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The historical legacy of Chinese security policy

Yuan-kang Wang

China has a rich tradition of military writings and a long history of warfare for over two thousand years. In ancient China during the Warring States period, the Military School (bing jia) contended for influence on policymakers with other schools of thought including Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism, and Moism. The military corpus continued to grow as subsequent dynasties confronted various security threats. Thousands of military treatises were written over the centuries, many of which were lost, but some survived the test of time. In the eleventh century, the Song Dynasty compiled the Seven Military Classics, including Sun Zi’s famous Art of War. These canonized texts are still widely read today.1 Military writings aside, official dynastic histories preserved numerous accounts of Chinese warfare. Each of these accounts presented a Chinese perspective—though not necessarily that of China’s adversary—of what had transpired in the war, including the cause of war, the number of troops, war aims, logistics, conduct of war, and casualties. Given the enormous size of the literature, it is not possible to present a comprehensive account of Chinese strategic thought and practice in the space available here. This limitation notwithstanding, we can still identify important recurrent themes in the traditional military writings and actual strategic behaviors.

There are five themes that characterize the historical legacy of Chinese security policy. First, Sinocentrism puts China at the center of the known world, manifested in the hierarchical tribute system. Second, Confucian pacifism affects China’s perception of itself as a peaceful, defensive, and nonaggressive nation and infuses morality into its foreign policy rhetoric. Third, Chinese realism guides actual strategic behavior and shows amoral pragmatism in the conduct of military affairs. Fourth, stratagems based on historical anecdotes may inform Chinese tactical maneuvers to deceive and outsmart the opponent. Finally, geography, along with the historical change in military technology, has a profound effect on resource allocation in Chinese defense planning, affecting the development of land power and sea power. These five themes reveal a diverse tradition in Chinese security policy, which I discuss below.

Sinocentrism

Historically, the Chinese saw themselves not as an empire or as a nation-state but as the center of civilization. The Chinese term for “China,” Zhongguo, literally means “the country at the center” or “the central states.” In this worldview, China stood at the center of the known world, or
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all-under-Heaven (tiānxìa). Foreigners, attracted by the splendor and superiority of the Chinese civilization, came to the Chinese court to pay tribute to the Son of Heaven and accepted their status as a vassal of the Chinese emperor. The Chinese way of diplomacy was hierarchical and non-egalitarian. Foreign relations were arranged in a concentric circle with China at the center, surrounded by tributary states and then by barbarians. The farther away from China, the less civilized the region. Unlike the Westphalian nation-state system, the concept of sovereign equality between states did not exist in the Chinese world order.

This Sinocentrism affected how traditional China conducted its frontier policy. John Fairbank popularized the notion of the "tribute system" to describe the Chinese world order. Non-Chinese rulers participated in the tribute system by observing appropriate rituals and ceremonies and were given a patent of appointment for their rulership as well as a seal for use in official communications. Leaders of tributary states could address themselves only as "king" (wáng); the term "emperor" (huángdi) was reserved exclusively for the ruler of China. Tributary states adopted the Chinese calendar and dynastic reign-title. Their envoys periodically brought local products as tribute and performed appropriate ceremonies, including the full kowtow (kneeling three times, each time tapping their head to the ground for another three times, for a total of nine taps), in the Chinese court and received lavish gifts in return. The Chinese court granted tributary states with trading privileges at the capital and at the frontier. Policies that embraced Chinese culture and writing, such as Korea and Vietnam, were considered civilized and received a higher status in the tribute system, while those that did not, such as nomadic peoples, were viewed as uncivilized and received a lower status. In Confucian thinking, the influx of tribute-paying foreign envoys strengthened the legitimacy of the Chinese throne, because the tribute symbolized his status as the accepted ruler of all under-Heaven. For tributaries, Chinese recognition and investiture had the effect of enhancing the legitimacy of the local rulers, a process similar to diplomatic recognition of states today.

The tribute system took shape in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) and waxed and waned throughout the ages until its collapse in the nineteenth century under European gunboats. Material power was indispensable in creating and sustaining the tribute system. Chinese rulers used the tribute system to organize foreign relations in a way that helped the country achieve its security objectives. By obliging foreigners to pay tribute, it was hoped, China would transform them into civilized and unthreatening peoples. Tributary states could call for Chinese help if attacked. China, as the leader of all tributaries, provided the public good of security. Trading privileges were granted as reward to those who accepted the tribute system or were withheld as punishment to those who refused to obey. Preponderant material capacity enabled China to set the "rules of the game" and to dictate the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

Sinocentrism does not mean that China was always the hegemonic power in Asia. Although there are periods in Asian history when China was predominant, there are also substantial periods when China was the weaker state or was divided into several competing ones. An oft neglected fact is that China was unified for less than 50 percent of the time in the last two thousand years, which means that for the majority of Asian history there was no single hegemon. It is historically inaccurate to assume that the Asian state system was always hierarchical with China at the center. Sinocentrism is mainly a civilizational concept.

Sinocentrism gave rise to a Chinese tendency to give paternalistic advice to others. As the leader of the civilized world, Chinese rulers were obliged to admonish deficient behavior on the part of their tributary states and to guide them into good governance. For instance, on hearing from his envoy that Korea lacked sufficient fortifications against Japanese pirates (which were also a threat to China), Ming Emperor Hongwu sent a rescript in 1369 to the Korean king stating that "we cannot neglect to counsel you of the ways of avoiding danger and protecting your kingdom," saying that foreign places behaved Chinese manner. The system was designed to portray China's as an alien to pursue. Peace,

Confucianism

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The legacy of Chinese security policy

He went on to instruct the Korean king in the proper way to beef up defense, replenish food supply, and construct buildings to conduct government affairs. Along with the tendency to give out advice was a moralistic approach to foreign policy announcements. Communications to foreign polities were often couched in moralistic language. As the superior culture, Sinocentrism placed China on the moral high ground when it reprimanded foreign rulers for insubordinate behavior or when it launched a punitive war against an allegedly immoral regime. Imperial China demanded respect, sincerity, and submission on the part of tributary states, and when those demands were not met, it put the blame entirely on the offending party.

The legacy of Sinocentrism did not disappear after China adopted the modern Westphalian system of sovereign equality. We still observe a Chinese tendency to give advice to foreign visitors. During the Cold War, leaders of pro-Mao Communist parties from around the world traveled to Beijing to pay symbolic tribute and to hear from the teachings of Mao Zedong. Official photographs and television footage frequently show foreign dignitaries listening attentively and nodding appreciatively as Chinese leaders lecture them. PRC foreign policy announcements are frequently couched in moralistic language. Chinese leaders have employed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) as an alternative to the US-dominated international order that limits the rights of sovereign states to pursue policies inconsistent with US interests and values. Chinese propaganda sharply criticized US imperialism and Soviet expansionism during the Cold War, accusing them of pursuing a policy of hegemony. Today, by saying that it will “never seek hegemony,” Beijing attempts to stake out a morally superior foreign policy to the alleged US policy of pursuing “sole hegemony.”

Confucian pacifism

Since Chinese culture is distinct, it is tempting to essentialize Chinese military writings and contrast them with the Western style of warfare. A popular view holds that the Chinese have traditionally prioritized defense, used war as a last resort, preferred an indirect approach, and shunned wars of total annihilation, while the West emphasized all of the opposite. The Great Wall of China is frequently cited as a symbol of this alleged preoccupation with defense and denigration of offensive use of force. This essentialized version of Chinese military tradition is often traced back to Confucianism. In the seventeenth century, the Jesuits who came to China were struck by a bureaucracy dominated by Confucian scholar-officials and its seemingly anti-militarist orientation. The Jesuit accounts of China later influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire who wrote about the moral superiority of a benevolent China and praised its laws for rewarding moral behavior. Max Weber was so impressed with the “pacifist character of Confucianism” that he wrote about how the Confucianists “faced military powers with aversion.”

John K. Fairbank highlighted the “pacifist bias” of Confucianism that forbade expansion through brute force and conquest.

Confucianism was the state ideology of Imperial China. Through its emphasis on the ruler’s cultivation of virtuous, Confucianism provided an important source of legitimacy for Chinese emperors. Learning Confucian classics was an essential element of the emperor’s early education. For career-aspiring young Chinese, mastery of the Confucian classics was crucial to success in the imperial civil service examination. As a result, virtually all Chinese officials were well versed.
in the Confucian precepts. In matters of national security, Confucianism downplayed the efficacy of military force and instead prioritized the cultivation of virtue and morality. A virtuous ruler, like a shining city on the hill, will attract the submission of adversaries and face no threat around the world. Chaos and disobedience arise when the ruler is morally corrupt. Military conquest undermines the legitimacy of the ruler and are therefore counterproductive and self-defeating. A virtuous ruler should avoid wars of conquest. The Confucian literature is replete with passages that denigrate warfare and military expansion. This emphasis on moral virtue at the expense of the martial spirit produced a disdain for the military in Imperial China. “Disparagement of the soldier,” writes Fairbank, “is deeply ingrained in the old Chinese system of values.”

The antimilitarism of Confucianism does not rule out war in certain situations. Confucius himself was in favor of military preparedness, but ranked its importance behind people’s livelihood and trust in government. For the Confucians, war must serve a higher moral purpose in the form of a “righteous war” (yizhan). A state can use force only when reasons for doing so are morally justifiable. Once a righteous war is launched, the conduct of war must follow the principle of benevolence and justice, for instance, not attacking civilians and withdrawing after the just cause is served. There are two morally justifiable reasons for using force: self-defense and punitive war. If a state that practices moral statecraft is invaded by another state, then the victim can justifiably mobilize the country for war in self-defense. Alternatively, if the ruler of a state is found to be unjust or abusing its people, a punitive expedition can be launched to punish the abusive ruler and rescue the suffering people. This principle still holds even if the abusive state is stronger in power. For Confucians, moral and ethical principles override the sovereignty of another state and take precedence over the reality of power balance.

But who gets to launch a punitive war? Confucius holds that only a sage-ruler has the right to launch punitive expeditions: “When the Way prevails in all-under-Heaven, the rites and music and punitive expeditions are initiated by the Son of Heaven” (Confucius 12:7, 16:2). Mencius develops the idea further, suggesting that when the ruler of a state is morally depraved, a punitive expedition is permissible to “rescue the people from the torments of water and fire” (Mencius 1.B.11). Like Confucius, Mencius insists that only the Son of Heaven can launch a punitive expedition; such a war is not aggression but rather punishment to correct unjust behavior. In practice, as whoever assumed the Chinese throne by definition had the Mandate of Heaven, and was thus virtuous, any military attack by the Chinese emperor could be morally justified. Those who refused to submit could easily be branded as bandits and criminals and deserving a punitive campaign. Conversely, since fighting a war will put strain on the people, a ruler’s strategic restraint can be justified on the grounds of showing benevolence and caring for the people. Hence, Confucian rhetoric can be adapted to justify both attack and retreat. The Confucian conception of righteous war can be used to justify military attacks as punishments of those who lack virtue, or to justify strategic restraint by dismissing the utility of force and emphasizing the need to let the war-torn people rest.

Thus, despite its antimilitarism, Confucianism is not entirely anti-war. This may sound paradoxical, but it raises questions about the use of morality to justify launching wars. In the history of human warfare, it is not difficult to find examples of conflict initiators using moral reasons to justify their military attacks. For instance, when the Ming Dynasty attacked the Mongols, it accused them of morally depraved behaviors and insubordination to the Son of Heaven. One finds similar moral justification in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, that Saddam Hussein was abusing his own people and developing weapons of mass destruction. Conflict initiators often dress their military actions in moral terms.

The merging of morality and authority in the Son of Heaven gives rise to the idea of the Kingly Way (wang dao) in the Confucian conception of international order. According to Confucianism,
ism downplayed the efficacy of morality. A virtuous ruler, if he faces no threat around him, Military conquests destructive and self-defeating. A virtue is replete with passages on virtue at the expense of "Disparagement of the stem of values." Certain situations. Confucius' view is behind people's literal; a higher moral purpose in when reasons for doing so are right. The rule of war must follow the ilium and withdrawing after using force: self-defense and another state, then the victim is treatively, if the ruler of a state be launched to punish the others even if the abusive state override the sovereignty of. Thus, a wise ruler has the right to Heaven, the rites and music (Mencius 12.7, 16.2). Mencius morally deprived, a punitive sense can launch a punitive correct unjust behavior. In the Mandate of Heaven, and be morally justified. These ways and deserving a punitive role, a ruler's strategic restraint for the people. Hence, Confucian Confucian conception of those who lack virtue, or emphasizing the need to let the warrior. This may sound para-military actions as either self-defense or punitive expedition. Many members of China's elites believe that China fights only "just wars" and that China goes to war only in self-defense. Andrew Scobell aptly calls this widespread view "The Cult of Defense." Beijing officially describes the border conflicts with India in 1962 and with the Soviet Union in 1969 as "self-defense counterattacks" (zuiwei fanji). After Vietnam invaded Cambodia, a Chinese ally, China decided to use force against Vietnam to teach it "a lesson." The 1979 punitive expedition against Vietnam was described as a "self-defense counterattack" even though China initiated the war. Other military actions, such as the Korean War (1950–53) and the two Taiwan Strait crises (1954–55 and 1958), were also described as defensive acts against US intervention. In Chinese eyes, Beijing's use of offensive military force was triggered by the opponent's aggressive acts and was thus self-defense in nature. It goes without saying that the other party to the same conflict saw Chinese aggression, not self-defense.
Chinese realism

If Chinese security policy was guided by Confucian pacifism, then wars should have been relatively rare in historical China. But that is not the case. Wars were common in Chinese history. A chronology of warfare compiled by the military historians of the Chinese Academy of Military Science shows that from 770 BC (Spring and Autumn) to 1912 (Qing Dynasty), China engaged in a total of 3,756 internal and external wars, averaging 1.4 wars per year.23 The Chinese were no less warlike than other peoples of the world. The empirical record does not support the assertion that the Chinese world order was peaceful and stable.

Aside from the idealized Confucian pacifism, the Chinese also have a tradition of pragmatism and realism. As Confucian ideals were difficult to put into practice, Legalism (法家) provided a toolkit of administrative methods that were more useful in actual governance. Legalism, in contrast to the Confucian emphasis on virtue, prescribed severe punishment to correct bad behaviors and rewards for doing good deeds. The Legalist believed that virtue is born out of power. Ever since the adoption of Confucianism as the state ideology in the Han Dynasty, Chinese officials have been pragmatic by incorporating Legalist techniques in the administration of their vast country. As Fairbank notes, rewards and punishments could keep the common people in line, but Chinese officials needed something more inspiring to motivate the people. The emperor's observance of Confucian rituals and ceremonies gave him a certain virtue and an aura of legitimacy that drew people to accept and venerate his rule.24 Government policies were written in the Confucian vocabulary of benevolence, virtue, and humaneness, but the policy substance was essentially Legalist. Commentators describe this millennium-old practice as "Legalism with a Confucian façade."25 The clever fusion of the two opposing schools of thought reflects a high level of pragmatism in Chinese statecraft and remains a salient feature in later dynasties.

In Chinese military writings, we find a similar amalgam of idealism and realism. In the canonical *Seven Military Classics*, passages are strewed with the precepts of benevolence and humaneness on the one hand and the hard realpolitik of power and force on the other. The concept of righteous war fuses both morality and war and opens up possibilities to brand the enemy as unrighteous and thus deserving destruction and extermination. When a war is launched in the name of upholding a moral cause, any level of violence—ranging from capturing or killing the aggressor, annexation of the victor's territory, to extermination and total destruction of the enemy—becomes moral and just. In this way, the moral ends justify the violent means. This ends-means relationship reflects Chinese realism in the prosecution of warfare. The Confucian disdain for violence gave way to a realistic appreciation of the correlates of war. Studies have shown that Confucian China has been a practitioner of realpolitik for centuries.26

Sun Zi's adages of "subduing the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill" and "the best strategy is to attack the enemy's strategy, next best is to attack his alliances, next best is to attack his army, and the worst is to besiege his cities" are often used to demonstrate the Chinese proclivity for minimal violence, but this view ignores the numerous wars of annihilation in Chinese history. It also essentializes what may not be uniquely Chinese: military strategists across culture and across time invariably favor winning without having to fight for it. If military success could be achieved with minimal cost, who would not be in favor? Alastair Iain Johnston uses a strategic cultural approach to analyze Chinese military writings and identifies a realpolitik strategic culture that significantly influences Chinese grand strategic choice. He argues that the Confucian elements in the *Seven Military Classics* are largely symbolic and have no influence on actual Chinese strategic behavior. Because of this operative strategic culture of realpolitik, China has viewed conflict as inevitable, held a zero-sum view of the adversary, and valued the utility of force in resolving interstate disputes. In times of superior strength, China has preferred to pursue an offensive, e.g. territorial expansion. A default grand strategy will adopt the same strategy, which is consistent with China's cultural and textual analysis for modern China's grand strategy.28 West or else, The anarchic act in a similar realpolitik world.

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**Stratagems**

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offensive, expansionist grand strategy (e.g., extended campaigns beyond the borders, annexation of territories, and total annihilation of adversaries). In times of relative weakness, China would adopt a defensive grand strategy (e.g., static defense and deterrence) or even an accommodationist grand strategy (e.g., territorial concessions, economic incentives, and peace treaties).27

The cultural approach to Chinese strategy has its appeal, but it again risks essentializing a type of strategic thinking that may not be uniquely Chinese. Chinese realpolitik may have nothing to do with culture but with a deeper cause that lies in the anarchic structure of the system in which no central authority exists to enforce order. The realpolitik that we observe in Chinese strategic behavior may be universal, not culture-specific. There is no a priori reason to assume that the Chinese have a distinctive style of warfare. In fact, studies have shown that Western and Chinese military writings share similar logic about warfare. For instance, Michael I. Handel's textual analysis of the works by Sun Zi, Mao Zedong, Clausewitz, Jomini, and Machiavelli has shown that "the logic of strategy and waging war is universal rather than parochial, cultural, or regional."28 Chinese realpolitik behavior shows no significant difference from realpolitik in the West, or elsewhere. Chinese realpolitik is best understood through international relations theory. The anarchic structure of the international system pushes states of various cultures to think and act in a similar fashion. Structural realism, an international relations theory, can explain Chinese realpolitik without resorting to an extra layer of cultural variables.29

An important source of confusion in the literature on Chinese strategic culture is the different definitions of culture adopted by analysts. A common method of defining culture is to include both beliefs and behaviors: "military culture refers to a discrete, bounded system of conduct and behavior to which members of the military are supposed to adhere, made of written and unwritten rules and conventions as well as distinctive beliefs and symbols."30 A key drawback of this type of definition is that, by subsuming both thought and action within the concept of culture, it runs the risk of being mechanically deterministic and tautological.31 Culture determines behavior, which is then read back into culture. It does not allow for the possibility of a disconnect between thought and action. A more useful definition, one that allows for social science-type testing, is to separate thought from action in the conceptualization of culture: "shared ideas, beliefs, and values collectively held within a society or by its elites that are transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of socialization."32 Behaviors and practices are not included in this definition because whether a cultural norm influences actual behavior is something to be tested, not assumed. It is possible that some beliefs and values (such as Confucian ideals) may not be reflected in actual practices.

Regardless of how one approaches the issue of culture, it is clear that the old popular way of juxtaposing a Chinese style of warfare with a Western style of warfare is problematic. There are more commonalities than dissimilarities in Chinese and non-Chinese security policy. The idea that the Chinese world order has been more peaceful than that in the West has been resoundingly discredited. Wars were common in Chinese history. At the strategic level, the historical legacy of Chinese security policy is one of realpolitik based on rational assessments of relative power between China and its competitors.

Stratagems and deception

Even though Chinese realpolitik is not sui generis, Chinese history is rich with stories of using clever stratagems and deception to defeat adversaries. These stratagems are embedded in Chinese history and may inform Chinese tactical maneuvers. The use of stratagems does not necessarily imply a preference for nonviolence but rather it is considered a cost-effective way of achieving one's strategic goals. For the Chinese, outsmarting the opponent is the most celebrated trait of
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the strategist. As Sun Zi’s The Art of War states, “Warfare is the Way of deception.” Deception is using unorthodox methods to outwit and defeat the rival. Sun Zi explains: “Thus although capable, display incapability. When committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity. When your objective is nearby, make it appear as if distant; when far away, create the illusion of being nearby.” Once your armies become formless (wu xing) and thus unfathomable, the opponent will be in a disadvantageous position that you can exploit to your advantage.

A popular source of stratagems and deception is the Romance of the Three Kingdoms (san guo yan yi), a fourteenth-century novel by Luo Guanzhong about the ancient three kingdoms of Wei, Wu, and Shu (168–265 BC). Stories of the Three Kingdoms are well known to the Chinese through village storytellers, operas, movies, and TV series. Some of the heroes such as Guan Yu are even worshipped as a Daoist deity in temples. Chinese strategists, diplomats, and military officers often use these stories to describe their maneuvers. The book is full of tales and anecdotes that illustrate the use of clever stratagems to outsmart one’s opponent. For instance, in the “empty fort stratagem,” the stronger opponent led an army to attack a city defended by the weaker. Not having enough troops to defend itself, the weaker one feigned strength by opening the city gate, with its chief strategist Zhuge Liang, known to be a risk-averse person, calmly playing a musical instrument atop the wide open gate. Seeing this, the opponent feared walking into a trap set up by a well-defended army and decided to withdraw. In the “sow discord stratagem,” the Wei kingdom recruited two admirals to help rebuild its navy after its defeat by Wu. Alarmed by the Wei’s move, Wu forged secret correspondence with the admirals and maneuvered to have Wei discover the papers. This deceptive stratagem tricked Wei into executing the two admirals for colluding with the enemy, thereby relieving Wu of a potential threat.

The use of stratagems is evident in today’s China. Sinologist Perry Link uses the Romance of the Three Kingdoms to illustrate China’s methods to control dissent. After a series of reports uncovering the spectacular wealth of Chinese leaders, in late 2013 China delayed the processing of visas for journalists from the New York Times and Bloomberg News without giving an explanation. Although most were issued a visa at the last minute, this tactic effectively instilled an atmosphere of fear among foreign journalists that might have led them to self-censor their reporting in the future. Similarly, scholars working on China face the risk of being denied a visa if they are critical of Chinese policies; losing access to China could jeopardize academic careers. Link concludes: “When US policymakers use terms like ‘strategic partner’ and ‘responsible stakeholder’ for the people at the top in Beijing, they are out of their depth.” In the security realm, China also employed stratagems to develop its Beidou Navigation System to achieve independence on satellite navigation for its military hardware including missiles, warships, and aircraft. When the US blocked Chinese access to satellite technology in the late 1990s, China turned to Europe by contributing 200 million euros (US$228 million at the time) to join the European Union’s Galileo program. Through this partnership, China was able to acquire and develop a wide range of dual-use satellite technology that eventually helped it achieve strategic independence in satellite navigation, to the chagrin of EU officials who found out afterwards. The Beidou became operational well ahead of the Galileo system.

Geography

Geography and security are closely related. Historically, China’s main security threats came from the Asian continent, not from the ocean. The Chinese heartland, fertile and well irrigated, was an attractive target for foreign attacks. For more than two thousand years, Chinese dynasties competed for security with mobile nomadic polities skilled in horsemanship such as Xiongnu.
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Khitans, Jurchens and Mongols. The Mongols and the Manchus even conquered China and established the Yuan (1279–1369) and the Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, respectively. Aside from continental threats, there had been sporadic threats from the maritime frontier, such as during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) when it faced wokou piracy along the coast and confronted a Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592–98. For most of history, however, the focus of Chinese security planners remained on the Asian continent. It was not until after the Opium War (1839–42) that the maritime frontier became a key source of security threat. Chinese strategists started to seriously consider the merits of frontier defense versus maritime defense.

The issue of frontier and maritime defense inevitably rests on resource allocation. When Chinese power was preponderant, the country could afford expansion on both fronts. The early Ming was able to launch several military expeditions against the Mongols and yet at the same time build the world’s most powerful navy. The Mongolian campaigns involved as many as half a million Chinese soldiers, according to Ming records. The Ming fleet boasted about 27,000 crews on 250 ships and sailed as far as East Africa in the early fifteenth century. At the height of Ming naval power, there were 3,500 ships in operation along the coast of China. For overseas countries, “the very name of the Ming navy was sufficient to inspire awe.” The early Ming was able to simultaneously maintain both a powerful army and a strong navy because it had the material resources to do so. In comparison, the resource-strapped late Qing Dynasty faced a stark choice between frontier defense and maritime defense when Russia started to encroach on Xinjiang on the western frontier and when the Japanese invasion of Formosa (Taiwan) exposed China’s inadequate coastal defense. In 1874, an intense policy debate erupted in the Qing court about whether to shift military funds from the inland Xinjiang to the maritime frontier. The Qing court, accustomed to a steppe-oriented strategy, was unable to adapt to the age of sea power and decided in favor of the frontier defense. In the end, a total of 51 million taels were allocated to support the military expenses in Xinjiang from 1875 to 1881, but only one million taels were actually appropriated for the navy every year. The prioritization of frontier defense was a debilitating blow to China’s naval program. Immanuel C.Y. Hsu suggests that had the Xinjiang funds been invested in the naval program, China might have had a powerful navy and might not have lost to Japan in the humiliating Sino-Japanese War of 1895. The Qing’s failure to allocate sufficient resources to the maritime frontier contributed to its downfall.

Hence, China’s geographical environment is a major factor affecting its military resource allocation and defense planning. China today has the longest land borders (13,743 miles) in the world, with 14 contiguous countries. During the Cold War, China faced security threats from both the Asian continent and the seacoast. On the land frontier, as many as 1.5 million troops were deployed along the two sides of the Sino-Soviet border. Both countries fought a border conflict in 1969. On the maritime frontier, Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan attempted to recover the mainland he lost in the Chinese civil war and concluded a mutual defense treaty with the United States. The Soviet threat, coupled with US escalation of the Vietnam War, created fear among PRC leaders about being drawn into a war. As the concentration of industry in coastal urban regions made the country vulnerable to attack, from 1964 to 1971 Mao Zedong and other Chinese leaders embarked on a massive program, called the Third Front, to move coastal industries inland and create an entire industrial structure in the inland provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and others. The Third Front was an extremely costly program, using up about 30 to 40 percent of national investment. Defense concerns introduced inefficiency into China’s industrialization program.

China is now the world’s second largest economy and is expected to surpass the United States in the next decade or so. With rising economic capabilities, China will be able to allocate more
resources to increase its military power. In addition to maintaining a large army, PRC leaders have made plans to turn China into a maritime power. Given China's expanding interests abroad and reliance on energy imports from overseas, such reallocation of resources toward the maritime frontier is to be expected. If history is any guide, whether China can become a maritime power will depend on its ability to maintain peace on the land borders.

Aside from influencing resource allocation, the geographical legacy of Qing conquests also affects Chinese defense planning today. The present territorial size of China is larger than most of the dynastic boundaries of the past. China's territorial boundaries waxed and waned throughout history. The Central Plain surrounding the Yellow River constituted the traditional Chinese heartland. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) did not directly administer the areas known today as Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria. That China is so big today is a result of Qing conquest, which doubled the territorial size of Ming China. The Manchus of the Qing Dynasty spent nearly eighty years trying to defeat the Zhuanghars, conquering Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet in the process. Through a series of expansions from 1683 to 1759, the Qing Empire became the largest continental empire in the world and a regional hegemon in East Asia. Its territorial size dwarfed that of any European country, its population was three times the size of Europe's total population, and its economy was estimated to be at least four times larger than that of Great Britain. The Qing's westward expansion destroyed the nomadic confederations that had dominated the history of east and central Eurasia for two thousand years.

When the Qing Dynasty was overthrown in 1912, the Republic of China inherited its territorial boundaries. Mongolia soon declared independence and fell under Soviet sway. Over the centuries, the Manchu homeland in northeastern China has been fully integrated into the Chinese nation, with the Manchu language in danger of becoming extinct. The People's Republic of China continues to administer Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. There are important strategic reasons for such control. Both Xinjiang and Tibet serve as buffer zones between the Chinese heartland on the one hand and Russia, India, and other nearby states on the other. Nonetheless, nationalist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet complicate security planning by the Chinese government and are now becoming a new source of domestic security concern.

Conclusion and future research

In studying Chinese strategic thought and military practice, it behooves us to be aware of the pitfalls of essentializing the Chinese tradition. The popular way of contrasting a Chinese style of warfare with a Western style of warfare does more to obscure than illuminate. Empirical studies of Chinese warfare show that the Chinese were as capable of total war as the Europeans. China has been a practitioner of realpolitik for centuries, often dressing its pursuit of power with a Confucian facade of benevolence. Sinocentrism deeply affected China's perception of its Century of Humiliation at the hands of Western powers and Japan and strengthened the resolve of Chinese leaders to pursue power and realize the so-called China Dream. Despite the foreign policy rhetoric of harmony and peace, there is no reason to believe that China will behave differently from other great powers in history.

Yet the tendency to essentialize the Chinese tradition remains strong within China today. Civilian and military strategists established academic associations to promote the study of Chinese strategic culture and published monographs and articles on China's military cultural traditions. The content of Chinese strategic culture that they have identified is still Confucian pacifism: Chinese cultural tradition emphasizes harmony and peace, giving rise to a strategic culture that is defensive and nonaggressive. This revival of strategic culture seems to serve a political purpose as the concerns over adopted the strategic culture, the European history of one level, more and the case between China and the United States.
as the Chinese leadership attempts to develop a peaceful rise discourse to ease international concerns over China’s rising power. Its popularity notwithstanding, the strategic cultural approach adopted by the Chinese analysts risks falling into the trap of cultural determinism. As noted earlier, the empirical evidence does not support the Confucian strategic culture that they advocate.

Chinese security policy is an exciting field that has plenty of room for growth. First, unlike European security, the study of Chinese security policy remains under-theorized. Chinese military history, including the PRC period, is a fertile ground to build new theories or to test existing ones. Second, although structural realism can explain Chinese security policy at the strategic level, more studies need to be conducted on the use of strategies in tactical maneuvers. What are the roles of historical anecdotes and ancient stratagems in Chinese defense planning and how do they supplement Chinese realpolitik? Third, more research is needed on the relationship between resource allocation and the simultaneous development of land power and sea power. China developed naval power during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, but for the majority of the time it has been a continental power. Only the Ming Dynasty was able to develop both land power and sea power in the early fifteenth century, but the rise of Mongol threat effectively pulled the seagoing Chinese back onto the Asian continent. Given its continental legacy, can the PRC become a full-scale maritime power? If so, will it exacerbate security competition with the United States?

**Glossary**

- **ba dao** 霸道
- **bing jia** 兵家
- **fa jia** 法家
- **san guo yan yi** 三國演義
- **tianxia** 天下
- **wang dao** 王道
- **weihou** 威虜
- **wu xing** 無形
- **yizhan** 義戰
- **zhongguo** 中國
- **zhuo dao** 自衛反擊

**Notes**

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22 Ibid.
23 Fu Zhongxia et al., eds., *Zongguo Lidai Zhanzheng Nianbian [Chronology of Warfare in the Dynasties of China]* (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2002).
27 Johnston, *Cultural Realism*.
29 Wang, *Harmony and War*.
33 Sawyer and Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception*, 58.
34 Nathan and Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, 25.
