past weakness and humiliation, in fact, the diplomacy of a war-torn, divided China was a remarkable success. It overturned the new order imposed on it by the Japanese and European
colonialists and patched up the empire. As the historian William Kirby writes:

Da Qing Guo, the vast Qing empire, the multinational and multicultural expanse that included Manchuria, Mongolia, Eastern Turkestan and Tibet, among other areas. No Chinese empire had ever been so big for so long as the Qing realm of the Manchus. But the amazing fact of the Republican era is that this space was not only redefined, as “Chinese” and as the sacred soil of China, but also defended diplomatically to such a degree that the borders of the PRC today are essentially those of the Qing, minus only Outer Mongolia. The Qing fell but the empire remained. More accurately, the empire became the basis of the Chinese national state.17

No country has this postimperial diplomatic history. The new republican leaders of China simply relabeled the empire, calling it a nation-state, even as it set about governing the same territories. Uniquely, Chinese revisionism began soon after its old order fell; reconstructing the empire has been the primary aim of Chinese statesmen since the Qing's fall in 1911.

Today, a revisionist China also wants to more deeply uproot the status quo: China wants continued international recognition that the boundaries and territories of One China are essentially the same as those of the Qing dynasty at its height, except for Outer Mongolia. The Chinese today have convinced the world that China's unity is somehow the natural order of things, rather than the result of a series of bloody conquests by the Qing regime. Today, Westerners fail to even challenge the premise that China is owed the “unity” it established through conquest and repression.

In the wake of the empire, the Republic of China's diplomats also secured a substantial place for China in the new world order made up not of empires, but of nation-states. A weak and divided China was still treated as an important country. It became one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, received a seat at the table at the Yalta Conference during World War II, and was a wartime ally of the Americans and British. By the end of two world wars, the Chinese had managed to both become part of a new American-led liberal order based on nation-states and emerge as the only country with its imperial borders more or less intact, securing promises
from the great powers that the Qing territories would revert to the new Chinese regime.

The tension between the nation of China and its traditional civilizational imperium was evident even in Mao Zedong’s revolutionary extremism. The Great Helmsman had little interest in joining the American-led order and had no use for an open trading and financial system or a set of alliances. Furthermore, Mao found some of the order’s “norms” to be objectionable and threatening, such as the commitment to human rights in the UN charter.

While Mao committed himself to Marxist-Leninist revolution, many essential foundations of Chinese strategic culture remained. Ultimately, Mao offered a new approach to Sino-centrism. Even as he railed against the “reactionary” old Chinese system, Mao wanted to restore China to primacy in the Asian system. The pathway to Sino-centrism would be leadership through a revolutionary communist foreign policy that sought to overturn American dominance. He provided aid and training to Ho Chi Minh in a communist revolutionary war, trying to turn him into a proto-Maoist, just as Chinese emperors had tried to shape a Confucian elite in the tributaries. Mao also fought to keep the United States from unifying Korea. He supported communist rebel groups in Burma, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia, believing that his form of communism was purer than that of the Soviets.  

Ultimately, his Sinicized communism did not succeed. Mao exhausted his country through endless revolutionary projects such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and by challenging both Cold War superpowers. The rise of a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance and the increasing hostility between Moscow and Beijing left China isolated and under threat. Backed into a strategic corner, Mao became a practitioner of modern statecraft. As the Soviets threatened war, Mao courted the Americans for support. He successfully sought to regain a place as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and set the stage for Deng Xiaoping to lead China firmly into the family of nations.

A “Normal” Revisionist?

In terms of Beijing’s conduct of international relations, Deng Xiaoping led China into the family of nations. However, even the relatively more modern
and liberal Deng gave no thought to letting go of China’s imperial holdings. There was no compromise on Tibet or Xinjiang’s independence, Hong Kong’s reversion, or the insistence that Taiwan was part of One China. This is even more remarkable given that Deng’s rule coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

Even as he held onto the imperial territories, Deng did his best to embrace the international system. China took its place at the UN, signed many treaties, joined several multilateral institutions, entered the World Trade Organization, and generally embraced the liberal economic order. China’s diplomacy was of a traditional Westphalian character, even taking more seriously the norm of sovereign equality and noninterference in other countries’ domestic affairs than the original Westphalian nations. The contradictions and tensions between nation and empire could be put aside for a time.

Accepting the premises of nation-state diplomacy did not mean only peaceful and commercial approaches. Indeed, Deng and his successors never lost sight of the potential efficacy of using force, as Deng launched an ambitious program to strengthen China’s science and technology capabilities and engaged in a comprehensive military modernization program. These efforts are in keeping with the long-standing Chinese belief in the efficacy of violence and coercion as tools of statecraft.

It is important to recite the fruits of these military labors, as it is easy to be lulled into a sense that China’s approach to hard power is different from the West’s because of its Confucian heritage and rhetorical emphasis on harmony. Here are some highlights of that effort.

Since 1990, China has invested in all classes of ballistic and cruise missiles under the world’s most active missile program. Its Second Artillery missile force is lethal and now largely precision guided. China has also upgraded its nuclear forces, including road-mobile, solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking anywhere in the United States. China similarly developed nuclear submarines that can deploy submarine-launched ballistic missiles. No country has a missile program as active as China’s.

According to the Rand Corporation’s 2015 US-China military scorecard, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) air forces have also been the beneficiaries of the CCP’s largesse: Today, about half (736 of 1,432) of China’s fighters are modern, fourth-generation aircraft, the equivalent of American
F-15s, F-16s, and F/A-18s. Yet it is the improvement in PLA maritime forces that has caught the attention of Asia-Pacific leaders. As Rand noted in its report:

Clearly, the PLA Navy’s surface fleet has made remarkable strides. As late as 2003, only about 14 percent of its destroyers and 24 percent of its frigates might have been considered modern—capable of operations against a capable enemy. By 2015, those figures had risen to 65 percent and 69 percent, respectively.24

China has been acquiring modern diesel-powered submarines at a faster clip than any other military in the world. It is now fielding modern destroyers at a rapid rate, many of them equipped with capable antiair defenses and long-range, antiship cruise missiles. China has also developed the world’s first operational antiship ballistic missile, specifically designed for targeting American aircraft carriers.25 Furthermore, in a general surprise to most observers, China remains committed to building its own aircraft carriers and mastering carrier aviation.26

Crucially, the PLA has also focused on improving its battle networking—the connective military tissue that allows for command-and-control and improved targeting.27 In combination, these systems expand the Chinese capability to hit targets further into the first island chain, or the string of nearby American-allied countries that includes Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. All this adds up to a break in the US monopoly over what Russia calls the “precision strike regime”—the network of communications and information systems that tie together the navy, air force, and missile force capability to find, target, and destroy American and allied forces and military installations. The PLA can now project power throughout the South and East China Seas and increasingly into the Indian Ocean.

The clearest sign of Chinese revisionism is that China’s military modernization has changed the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. This is all a far cry from the Qing banner system of military organization and Mao’s revolutionary forces. In a consequential turn of history since the British-visited destruction of China, it is Beijing that has invested more time, energy, and resources into building a modern force that could do unto others what was once done to China.

At the same time, China improved its capacity for imperial defense against
a restive populace and periphery. In many ways, China is the most sophisticated police state in the world.28

The military buildup and increased uses of coercive power are consistent with China’s revisionism. Much of that power is aimed at Taiwan, as China tries to get the democratic island to “rejoin” the motherland. The obsessive focus on “regaining” Taiwan is consistent with imperial thinking—all under heaven, or at least all of what the Qing once ruled, must again be ruled by Beijing. However, alongside this conception is the thinking of the new Chinese maritime power revisionists. For the Chinese maritime nationalists, Taiwan is also the “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” as Gen. Douglas MacArthur once referred to it,29 located in the heart of maritime Asia with the Luzon Strait to its south, the East China Sea to its north, and the Philippine Sea to its east. The island splits North from Southeast Asia and can be used by the Americans and Japanese to bottle up China’s power projection in the first island chain. In geostrategic terms, Taiwan can serve as either a bridgehead for foreign powers to stage attacks on China or a springboard out into the Pacific if controlled by China.30

Taiwan merits special attention because it evokes both Chinese imperial thinking and inspires the planning of the nation-state geopolitical thinkers. The island’s continued de facto independence is an insult to China’s view of itself as a continuous unified civilization and an obstacle to achieving contemporary greatness. Beyond China’s desire to keep the empire intact and regain the last holdouts, it wants to change the distribution of power in Asia and is dissatisfied with American dominance.

China, however, is also starting to push out beyond Asia. During the early 21st century, China’s energy and commodity companies had to scour the world for natural resources to feed China’s economic boom. President Hu Jintao was not ready to rely solely on the US to protect China’s global transit and supply lines. With expanding overseas interests, Hu called on the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to undertake “new historic missions.”31 He began to deploy military forces further afield into the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and Indian Ocean and buy and build a set of maritime facilities across the Indian Ocean that could be used as modern-day “coaling” stations and logistics facilities for PLA forces.

China’s increased assertiveness during this period was also driven by
its hatred of Japan, the only Asian country to have successfully waged war against it. With more naval resources, Hu began to push China’s East Asian maritime claims and harass the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands, reasserting China’s primacy.

Under the direction of Xi Jinping, China has continued this muscular foreign policy approach. Xi also has the internal strength that Hu lacked. In recent years, Chinese maritime forces have shifted the balance of power in East Asia’s littoral seas. In 2012, Chinese maritime militias and coast guard vessels seized the Scarborough Shoal, an atoll located 100 nautical miles off the Philippine coast, from Manila.

Elsewhere in the South China Sea, Beijing has constructed more than 3,000 acres of manmade military outposts and begun forward deploying missile batteries, drones, and fighter aircraft to these new bases. All the while, Chinese coast guard and fishing fleets continue to harass Filipino, Vietnamese, and Indonesian fishing and coast guard vessels. In the East China Sea, Chinese maritime militias and fishing fleets maintain a regular presence around the Senkaku Islands, over which both Beijing and Tokyo claim sovereignty. Chinese air force activity in Japanese airspace has increased dramatically in the past five years—in 2016 alone, Japan scrambled jets a record 851 times to intercept intruding Chinese fighters.

This strategic behavior is not just about righting the wrongs of the past or reestablishing the empire’s boundaries. Indeed, contrary to the official claims of CCP organs, China was never a true maritime power—certainly not in the Qing dynasty and certainly not with a reach into the Pacific. Rather, this type of revisionism is about the dilution of the main contemporary problem: the dominance of US and allied power in the Indo-Pacific.

From a Chinese point of view, the status quo, in which Washington’s allies and partners encircle China and form a first island chain running from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines, is untenable. During peacetime, China still relies on the US to keep the maritime commons open, but during a crisis, the US would potentially constrict China’s ability to operate, both commercially and militarily, in the broader oceans. The fact that many of the countries cooperating with the US were once Chinese vassals is a further insult to Chinese feelings. When Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi snapped at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum in Vietnam, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”
he was likely referring to both the current power disparity between China and Southeast Asian countries and China’s past suzerainty over them.34

What is unique about China’s revisionism is that the CCP does not appear to be simply using China’s imperial past to justify its current territorial claims. Rather, it appears CCP leaders have a deeply held belief in both the real and imagined glory of imperial China.

The CCP highlights the voyages of Ming-era adventurer Zheng He and other Chinese warriors and adventurers to explain the justice of its cause in the South China Sea. It has put out an official white paper explaining its historical rights in the seas.35 The paper states, “The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited [the islands of the South China Sea].” China’s argument for its claim to the South China Sea may have been soundly repudiated in a 2016 Hague Tribunal ruling, but Beijing still emphasizes its historical rights. Xi does not miss an opportunity to refer to the South China Sea as China’s. While some of this is ideological propaganda, meant to justify territorial claims, it would be a mistake to dismiss the very real belief in China in its historical mission to restore quasi-imperial suzerainty.

**Revisionism: How Far?**

The CCP strategists have to reckon with the truth that America has done more for China’s rise than any outside power. It helped China, then the Republic of China, rid itself of Western treaty concessions and gave it a place as one of the five policemen—the great powers who would oversee the international order after World War II. The US granted China a place on the UN Permanent Five and even helped push Russia out of Manchuria. America’s uniquely liberal worldview did not try to contain the resurging power of China, now the PRC, but rather offered it a place as a responsible stakeholder in the global liberal system. The fact that China has benefited from US order building has obviated the need for Beijing to challenge the global order thus far.

Still it is the American-led order in Asia that China seeks to revise. China finds the US alliance system threatening, US unofficial support for
Taiwan offensive, and US pushback in maritime East Asia unacceptable. Conversely, China’s desire to carve out a sphere of influence in East Asia is antithetical to the US interest in an open economic and political system and a free maritime commons.

In terms of the global order, China’s revisionism is constrained by its dependence on the global economic system. From Deng’s southern tour in 1992, a move he made to checkmate opponents of reform, through the end of Cold War, a main goal of Chinese diplomacy and economic policy was to reform its economy and join the World Trade Organization. China has strengthened itself as a part of the open international order, and in so doing, it has created dependencies on the US and the West for energy security, technology, and even corporate expertise. It is not yet clear if China wishes to overturn this system or has a workable alternative. It could remain a free rider of the liberal order while establishing hegemony in Asia.

It is not obvious if China has a global strategy in mind. If China were to ally with Russia and Iran—its fellow revisionists—Washington would face a severe challenge to its world order. However, China has not made much strategic effort to either align with Iran or challenge the US position in the Gulf. Rather, it has carefully balanced relations among its main Gulf oil suppliers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. In addition, it has gradually exercised more military power in the region through its Gulf of Aden task force and its basing ambitions in Djibouti.

Eventually, forward-stationed Chinese forces will guard Chinese energy routes, support the ongoing PLAN anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, and rescue Chinese nationals from conflict zones when needed. However, as of now, China does not yet play much of a role in Middle Eastern geopolitics. China’s approach in these areas still serves its interests in building its strength in Asia, its traditional sphere of influence.

As for Russia, the relationship is more complex. The two countries have been uneasy partners and sometimes rivals. Russia was an antagonist in the century of humiliation, a Cold War ally, and then a rival. The two countries almost came to blows in 1969, and China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam had as much to do with challenging Moscow as punishing Hanoi.

Since the end of the Cold War, the two countries have made common cause in diluting US influence through voting patterns on the UN Security Council. They have created the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to help
manage Central Asia. Russia was a major supplier of Chinese military equipment, and the two great powers are finding some commonality in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Russia will remain suspicious of its more powerful Asian neighbor as it becomes increasingly influential in Central Asia and sends workers into the Russian Far East.

As of now, China’s revisionist intentions remain focused on East Asia, the region where it was once dominant and central. In Asia, it has a sense of both what it does not want—US preeminence, US alliances, and a US-style liberal political-economic system—and what it wants—reconsolidation of Qing territory, control over the South China Sea, and a system of deference to its interests. China will face resistance to any hierarchical system; the old tributary states are proud, relatively new independent nations that no longer view China as the exemplar of Confucian moral virtue. China could only get its way through force, economic coercion, and inducements, combined with inattention from the United States.

**Toward a US Policy and Strategy**

Before fashioning a China strategy, the US must reckon candidly with China’s imperial nature. For many reasons, the US has pretended that China under the CCP can become a responsible nation in a liberal international system. But how can it? The CCP runs an empire—this means it demands deference from other Asian nations, is sensitive to any separatism from Taiwan to Hong Kong to Xinjiang, and believes in its civilizational superiority and in the justness of its case. All of this is inconsistent with what the US means when it calls on China to act as a responsible stakeholder.

The US must realize that it is more difficult to deal with an empire than with a “normal” rising power. China turns negotiations over geopolitical disagreements into demands that the restoration of Chinese greatness be respected. For example, US moves to support Taiwan are nonnegotiable for China. From China’s view, such efforts signal the United States’ intention to split the empire and therefore the unity and stability of China.

If the South China Sea is rightfully a “Chinese lake” and Beijing is simply living out a preordained national destiny, what exactly will China want to discuss? Furthermore, absent US power and presence, the other Asian
nations will be treated as lesser vassals, not sovereign equals. Assertive moves by Vietnam or Korea, once vassal states, trigger emotional reactions from China that amplify any geopolitical dispute. China’s hatred of Japan is partly the result of the desire to bring low the only Asian power that defeated and humiliated China in war.

However, the fact that China is an empire also provides the US with much more strategic leverage than Washington imagines. This leverage is strengthened by China’s structural economic stagnation, which is caused by massive amounts of debt, overcapacity, an inefficient financial system that misallocates capital, slack export markets, and environmental and demographic problems that will cost the CCP significant sums to ameliorate. Nevertheless, Xi’s external plans are more, not less, ambitious. He is restructuring the PLA to become a more professional fighting force, pressing China’s maritime claims, and enhancing its maritime power, even as he stakes his legacy on his ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) plan to link Asia with Europe.

China now claims or rules territory from the Western approaches to Afghanistan to the top of the South China Sea. That is a massive geography. Moreover, the imperial holdings of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong have not gotten any easier to manage. In short, China is in imperial overstretch. A US strategy should begin to take advantage of this.

The US has more at stake in East Asia than Central Asia and as such should focus the hard elements of its strategy on a US buildup in and around the Western Pacific. A much more serious capacity-building effort targeted at the maritime nations of South East Asia and a series of policies that encourage significant economic growth along market lines in these countries would help avert the possibility of China dominating the Western Pacific. The sine qua non of this strategy, however, is rebuilding US military power.

In parallel, China should be encouraged to go west. China will have many land-based investments to defend, and as long as India is consulted closely, doing so will not threaten any conceivable US interest. China should be forced to choose how it spends a shrinking pot of money.

The greatest advantages the US has in such a strategy are its alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines and partnerships with Singapore and Taiwan. Partnerships with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam will take time to develop, as each is wary of developing ties that
circumscribe their independence. Helping build a US-aligned order consisting of free-market economies, liberal polities, and defense establishments capable of defending their sovereign territory will take time and patience. Nonetheless, the US can and should assist these nations in their quest to become cohesive nation-states capable of protecting their sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

While no one will rush to join a collective security system, much can be done to create greater cohesion among allies and partners. All have a common interest in an Asia free from Chinese hegemony. All share interests in not losing territory and maritime claims to China. All have a military interest in enhanced maritime security. The US is the only country that can put these building blocks together.

The US should support a major military buildup in the region, providing each country with the means to deny China access to its territorial waters and airspace. To do so, Washington must increase the efficacy of its security assistance and arms sales systems. These steps should be backed up with a more active diplomatic effort focused on resolving territorial disputes bilaterally or trilaterally, even as the ASEAN processes go forward. This diplomatic approach will demonstrate that Southeast Asian countries are capable of engaging in international relations and resolving disputes bilaterally, trilaterally, and multilaterally—cooperating where they can. In so doing, a stable order is more likely to develop in Southeast Asia.

Such a strategy in maritime East Asia is intrinsically beneficial to the US. But given China’s imperial overstretch, it would also begin to raise questions in Beijing about how much it can afford to compete with the US. The liberal order is open to China and has been since Nixon’s presidency. China has the option to forgo costly competition and embed itself more deeply in the liberal order. Certainly, many of China’s entrepreneurs would prefer that to territorial grabs, spheres of influence, or the defense of North Korea. If China is surrounded by fully functioning nation-states that embrace free-market economies and are aligned with the US, its global entrepreneurs may press Chinese leaders to change course.
Conclusion

China's revisionism is unique. It is holding onto most of the territories of the Qing Empire and, in that sense, seeks the status quo. However, the unification project is unfinished. Taiwan must come under Chinese political control, Hong Kong must become more of a Chinese vassal, surrounding nations must be more deferential, and the South China Sea should become a Chinese lake. What's more, a more powerful China seeks to undo the American-led security system in Asia. In all these ways, China is revisionist.

China also benefits from the free and open US-led system and the US provision of public goods. Beijing's path to power enmeshed it into a global trading system, thereby constraining some of its strategic options. Accordingly, China does not seem to be seeking hegemony in other regions.

China could still “free ride” on the benefits of the US-led order while acquiring hegemony in Asia. The history of Chinese foreign relations shows the surprising consistency of Sino-centrism. Today, however, Asian elites do not believe that Chinese political culture is superior to their own. Neo-Sinicization will not work, and the PRC's attempts at soft power have had no discernable impact.39

Rather, to create a truly Sino-centric system, China would have to rely on economic inducements and military coercion. This strategy would be consistent with China's strategic culture and traditions. Although China's past tributary system did not often require force, its rulers did not hesitate to use violence when they thought it was necessary. And, as noted, China's military modernization over the past two decades has been remarkable, giving it greater capacity to threaten the use of force.

Ultimately, the Qing world order was destroyed because it could not properly analyze and respond to the new geopolitics that were forming in the quickly rising West. China's leaders hold a sense of inevitability regarding their nation's return to primacy. As with the Qing, this could turn out to be a grave mistake. If Washington competes vigorously in the maritime realm while encouraging China to invest more money and diplomatic energy on continental Asia, China will be forced to choose between holding onto its Western empire or advancing its maritime power. A wise strategy would force China to do so while holding out hope that China takes a more productive course in its foreign affairs.
Notes


