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## 1

# The Principles of Chinese Foreign Policy

The modern state of the People's Republic of China, for all the protestations of antiquity – its current leaders make much of their 'unbroken' link to an ancient culture – is in fact the result of an extensive period of war, unrest, revolution and change. From 1644 to 1911/12, the Qing dynasty ruled the approximate territory now covered by the PRC. Periods of expansion and external aggression from the late seventeenth to the eighteenth century saw them annex the Tibetan plateau and the area in the north-west now called Xinjiang. Once these campaigns ended, the borders of the Qing empire did not radically change, and they are broadly the territorial limits within which the PRC now sits.

By the nineteenth century, Qing China was a stagnating polity, beset by internal and external threats. Symptomatic of this was the vast Taiping uprising, which ran for almost two decades after 1850 and led to an estimated 20 million deaths. But it was at this time that the Qing came up against the full force of western modernity, in the form of the British imperial navy. The two Opium Wars, in 1839–42 and 1856–60, saw Hong Kong Island ceded to Great Britain and the extraction of vast indemnities from the country, forcing it to open up to forms and modes of foreign trade it had not previously wanted to engage with. By the turn of the twentieth century, successive clashes with neighbours and internal divisions had significantly debilitated the Qing, and it finally collapsed in 1911/12. Its replacement, the Republican government, saw China wracked by division and instability, culminating in a calamitous and tragic descent in the 1930s into international and internecine war.

**This history, steeped in blood and suffering,** is important to understand because for modern Chinese political leaders, and indeed for the general public, it is still alive. In many ways it is not

over. As academic William Callahan has described, the 1990s saw a reawakening of interest and awareness about the ‘century of humiliation’, the label given to the period from 1840 to 1949 when China suffered so much. 1949 therefore is seen in this narrative as a double liberation – the first from internal feudalism and old thinking, and second from external oppression. The creation of the People’s Republic in this historiography is truly a renaissance. This is best illustrated by the preamble to the official 1982 national constitutions of the PRC:

After waging protracted and arduous struggles, armed and otherwise, along a zigzag course, the Chinese people of all nationalities led by the Communist Party of China with Chairman Mao Zedong as its leader ultimately, in 1949, overthrew the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism, won a great victory in the New-Democratic Revolution and founded the People’s Republic of China. Since then the Chinese people have taken control of state power and become masters of the country.

This idea that the Communist Party acted on behalf of all Chinese people, and took the lead in their deliverance from all forms of oppression, is one that gets reiterated to this day. Speaking after reviewing the military parade marking the seventieth anniversary of the ending of the Sino-Japanese War and World War II in Asia in 2015, Xi Jinping stated:

The victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression is the first complete victory won by China in its resistance against foreign aggression in modern times. This great triumph crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China and put an end to China’s national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times. This great triumph re-established China as a major country in the world and won the Chinese people respect of all peace-loving people around the world. This great triumph opened up bright prospects for the great renewal of the Chinese nation and set our ancient country on a new journey after gaining rebirth.

The themes of national humiliation, struggle, liberation and rebirth have proved rich ones for China’s current leaders to mine in order to get public support. This is partly because to some extent these statements are accurate. But as historians continue to show, they are also a gross oversimplification. The key point to observe here is that this historic framework is the primary one within which leaders like Xi Jinping see their country and its role in the world. They are operating within a history where, in their view, a great and glorious civilization was eroded and felled by foreign aggression and internal corruption and weakness. This led to terrible suffering, particularly under the Japanese, until the Chinese people were united by the Communists and the People’s Republic was recreated. Since 1949, the country has been on a mission to restore itself to the centre of the world stage. Chinese foreign policy operates within this emotional framework. It is from this framework that issues like the treatment of China’s regional role, its relations with Japan, its stand on the South and East China Seas, its attitude towards the United States, and its principles of foreign policy derive.

## THE IDEAS

The history of Qing and Republican China had been one of victimization and suffering, and one of the PRC’s first promises was to break with the past by sticking to clear principles of behaviour in foreign policy matter. In 1949, after all, it was still vulnerable. It had one major international ally, the USSR, but for Europe and the United States its choice of political model (Communism) made it immediately suspect. While the United Kingdom recognized the PRC diplomatically in January 1950 to preserve its interests in Hong Kong, the United States resisted. Matters were not

helped by the activities of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, whose unilateral launching of an assault on South Korea resulted in a bloody three-year war which pitted Chinese troops against US ones within a UN force. The Korean War stalemate in 1953 carried political costs for China, ensuring that it got locked into the same Cold War environment as the USSR in the eyes of the United States. It also meant that by the mid-1950s China had become increasingly isolated.

Throughout the 1950s, the new PRC started to articulate what, by 1955, soon came to be known as the **Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence**. These were: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty (at the Asian–African Conference of 1953); mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit (at the Sino–Indian Joint Statement and Sino–Burmese Joint Statement in 1954); and peaceful coexistence. There are good arguments to show that these were derived from ideas originally put forward by Indian leader Nehru. They were inspired by similar anxieties – a desire to preserve hard-won autonomy after an extensive period of colonial interference; the need to safeguard sovereignty; the stress on cooperation among what were seen as the non-hegemonic and non-aligned nations; and the desire to demonstrate a peaceable stance towards the rest of the world – designed to counter all the fears of a predatory Marxist ideology and world revolution held by many outsiders.

The Five Principles became the mantra on which China's foreign policy and its relations with the outside world have been built ever since, but they have proved controversial. And there are plenty of questions about how fit for purpose they are for a country which is now economically and politically so much stronger and more prominent than the one that adopted these over half a century ago. The principles have been accused of delineating a Chinese attitude which is introspective, self-interested, and, ironically, unprincipled, looking solely after itself and not wishing to have responsibility for others. China has defended its posture on domestic issues like Tibet, Xinjiang and its human rights behaviour by producing the 'non-interference' language taken from the principles, and has similarly desisted from commenting on the affairs of other countries over the same issues. This has sometimes given the country's foreign policy a highly amoral tone. More importantly, critics have also found plenty of evidence that in fact while China has said – and still to some extent continues to say – that it observes the principles, in practice it barely heeds them. This lays it open to accusations of hypocrisy.

## TETCHY NEIGHTBOUR

Preservation of itself against foreign interference was at the heart of a number of arguments that China had with neighbours over the 1950s and into the 1970s. In this era, when China was not even recognized as a state by the UN (its seat on the General Assembly was occupied by the Republic of China, whose leaders had fled to the island of Taiwan after defeat in the Civil War in 1949), it was engaged in a series of skirmishes, clashes and out-and-out conflicts with its neighbours. Most of these were about contested borders. As US scholar M. Taylor Fravel has pointed out, at its birth the PRC was locked in disputes with over 22 separate parts of its borders. The most contentious of these were with the USSR, Vietnam and India, and over the ensuing three decades it came into actual conflict with each of these – India in 1962, the USSR in 1969 and Vietnam in 1979. Each led to casualties and diplomatic fallout, and the 1969 border clash with the USSR in the depths of the Cultural Revolution alerted the United States in particular to the parlous state of Sino–Soviet relations and the opportunity for a rapprochement. This was achieved in 1972 with the visit by President Richard Nixon.

Remarkably, the PRC was to slowly but decisively address most of these territorial issues, at least as far as land ones were concerned. In the late 1950s and into the early 1960s it resolved some of the disputes with Myanmar and Vietnam. Over three decades later it addressed the Russian issue when then-president Jiang Zemin agreed a huge deal with President Putin. By 2010, all but the two outstanding disputes (those with India) had been resolved. Interestingly, despite its shrill talk in the lead-up to most negotiations about never ceding territory and vehemently protecting Chinese national sovereignty, the PRC was willing to be remarkably pragmatic in the way in which it solved arguments. The case with Russia is illustrative of this, with the PRC relinquishing some 40,000 square kilometres to the USSR in order to reach a deal: something that was never publicly admitted at the time, at least within China.

### WHAT'S A BORDER, ANYWAY?

Part of the issue of China's arguments over its own borders was born from the simple lack of an historical Chinese concept within Chinese history of what a border actually was. The idea of sovereignty and of a nation state, after all, was born of the European Westphalian treaty in 1648, and there is no simple Asian equivalent to this. Many would argue that a large number of countries bordering or close to China, from Myanmar to Laos and Cambodia, were creations of colonial interference, their borders the result of historical accident rather than geography, culture or anything remotely approaching diplomatic reason. In addition to this, there was the question of how Chinese rulers, before and after 1949, conceptualized the entity they were in charge of. Historically, it has been argued that Chinese emperors and political leaders saw China more as a cultural or civilizational sphere, rather than occupying a specific geography. There were issues of vassal states around China who had unclear, somewhat contested relations with the 'mother culture'. Through language, religion, art and customs, 'China' operated in this context more as a nebulous concept, something that was able to almost annex and overcome people no matter what territory they were in because of its appeal and civilizing essence.

Beyond this, there were also issues of the way in which the PRC's predecessor entities had operated diplomatically during the long imperial era. They had not supported naval operations – at least not since the Ming dynasty and the famous but brief travels of the eunuch Admiral Zheng He in the early fifteenth century. On the whole, Imperial Chinese dynasties had operated as land entities, creating security from the huge natural bulwark of the Tibetan plateau and the vast, empty steppes of central and north-east Asia. In the era of the Great Khans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the imperial dynasties of the Song and later the Ming had experienced their greatest threats before the modern era from the land, not from the sea. This therefore created a mindset focused on land issues, one that never looked too deeply into the vast seas and oceans around the eastern and southern coasts. Only in the twentieth century did these really begin to exist for Chinese leaders, and only in the era after Mao did China start to create something approaching a naval strategy.

### CHINA AND THE WORLD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: JOINING THE DOTS

The preceding sections offer some context which is important in helping to understand how PRC leaders see the role of the nation they lead in the world of the twenty-first century. History matters to them. The memory of humiliation at the hands of colonizers and aggressors continues to be strong, giving a highly emotional aspect to their foreign policy, a mood Christopher Coker has typified as 'resentful'. It is a foreign-policy attitude which mixes bitter memories of past

defeats and humiliations and the desire to be once more a strong, powerful state, along with elements of long-term strategic thinking. It would be simplest to describe it as a hybrid, combining secrecy, resentment, practicality and seriousness.

This idea of Chinese leaders having a long-term, strategic vision for their country, one which is patently clear to them but which they seek to conceal and hide, is a perennial theme of commentary about Chinese attitudes towards the rest of the world and their role in it. In the era since 1978, the most famous statement about this reportedly came from Deng Xiaoping – reportedly, because it is hard to trace the precise time and moment when he used the phrase ‘tao guang yan hui’. This is not surprising. The phrase itself is one of the many thousands of ‘chengyu’, statements usually made up of four Chinese characters, which operate like English proverbs. This one means the same as ‘hiding one’s light under a bushel’. But rather like Deng’s claimed appropriation of the phrase ‘it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice’, this one had a long history before his supposed use of it. According to one Chinese analysis, Deng deployed it after the rocky period of the 1989 uprising, when he urged fellow cadres to be calm and consider things coolly. In order to have stability, he stated after commanding troops into Tiananmen Square that year, ‘we need to be calm, calm and then calm.’ Over the following year, he developed it into an edict (known in China as the ‘24-Character Strategy’ due to the number of Chinese characters used), which roughly translates as: ‘Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.’ This recognized a number of positions China had taken up since the Maoist era – the desire to oppose hegemony in international affairs and observation of the Five Principles – but was also an acknowledgement that China did have aspirations it wished to see fulfilled, even if it was not going to aggressively assert them, thus preventing opponents in its international space, such as the United States, from thwarting its plans.

The edict above, like similar highly general articulations, has been the object of fierce debate inside and outside China. For many, it plots out a unique way for China to avoid the kind of problems that the USSR had experienced in the Cold War, getting lulled into an economically debilitating arms race with the United States, spending huge resources on military kit rather than people’s welfare, and ultimately being felled because of the lack of popular support this gave rise to. The Dengist role set for China was to be cooperative, observant of international norms, and a defender of stability and the status quo, but the phrase also implied something that would be achieved beyond this – the idea of biding time and aiming for a grander objective. It was this that made observers uneasy. What was the Chinese vision of its role once it had achieved power, wealth and influence? Could its reassuring language about not aiming for hegemony really be taken at face value?

This sits alongside the idea that Chinese leaders pursue long-term objectives and visions, informed by the ideas and culture of ancient thinkers like Sun Tzu, the author of the great treatise from over two and a half millennia before, *The Art of War*. ‘The supreme art of war,’ one of the more famous lines in this much quoted and admired work reads, ‘is to win battles without fighting them.’ The essence of strategic intelligence is simply to outwit, create ruses and clever devices whereby someone’s opponent is constantly second-guessing and misunderstanding in the process: ‘Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent’s fate.’ This privileging of deviousness and concealment, almost Machiavellian (millennia before Machiavelli

himself), is echoed in the work of the great legalist philosopher, Han Fei, whose advice four centuries before the Christian era was to tell leaders to be almost preternaturally reticent and unknowable, never allowing others to see what they were up to, inside or outside the circles of power: ‘Do not let your power be seen,’ Han Fei urged; ‘be blank and actionless. Government reaches to the four quarters, but its source is in the center.’

For diplomatic practitioners like Henry Kissinger, Chinese strategic thinking on foreign affairs is dominated by the desire to control specific issues that matter to them, to use whatever levers they can in the process, to eliminate areas of uncertainty and to be ruthlessly pragmatic, using an almost intuitive process of confusing, bewildering and subverting the expectations of those they engage with. Kissinger himself compares this to the Asian game of ‘Go’, a form of chess where the battle is not about control and dominance over lines like international chess is, but about closing down space with the use of strategically placed pieces. For Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard University, China’s behaviour in the Cultural Revolution evinced strong strategic principles – an awareness of what was wanted, a diplomatic plan to achieve this and a strong sense of political commitment backed up by unity among its leaders. This culture of following long-term strategic principles is something that fascinates outside observers. For example, in his massive study of strategy, political scientist Lawrence Freedman devotes a large portion to Chinese principles derived from the time of Sun Tzu and the ways they have informed Chinese politicians’ strategic thinking to this day. For him, the key is to make clear the relationship between tactics and strategy; both need to work together. Quoting Sun, Freedman says, ‘Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.’

## RISING PEACEFULLY

There is plenty of evidence that Chinese foreign-policy thinking was –and remains –highly deliberative, perhaps because of the decision-making process in China itself, which is informed by copious amounts of consultation and thinking. According to Xi Jinping’s description, the Chinese Communist Party is above all a kind of strategic, evaluative entity, one that is there to assess risks and to consolidate the ideas and practical wisdom that China has accrued since the great Communist experiment started in 1949. It figures almost as a community of knowledge. This is hardly surprising; in terms of its policies and their implementation, the Party made massive mistakes in its early decades, and somehow now has to explain these away and show that they at least served some function. In the twenty-first century, as a mature force, it has reflected on and learned from these errors. That gives it reinforced legitimacy, rather than, as some might imagine, eroding it.

That sense remains in the West too. We all can fall into the trap of believing that (from the time of Deng onwards, at least) China has been pursuing a ‘grand strategic vision’. Furthermore, this thinking goes, unlike in multiparty democracies, its leaders are unaffected by the vagaries of short-term electoral cycles and so can pursue long-term domestic and international policy goals unavailable to democratic states. This is married to an ‘understanding’ that Chinese politicians and leaders embrace opacity and try to keep their intentions buried. These two combined mean that trying to identify what China’s grand plan might be has become something akin to the philosopher’s gold of modern international relations studies. Whoever can best describe the real Chinese long-term strategic diplomatic intent will expose one of the most complex but crucial issues in current geopolitics.

**This philosopher's gold boils down to a series of simple questions:** Is China seeking a kind of hegemony of its own, or is it genuinely a status-quo, cooperative power? Is it a rule-keeper or a rule-breaker? Is it trying to build its economic clout so that it can eventually dictate the global order, making the world in its own image and one day supplanting the United States to be world number one –finally ‘ruling the waves’ and imposing a ‘China model’ on the world around it?

In the last decade, the need to find answers to these questions has become more urgent. Now China is the second largest economy worldwide and its influence is much greater now than ever before, knowing its international intent matters far more than when it was a much more modest power. Since 2001, its economy has quadrupled, and while the rest of the world languished in the global economic crisis of 2008, China motored ahead almost faster than people had the chance to notice. Surely this had to translate into something more than simple trade flows? Surely there was a political and diplomatic strategy behind all this?

**In the era of Hu Jintao, Chinese leaders stuck rigorously to the template of peaceful coexistence and ‘win-win’ cooperation.** They were keen above all to show that they were biddable members of the world community. In 2005, Zheng Bijian, a spokesperson close to the leadership, authored an article in the influential US journal *Foreign Affairs*, in which he stated:

Despite widespread fears about China's growing economic clout and political stature, Beijing remains committed to a ‘peaceful rise’: bringing its people out of poverty by embracing economic globalization and improving relations with the rest of the world. As it emerges as a great power, China knows that its continued development depends on world peace –a peace that its development will in turn reinforce.

It is true that since 1979 China has not engaged in any international conflicts, beyond the smallest of skirmishes. It has, as US expert on Chinese foreign affairs Bates Gill showed in one study, contributed to many UN peacekeeping missions. And it has joined pretty much any international forum it can. For analysts like Susan Shirk, academic and former deputy assistant Secretary of State in the Bill Clinton administration, it is a fragile, not a strong, pushy entity, one more focused on using the benefits of a benign international environment in order to build up its own domestic stability and power. The priority of its leaders post-Deng has been to make sure the country is rich, strong and successful, and that has meant focusing on the economy. Elite leaders from 1978 onwards have all stated, consistently, that their number one priority is economic. Even the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was situated within this rubric, working with the Communist Party to ensure that the country developed, that its people grew richer, and that it became wealthy.

This strategy has proved very successful. As of 2016, China had raised its per capita GDP from only US \$ 300 in 1978 to more than US \$ 10,000. It has more billionaires than the United States, and a middle class that is anything from 300 million to 500 million strong. The Party state has to keep this demanding, highly expectant group of people happy, and it is therefore only interested in the outside world in ways that assist in this. But from time to time another narrative creeps in –the idea of an ‘historic mission’ (as Hu Jintao, the country leader from 2002 to 2012 put it), where it was striving to be a great, strong power again. The efforts the country makes to look at the mistakes others have made is telling in this context. In 2008, for example, the state-run Chinese Central TV (CCTV) ran a 12-part series where it looked at the fall and rise of powers from the era of the Roman Empire onwards. Why pay so much attention to this, and particularly to the cases where such transitions had occurred without conflict? Sun Tzu's words

seemed to echo loudly here: win battles without even fighting them, gain victory before even a shot had been fired. Was this the real underlying attitude of the Chinese leaders? And wasn't there something ever so slightly ominous about the idea of a 'peaceful rise'? Didn't this hint at a larger ambition to eventually reach the top slot? It is not surprising that US analysts in particular started to find plenty of evidence of Chinese assertiveness, duplicity and ambition concealed as friendliness and protestations of being humble and keeping a low profile.

## THE CHINA DREAM

Haunting Chinese official discourse on its global role is the notion of rectifying the unjust deal that modernity has inflicted on it as a culture, country and economy. For all the talk of Chinese strategic long-term thinking and highly rational and deliberative attitudes, this often gets mixed up with high emotions. The key issues are addressing China's honour, pride and sense of worth; the highly emotional nature of Chinese foreign policy is best illustrated through the language by which it is conveyed, the terms used to attack those who are undermining the country's prestige and honour, 'offending,' as the most often used phrase goes, 'the feelings of the Chinese people.' Countries like Japan (as will be shown in Chapter 4) get particular attention here –for their refusal, in the eyes of many Chinese, to apologize properly for the offences committed by the imperial Japanese forces in World War II, and their insensitivity to China's emotional needs and vulnerability thereafter.

Much writing on Chinese foreign policy is blind to this emotional angle. This is perhaps because of the dense network of bureaucratic players who are involved with it (for which see later in this chapter) and the somewhat turgid way in which Chinese spokespeople talk about international issues –except when they are granted the space to wax with indignation over Hong Kong or Taiwan, for instance. There are clear formulae and agreed postures that are trotted out: the repetition ad nauseam of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, in particular the mantra of non-interference in the affairs of others. This combination gives the impression of a Chinese foreign policy being produced by a coldly calculating and highly rational machine, with its associated language, immune to human emotion.

Politicians have always exploited these emotional historical ties. In China, the ideological appeal of Marxism–Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought has waned, at least for the general public. The Communist Party is searching for new sources of legitimacy, and one of the most powerful, alongside improving people's living standards and economic well-being, is this notion of China restoring its position as central to the world, a new Middle Kingdom as it were, a place at the forefront of modernity, admired, looked up to and followed by others.

This partly lies behind the term Xi Jinping started to use in 2013: the 'China Dream'. As with many of his other statements, this had a pleasing vagueness. Everyone latched onto the phrase. To some it meant cleaner air, better living conditions, more wealth, and for others more freedom to create, innovate, and be independent. For those more interested in China's role in the wider world, the dream had a link to ideas which had appeared throughout the previous century. In the final years of the Qing, when the country that existed then was beset by divisions, foreign oppression and looming economic calamities, a group of young Chinese, many of whom had lived abroad, proposed what they called 'minor reforms'. Two of the most famous were the celebrated modern Chinese thinkers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, both of whom had been educated abroad and who brought back ideas about how to modernize the moribund Qing. Their demand was simply that through embracing technology and science, China could once more be



great again –a ‘rich, strong country’. The ideal was a potent one, but their announcement was aborted by a harsh clampdown. The emperor who had sponsored their initiative was sidelined by his formidable grandmother, the infamous empress dowager Ci Xi.

The idea did not disappear. The May Fourth Movement, triggered by China regarding itself as the victim of unjust reparations after World War I (mainly because of concessions which had awarded the former German-occupied north-east of the country to Japan), saw this sense of a Chinese-style modernity once again appear, this time in the form of the twins ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Democracy’, according to a popular slogan at the time. The hopes of that era were put paid to by the period afterwards in the 1920s when China fragmented into fiefdoms of warlords and then descended into the agony of the Sino–Japanese war. But it emerged again when the Communists won the Civil War, and was announced by Mao Zedong, whose adaptation simply added the term ‘socialist’. The China Dream over the 1950s and into the 1960s was to be a ‘rich, strong, socialist country’. But after 1978, it reverted once more to its historic template –being rich and powerful was enough. **Socialism, paradoxically, was a means to that.**

The two were closely linked. Without material wealth, China would always be vulnerable. It needed wealth not just in goods, though, but in knowledge, capacity and abilities. This hunger to transform itself impressed anyone who witnessed it. China sent over a million of its young abroad to study from 1980 onwards. With the implementation of the Four Modernizations, an idea also resurrected from China’s past (it had first been used in the early 1960s), it saw the reconstruction and development of industries and areas of technology that had simply been neglected, abandoned, or unknown in China till then. This process of acquisition, empowerment and modernity is ongoing, but the tantalizing possibility of the achievement of a great, strong, rich country has never been more prominent. Once Chinese leaders might have referred to this as an aspiration, an ideal outcome lying far in the future, a future with all the intangibility of a dream. **But now it is a looming reality.** The Communist Party under Xi Jinping has the very real chance to be in charge of a country that, after a century and a half of suffering and injustice, is truly great once more, especially in view of the disarray in other parts of the world at the time of writing, from the EU to the United States. This is a powerful, compelling source for their appeal, and is offered as an implicit justification for their ruthless attacks on those who are against them. If you tread on the dreams of the Communist Party, the logic goes, you tread on the dreams of the Chinese people, because you threaten the country’s best chance to rise once more to its proper and rightful role in the world.

**This attitude brings up a number of issues.** Was China ever as central in the world as the historic narrative involving it becoming a ‘strong, rich power’ so often used now implies? That raises questions about what sort of China existed in the past, when its borders increased and then imploded during the era of imperial control. Is this real China of the past, exposed by the painstaking work of Chinese and non-Chinese historians, the same historical China referred to by CCP leaders in popular discourse? Then there is the delicate question of non-Chinese influence on Chinese empires through the ages –from the Mongolians who ruled the Yuan era, to the Manchurians in the Qing. Most intractable of all is this notion of what it even means to be Chinese, what sort of coherence this identity gives across this complex, often fragmented, and confusing history. But all of that counts for little when Chinese politicians in the twenty-first century survey vast ranks of new military kit, and speak to people for the first time living in modern-looking Chinese cities, regarding a future that their parents or grandparents only ever

dreamed of—with nice housing, plentiful food, good cars, foreign travel, and a world of opportunity around them. For this aspiring emerging middle class, it is a simple thing. The glorious Chinese past might never have existed. Who cares? But the Chinese present and future can be glorious. This nationalistic trope in Chinese foreign policy will emerge throughout the following chapters.

## MORAL RISE

Mao and his successors have been clear about one thing—perhaps the sole thing that they have been unified and consistent on. **There is modernity, and then there is the Chinese way of doing modernity.** Emulating the rest of the world does not mean becoming like it. It means maintaining your essential quality of, well, being Chinese. The idea is not one that people within China, particularly its leaders, have much interest in becoming reflective and philosophical about. For them being Chinese is a blindingly obvious thing. It needs no dense explanations or analysis.

**In the era of the People’s Republic, ideas from sources like Marxism, the Soviet Union and, later, US-style capitalism, have been indigenized as soon as they come into the country.** It was the nice-sounding ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ that became the dominant state ideology under Deng, even though intellectual interrogation of this idea often proved frustrating. Marxism was meant to uncover universal principles of political and social development; how could it exist in a uniquely local variant? The market became a core issue here. Regarded as anathema in purer socialist systems, in China it was embraced, with the caveat that it had ‘Chinese characteristics’. **So did that mean it was socialist or non-socialist? No one quite knew.** Plenty of other ideas or notions had the prescription ‘according to national conditions’ attached to justify them. China came across like a world within itself, a universe receptive to those outside of it but utterly insistent that it had a specific set of qualities and defining ingredients which had to be honoured and reflected for any ideas to come in. ‘Using the foreign for Chinese purposes’ has become one of the most ubiquitous modern sayings.

**With the articulation of a ‘peaceful rise’ in the early 2000s, a set of other ideas making this stress on ‘Chineseness’ even more pronounced came along.** If China was a great power, it needed to be recognized as such not just through its economic prowess and its new political prominence, but through appreciation of its 5,000 years (as often stated) of continuous, great civilization, which gave it not just a political but a moral right to be looked up to. China’s cultural attributes figured in the thinking about soft power. Anxious not to attract the unwelcome ire and attention of the United States through being accused of building up hard military assets, the use of cultural cachet became highly attractive. Confucius Institutes started to open up across the world, linked to government support. Chinese music, literature and art started to appear, culminating in a leader like Xi Jinping whose *The Governance of China*, a book of his speeches and statements issued in 2014, contained far more references to China’s imperial past than it did to Mao Zedong or Marx.

The way that the Communist Party leaders of today talk about China’s traditional culture is contentious. This is particularly the case because the movement they are now in charge of has historically set itself as the clear enemy of what it labelled as antiquated thinking, art and philosophy. Confucius was a *persona non grata* under Mao. He was the figure regarded as the architect of the prison of Chinese social hierarchy and patriarchal family structures which Communism wanted to rip apart. Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution attacked what they saw as vestiges of this feudal history, labelling them the ‘Four Olds’ (old customs, old culture, old

habits and old ideas). But it was the bulldozers, cranes and demolition workers of the post-1978 era which did most to eradicate whatever historic traces the past may have left in China. A 5,000-year-old culture is what Chinese leaders claim, but the physical environment in the country often makes structures just 20 years old seem like antiquities. Newness reigns everywhere. Only in places like the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, which never suffered the political domestic travails of the mainland, is there a world-class collection of artefacts from the Chinese past. In the People's Republic, much of this material heritage risked being smashed to pieces in the era after 1949 if left on the mainland.

The chief propaganda enforcer for Xi Jinping, a former journalist called Liu Yunshan who sat beside him on the Standing Committee of the Politburo from 2012, speaks melliflously about the glories of Chinese culture. But there is a clear agenda. These 'glorious traditional assets' of the past are made something new, constructed into politically useful resources that can shore up the legitimacy of the modern rulers, contributors to a sense of the country being cohesive, historically strong and built on an age-old cultural structure, however politically and socially unstable it might have been at times. They also allude to a deeper ambition, something which has only been properly articulated by scholars like Yan Xuetong, from the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing, who has referred to the need for China to reassert its values and its historic traditions in order to stand not just as a political and military counterweight to the United States, but an ideological, cultural and intellectual one. The ambition in his vision is for China to be the centre not just of its own material world, but more importantly of its spiritual one:

If China wants to become a state of humane authority, this would be different from the contemporary United States. The goal of our strategy must be not only to reduce the power gap with the United States but also to provide a better model for society than that given by the United States.

There are plenty of counter-arguments to this, even in China, where others argue that with a domestic situation so beset by challenges and uncertainty, it would be hubristic to claim that China has the kind of potential role people like Yan are claiming for it. For them, referring back to Deng's 'keep a low profile' suggestion, this is not just a posture of studied humility –it is a necessity for a country that remains vulnerable to attack. The Trump presidency, however, significantly increases the chance for China to achieve this.

Ambitious external visions of Chinese power run parallel to claims (mostly made by non-Chinese) that China has created a new kind of way of operating –a Chinese style, typified by unique diplomacy, one based on the China development model rather than the dominant Washington Consensus. This claim was first made by then-Kissinger Associate Joshua Cooper Ramo in a work in 2004. China offers something new in the way in which it is claiming diplomatic space, he argued:

China's new development approach is driven by a desire to have equitable, peaceful high-quality growth, critically speaking, it turns traditional ideas like privatisation and free trade on their heads. It is flexible enough that it is barely classifiable as a doctrine. It does not believe in uniform solutions for every situation. It is defined by a ruthless willingness to innovate and experiment, by a lively defense of national borders and interests, and by the increasingly thoughtful accumulation of tools of asymmetric power projection. It is

pragmatic and ideological at the same time, a reflection of an ancient Chinese philosophical outlook that makes little distinction between theory and practice.

This notion was subsequently supplemented by Daniel A. Bell, a Beijing-based Canadian academic, whose spirited defence of the Chinese government model involves appreciating its meritocratic base, the ways in which it privileges technocrats in the art of governance rather than Western-style politicians with their expertise at communication, hard sell for policy and often little else. Marking out Singapore as the likeliest future ideal state for China, with the People's Action Party having a monopoly on power despite there being regular universal franchise elections, Bell talks of the ways in which China eschews Western-style liberal democracy, despite its universalizing nature, and has so far shown the real viability of one-party rule.

The theses of both Ramo and Bell have been fiercely criticized.<sup>23</sup> Nor, to be fair, are they that often referred to by Chinese officials themselves, beyond figuring as useful, unsolicited propaganda; even so, they do draw attention to China's unique aspects and put their finger on why these still cause perplexity. China does not figure in a new Cold War in the ways the now defunct USSR once did, a power that could be regarded as a predatory, outright competitor, but nor does it figure as a simple ally; there are many overlapping interests between China and the United States, which will be looked at later. And yet there are clear areas of deep difference and disagreement. The most powerful of these is simple: that China maintains a system where one party has a monopoly on power, something that was not meant to happen after Communist history supposedly ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This anomaly cries out for an explanation. What is it that China has done, what is distinctive about its posture and its strategy that has allowed it to achieve this –economic, capitalist-style transformation which at the same time maintains resolute political stability for a one-party system? How should the outside world relate to this situation? Through some kind of engagement strategy, through containment, or by some other wholly new position?

## 9/11 AND THE CRASH

There are two final ideas to factor into Chinese foreign-policy thinking before moving to the specifics of Xi Jinping and the era that he dominates. The first of these involves an attitude proposed by Jiang Zemin around the turn of the millennium, when he spoke of a 20-year-long era of strategic opportunity. Jiang was addressing the role of China as it prepared to enter the WTO and undertake a number of difficult domestic reforms. As some commentators have made clear, these depended as much on using foreign competition and involvement to forge change in China as in exploring opportunities for China's benefit outside the country. After the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, an era of contentiousness between the United States and China –which had come to a head on 1 April 2001 after a US spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet collided in mid-air close to the coast of southern China –ended. Washington had a newer, far more pressing priority, and decided to embark upon wars in Iraq and Afghanistan instead. This era of distraction offered unforeseen benefits for China. The ominous language from the United States, which had been portraying China as an ever-increasing threat as the 1990s wore on, died down; George W. Bush, after spending his first year in office excoriating Beijing, started to use a far friendlier tone.

Jiang implied that this era of relative harmoniousness would end. But at least until the start of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the country had the opportunity to pursue its primary objective –to enrich itself, stabilize its domestic situation and ensure that it had a sustainable

basis for what the leaders called ‘perfecting modernity’ in the country. Unsurprisingly, for such a long-term idea, this one was vulnerable to a number of outside forces. Two in particular looked certain to play an important role. The first, the more positive (on the surface, at least) for China, was that its economic ascent had been far quicker than anyone had expected. With entry to the WTO, it unleashed immense forces of productivity which continued throughout the following decade. Far from challenging China, the WTO appeared like a huge motivator, a godsend for those who wanted to see better productivity within the country and knew that the only way to do this was to introduce external companies to turn up the heat on sluggish, underperforming local ones. In this way, far quicker perhaps than even China’s most optimistic leaders had predicted, the country was a huge global economic player, with new markets, business contacts, links and an associated importance far beyond its shores.

**But there was the second, less positive issue** –the calamity the outside world visited on itself during and after the global economic crisis of 2008. As China became more successful, therefore, the economies of the United States and the EU weakened. The era of strategic opportunity, of China maintaining a low profile, focusing on its own issues and simply biding its time, ended well before the 2020 deadline. The dominant mindset in Beijing was to focus on issues directly in the country’s national interest –whether they were diplomatic, economic or military. China, therefore, did not on the whole initiate much through the UN that did not directly relate to it, and it tended to follow the leadership of others (since taking up its seat in 1971, China has deployed its veto only seven times, while the United States has deployed it more than 40. Of those seven times, it only acted unilaterally on four). Through this apparent passivity, it garnered a reputation as a freeloader to such an extent that in 2005, Robert Zoellick, a US official, demanded in a talk to the National Committee on United States–China Relations that it become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ and involve itself much more in international affairs, taking up a position not just on matters close to home like North Korea and governance of the international finance sector, but also on more global issues:

China is big, it is growing, and it will influence the world in the years ahead. For the United States and the world, the essential question is –how will China use its influence?

To answer that question, it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China’s membership into the international system: We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system.

Like it or not, China was now a global power. Being enticed into this exposed position was something that Chinese leaders had done all they could to resist: witness the fierce rebuttals of a suggested G2 (the United States and China) that started to appear in 2009. But it was impossible from 2010 onwards, when it became the world’s second largest economy, to continue presenting itself as a weak, vulnerable player best left in the anteroom of global action. The decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, creating space for increasing disunity there, and the Trump presidency in the United States heralding an era of more mercantilist, isolationist behaviour by the world’s supposedly sole remaining superpower, only underlined this sense that China was being forced into a position of responsibility and prominence far sooner than it ever wanted, solely because of the irresponsibility of other, previously dominant partners.

In 2009, as a partial response to this, Dai Bingguo, a state councillor and at that time the most prominent foreign-policy official in China, set out the country’s ‘core interests’ for the first time. These were threefold: ‘number one [...] is to maintain its fundamental system and state security;

next is state sovereignty and territorial integrity; and third is the continued stable development of the economy and society.’

This was hugely general, but the message was clear. Engagement that was aimed at undermining China’s own choice of political model, and carried some attempt to reform or change it, was posited as fundamentally against its interests. In the ensuing years, even more shrill statements were made condemning Western attempts to challenge, or seduce or otherwise attempt to change China’s domestic political choices; state sovereignty and territorial integrity related to the issues of Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the contested South and East China Seas. The third covered its burgeoning overseas economic interests. Even a charitable observer could not but regard this as a somewhat self-interested menu of requirements. Remarkably, however, this is the closest that an elite leader in recent times has come to outlining in one framework a holistic Chinese philosophy of engagement with the outside world.

## THE TOOLS

There is one final issue to pay attention to in this overview. Having mapped out the background of its posture on foreign policy, and the core ideas in its diplomatic mindset, it would be best to conclude with an attempt to describe the practical tools that China has –or any country, for that matter –in its foreign-policy strategy. Whereas governments have a high degree of control and powers of initiative over domestic issues (and even with this advantage often struggle), their powers inevitably reduce quickly with matters that lie beyond their shores: the levers of control diminish. It then becomes a choice between moral suasion, economic inducements, or, in the worst cases, military force to get one’s way, all of which carry high degrees of uncertainty and risk.

In the era of Maoist enclosure, China had few diplomatic allies. It had few connections to the outside world in terms of logistics, movement of people, and trade. This has now changed. In the following areas it has its own distinctive interests, as well as ways in which it is vulnerable to forces and issues beyond its borders but can also exercise influence over them in new ways. These have given it tangible interests it needs to protect, and new modes of engagement with the wider world:

- **INWARD AND OUTWARD INVESTMENT:** Since 1978, China has allowed foreign capital into the country, and, since the 2000s, has promoted a ‘going out’ campaign that sees its own state and non-state companies working in the rest of the world. In 2014, China was the largest global recipient of foreign direct investment. But it also, more remarkably, started to figure as a major international outward investor, with stock of more than US \$ 100 billion. It invested in Europe, the United States and Australia, buying companies like Weetabix in the United Kingdom, Volvo in Sweden and Standard Bank in South Africa. It took shares in companies as diverse as BP and Tesco, but also through Huawei and ZTC became a major player in technology –and, because of security concerns, a highly contentious one. It became a large investor in the resources and agribusiness sector in Australia and Latin America, and in the energy sector in the Middle East. Investments were an important part of China’s economy, and a new aspect of its influence.
- **MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE:** As already mentioned, between 1949 and 1978, very few people travelled into and outside China. It was in many ways a closed country. Access was very difficult, meaning only a few Europeans or North Americans got in, and even fewer Chinese travelled outside of it. In 2014 alone, though, 100 million individual journeys were

made by Chinese people, embracing tourists, academics, business people and officials. They became the largest spenders in luxury shops in Paris and New York, and the source of immense tourism opportunity –so much so that whole retail centres were established for them in places like Bicester in the United Kingdom. People from China also figured as workers in Africa, students in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia, and as highly skilled migrant labourers. People-to-people links took on a dynamic of their own, with Chinese appearing visibly in people’s lives as students, customers and visitors in ways they never had before. But it also meant that the Chinese government had become responsible for the same demands for care of its people abroad as Western governments: 36,000 Chinese had to be repatriated from Libya during the uprising there in 2011, and a Chinese man was tragically murdered by the Daesh group in the Middle East in late 2015 after being taken hostage. In the last decade, China has had to arrange 15 major rescue operations –including ones in Yemen, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

- **MILITARY ASSETS:** Chinese expenditure on its military went up exponentially from the year 2000 onwards, with a process of modernization that meant by 2015 and the military parade to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Sino–Japanese war mentioned in the Introduction, more than 80 per cent of the kit on display was new. China started to innovate, with its own stealth fighter jet, the J-20, and its own aircraft carrier. It built its first overseas military asset in Djibouti off the east coast of Africa, and developed a credible naval capacity for the first time ever, in order to protect its overseas citizens and its crucial trade routes.

- **CULTURAL ASSETS:** millions are starting to learn Chinese, trying to visit and understand China and be exposed to different forms of its culture. Chinese cultural assets, its history, language, literature and people have partly become a means by which the Chinese government (and other actors from China) is able to promote more benign and useful images of the country abroad, one that blunts the negative impressions given by its political system. There has been fierce argument about just how deliberate and strategically thought through this has been. What is indisputable is that China’s soft-power assets and government-led messaging did impact on international images and imaginations about the role of China in the world, its importance and its potential.

These issues are a source of hard and soft influence arising from within China, but they are also a new means by which outsiders can influence the country. The situation now is very dynamic. Many of the issues above will figure in the following story of Chinese foreign policy in the second decade of the twenty-first century. They show that in many ways, for all the talk of grand strategy and frameworks, Chinese foreign policy has often had to tie itself to protecting or supporting very practical issues. First, therefore, it is important to look at the network and the people at the heart of this system of protection, influence and influencing, and try to answer the question of how they view the outside world, how they develop policies towards it, and how they regard the future role of their country within it. Right at the centre of this sits the figure of the current general secretary of the CCP and president of the PRC –Xi Jinping.