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The “Century of Humiliation” and China’s National Narratives

Commissioners: Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts on China’s national narratives and their implications for Chinese foreign and national security policy. I want to note that the views I express in this testimony are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of CNA or any of its sponsors or affiliates.

I have been asked to discuss the role that China’s historical memories of subjugation at the hands of Western powers during the 19th and early 20th centuries play in PRC policy debates, particularly debates about the current state of geopolitics and about China’s emergence as a great power. I will discuss how these experiences, and subsequent interpretations of them, have helped structure Chinese elite and popular views of China’s past, present, and future role in the international realm. I will also note some implications of these views for China’s current-day foreign policy, and for some of the attitudes that its influential thinkers display toward the United States.

There are five main points that I wish to make.

- First, the “Century of Humiliation” – a period between 1839 and 1949 when China’s government lost control over large portions of its territory at the hands of foreigners – is a key element of modern China’s founding narrative.
- Second, the Century of Humiliation is thought by many Chinese today to provide historical lessons that are taken as indicative of how strong Western powers tend to behave toward China.
- Third, the intellectual debates about the nature of international relations that took place during the Century of Humiliation underpin similar elite debates that are taking place in China today.¹ Concerns with the nature of interstate competition, with the possibility for equality among nation-states, and with the question of whether the international system might evolve into something more peaceable in the future, remain salient topics of discussion and debate in China today.
- Fourth, although the PRC government maintains that the Century of Humiliation ended when the CCP won the Chinese civil war and established itself as the ruling regime, there remain several vestiges of that period that, in the minds of many Chinese, must be rectified before China’s recovery will be considered complete. The most important of these – and perhaps the only one that is non-negotiable – is the return of Taiwan to the mainland.
- Fifth, there is significant lack of consensus among present-day Chinese elites about what the lessons learned from the Century of Humiliation mean for China’s future trajectory in the global arena. The Century of Humiliation provides key frameworks through which Chinese intellectuals

¹ By “elites,” I refer to high-ranking members of the Chinese government, the Party, the military, and government-affiliated think tanks and research organizations.

and policy-makers may view China's place in the world, but there is significant variation in their interpretations. We should be cautious about assuming that one path will definitely be chosen.

What was the “Century of Humiliation”?

Anyone who spends time reading Chinese newspapers or official speeches, or talking at length with PRC nationals, will eventually encounter the “Century of Humiliation.” This tale of loss and redemption, in which modern China was forged out of a crucible of suffering and shame at the hands of foreign powers, has become part of the PRC's founding narrative, in the same way that colonial Americans' chafing under British taxation and their subsequent battle for independence is part of ours.

This “long century” of 110 years opened in 1839, when Britain sent gunboats up the Yangtze River to compel China's rulers to open their ports and markets to the opium trade, at the beginning of what came to be known as the First Opium War. This experience, and subsequent interactions with other Western nations that made similar demands for trade access, marked China's first sustained exposure to the West, and highlighted imperial China's military and diplomatic weakness in the face of Western power.

The shock to the Chinese worldview cannot be overestimated. Historically, China had sat comfortably at the center of a ring of tributary relationships with its neighboring countries. Its rulers had limited familiarity with any civilization outside of Asia, and in their few contacts with Westerners had made clear that they expected the same deference from far-away leaders as they did from those on their periphery. Now, in the space of a little over a century, China suffered a long list of political, military, and cultural indignities, including the following:

- China was forced to open and effectively cede control over a series of “treaty ports” along the Chinese coast and the Yangtze River, in which a number of foreign powers enjoyed extraterritorial privileges. China also ceded Hong Kong and other territories entirely.
- Japan, which the Chinese historically had regarded as an inferior, “younger brother,” was also challenged by the West, but its rulers proved to be far more adept than China's at remaking their political and military system to meet these new challenges. By the mid-1890s, Japan's military was strong enough to defeat China's and to gain control over Taiwan and portions of Manchuria. In the 1910s and again in the 1930s, Japan encroached ever further into Chinese territory.
- Throughout the 19th century, China was riven by massive rebellions in which tens of millions of people died; these uprisings were frequently fanned by popular opposition to the growing foreign presence and by the imperial government's acquiescence to foreign demands.
- Independence movements in Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang in the 1910s, '20s and '30s further reduced China's territory.
- The millennia-old imperial system collapsed forever in 1911, leading to an extended period of further chaos in which the new, nominally republican government was unable to control large swaths of China's remaining territory.
- The eight-year long war against Japan (World War II) and the multi-decade Chinese civil war between the Chinese Communist (CCP) and Nationalist (KMT) Parties devastated the Chinese landscape and tore its people apart.

This period was deemed to have ended only when the CCP and the Red Army (the predecessor of today's People's Liberation Army, or PLA) won the Chinese civil war, drove Chiang Kai-shek's KMT off the mainland, and established the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

The Century of Humiliation as legitimizing narrative for the CCP and PLA

The experiences of the late 19th and early 20th century became an indelible turning point for China. An American author wrote in 1959 that “The Chinese have one very broad generalization about their own history: they think in terms of ‘up to the Opium war’ and ‘after the Opium war’.”² This remains true to this day. This period was crucial for Chinese scholars and statesmen – both at the time and today – both as a founding moment for modern China, and as the source of a number of lessons about the nature of national power and of the modern international system. The experiences of the Century of Humiliation drove these figures to ask: Why were Western nations strong and China weak, and how might China improve its situation?

There emerged a wide range of competing answers to these questions. Chinese thinkers tended (in keeping with their 19th-century Western counterparts) toward cultural explanations of China’s inability to compete in the modern international system. For instance, they asserted, Western nations since ancient Greece have been oriented toward active, often militarily aggressive, interstate competition. China, on the other hand, was thought to have a national culture that was noncompetitive, non-striving, and defensive.

At the time that these contrasts were first drawn, many Chinese figures thought the Western way of doing things was better, and portrayed China’s people as stagnant, complacent, and backward. The West’s invasion and subjugation of China was seen by many of these thinkers to be a natural outcome of national strength. Many of these thinkers concluded that the way for China to grow stronger in the international arena was for it to become more like the West – by creating new forms of government, by reforming its social structures and values, by strengthening its military, or by some combination of these.

Over time, however, an earlier diversity of views began to crystallize into a consensus in China that the problem lay not with China but with the West. By the 1920s the strident articulation of this view had become a useful way for China’s emerging political parties to appeal to the angry nationalism of China’s increasingly active popular movements. For instance, China’s many enforced agreements with foreign power come to be collectively labeled as “unequal treaties” that made it impossible for China to gain power under existing international law – a term that persists to this day.³

Today, this narrative has become a key legitimizer for CCP rule, because the CCP is portrayed as the *only* modern Chinese political party that was able to successfully stand up to foreign aggression. In the words of a current-day Politburo member, “the establishment of new China [i.e. communist China] ... put an end to the situation in which old China was split up, the nation was subject to humiliation, and the people experienced untold sufferings.”⁴ The ability of Mao Zedong’s government to effectively wield diplomatic, economic, and military power are depicted in CCP and PLA literature as having started China down its present path to global influence. Chinese propaganda glorifies the exploits of the PLA and the Red Army in fighting off China’s would-be subjugators, including the Japanese, the KMT army, and the United States in Korea, and the PLA teaches its personnel that China’s Communist forces have never lost a war.

² Richard Harris, “China and the West,” *International Affairs* 35:2 (April 1959), p. 162.

³ See especially Zhitian Luo, “National Humiliation and National Assertion: The Chinese Response to the Twenty-One Demands,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27:2 (May 1993), pp. 297-319; and Dong Wang, “The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China,” *Pacific Affairs* 76:3 (Fall 2003), pp. 399-425.

⁴ Liu Yunshan, “Jifa aiguo renqing, zhenfen minzu jingshen, ningju renmin liliang” (Stimulate a passion for patriotism, inspire national spirit, and pool the people’s efforts), transcript of a public speech, *Renmin Ribao* (14 April 2009), p. 162.

This narrative allows China's government and people to interpret contemporary successes through the lens of earlier failures.⁵ The scholar Peter Hays Gries, analyzing the popular and official outcry that resulted after the accidental 1999 US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, provides one example when he quotes a *People's Daily* article that makes explicit reference to the Century of Humiliation:

This is 1999, not 1899. This is not ... the age when the Western powers plundered the [Chinese] imperial palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and Macao ... China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied⁶

A persistent feeling of insecurity

Despite China's recent successes, deep-seated suspicions of Western intentions linger, and are stoked by the CCP's continual employment of the Century of Humiliation narrative. CCP and PLA writings still present China as the perpetual and innocent victim of Western nations' continued determination to subjugate it. Recent PLA publications on martial strategy, for instance, assert that Western nations are fundamentally rapacious, greedy, and aggressive, having grown historically out of "slave states [that] frequently launched wars of conquest and pillage to expand their territories, plunder wealth, and extend their sphere of influence."⁷ Such writings often add that China, by contrast, is by nature a "peace-craving and peace-loving" nation.⁸ In this view, because the West has not fundamentally changed, China must seek peace, but prepare for war. Hence President Hu Jintao, in a 2004 speech laying out the new "historic missions" of the People's Liberation Army, warned that "Western hostile forces have not yet given up the wild ambition of trying to subjugate us."⁹

Framing China's current situation

This persistent feeling of insecurity today is used by China's leadership – and by its people – to frame both China's current national concerns and its future national aspirations. China is often portrayed as having suffered three kinds of loss during the Century of Humiliation: a loss of *territory*; a loss of *control* over its internal and external environment; and a loss of *international standing and dignity*. Each of these represents an injustice to be rectified.

On the issue of territory, there is a fairly straightforward consensus that China's work is not yet done. From the height of China's regional power during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to its nadir in the 1920s, China effectively lost control over one-third of its territory, a process that later came to be referred to as being "carved up like a melon" (*guafen*). Thus far the PRC has been able to reassert control over Tibet,

⁵ Many Western authors have written about this phenomenon; for just a few of the best, see the recent works of William A. Callahan, Paul A. Cohen, and Peter Hays Gries.

⁶ Han Zhongkun, "Zhongguo, bushi yibajiujiu" (This is not 1899 China), *Renmin Ribao*, 12 May 1999; quoted in Peter Hays Gries, "Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing," *The China Journal*, No. 46 (July 2001), p 32.

⁷ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* [English edition] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2005), p. 426.

⁸ Lin Chengdong and Chen Zhongdong, "The Importance of National Defense Construction and Army Building in the Overall Layout for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," *Jiefangjun Bao* (6 October 2007), p. 6.

⁹ Hu Jintao, "Renqing xinshiji xinjieduan wojun lishi shiming" (Understand the new historic missions of our military in the new period of the new century), 2004.

Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, but not over Taiwan – and the view is nearly unanimous that the losses of Century of Humiliation will not be fully rectified until Taiwan is returned to the mainland. This is considered a non-negotiable policy, a “sacred duty of all the Chinese people,” and indeed this position has been strengthened in recent years with the passage of the PRC’s 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which made clear that China was prepared and willing to use force to compel reunification if it could not occur peacefully.¹⁰ Other, smaller pieces of territory – in particular a number of disputed islands in the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas – are often also encompassed in this narrative, but this is less universal and of more recent provenance.

More contentious, in discussions among current-day Chinese intellectuals and government figures, is how China should exert control over its external environment and improve its international standing. The international arena in which China operates today is viewed by most in the PRC as originating in the hostile, Western-created system of the 19th century. But there is significant difference of opinion among Chinese elites on whether a stronger China can work within that system to improve its situation, or whether it ought to seek either to avoid or to transform the current international order.

How the Century of Humiliation shaped Chinese views of the international system

The Century of Humiliation exposed Chinese intellectuals to a different way of thinking about international relations. By examining their own situation alongside the theoretical writings of Western historians and social scientists, these figures developed some key areas of consensus about the nature of interstate relations. These included (but were not limited to) the following propositions:

- Human history is driven by competition among groups of peoples – in the modern world, by competition among nation-states.
- The well-being of a nation is tied to its ability to compete in the international arena; it is not possible to “opt out” of competition among nations.

Key debates also persisted. Some of the major questions raised included:

- Could competition among nations be restricted to the intellectual realms, so that military and political equality in the international arena is possible?
- Might competition among nations eventually cease altogether, leading to global peace and harmony?

Both the propositions and the debates have become key elements of today’s elite intellectual and political discourse in China. As the PRC has emerged onto the world stage as a major power, discussions among Chinese intellectuals about the nature of the international system and China’s place in it have again become prominent, resulting in countless articles published in government- and military-affiliated journals regarding the “international system,” “international order,” “global order,” and so on. Drawing on the insights and debates of their 19th century predecessors, the authors of such pieces are concerned to understand the fundamental nature of interactions among states and to determine how China might turn this dynamic to its own advantage.

These figures agree on the fact that China’s global power and influence are rising, but they do not agree on what this means for its future relations with other countries. Chinese intellectuals today offer at least

¹⁰ “Text of China’s Anti-Secession Law” (14 March 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4347555.stm>.

three views of how China should interact with other nation-states. All start from the implicit premise that today's international system has not changed in its essence from the 19th century, in that it is composed of strong and weak nation states that vie for dominance in the global stage. In the current era, the US is viewed as the strongest country in the world – and thus the one most able and likely to wield power against other nations. These figures also tend to presuppose that Western powers – again, particularly the United States – have the assertive, militaristic orientation summarized in the previous section. And they further assume that the West has a vested interest in maintaining the international system that it created.

However, they disagree on the question of whether a different international system is possible in the future, and they disagree on whether – if so – China is yet, or will ever be, sufficiently powerful to alter the current system. They therefore come to different conclusions about how China should position itself vis-à-vis the global order in general, and the United States in particular.

These three schools of thought can be summarized as follows.

View #1: The current international system is harmful for China, and therefore China should keep its participation in that system cautious and minimal

Few Chinese advocate total non-involvement in the international system. Many, however, express discomfort about engaging substantially in the global arena as it currently stands. In their view, the West remains committed to aggressive competition, and China remains vulnerable. They posit that the international system has not changed significantly since the Century of Humiliation, and that it cannot be changed significantly in the future. In their view, this system persists for one of two reasons: either because international relations are *inherently* characterized by a competitive, usually conflictual dynamic between nations of unequal status, or because Western powers – particularly the United States – have a vested interest in retaining this system even if another way is imaginable.

This view puts China on the defensive. Such figures caution that engagement is highly risky, asserting that because the current international system reflects Western interests, it will allow China to engage only as a way of protecting the Western-dominated status quo. In their view, attempts by international institutions or individual Western nations to dictate how China should behave are simply more sophisticated ways of making “unequal demands” on China. Several Chinese intellectuals have, for instance, attacked the US's desire for China to become a “responsible stakeholder” as a “colonialist” viewpoint that is aimed at having weaker countries shoulder the burdens of stronger ones.¹¹ They express concern that taking on such burdens could weaken China rather than strengthen it, and that such is perhaps the US's intent: “Some countries, especially the United States, may take advantage [of the concept of international responsibility] to impose on China some responsibilities that it cannot undertake in its present stage of economic development, and use this to slow the speed of China's development.”¹² As a result, China's “vulnerability in China-US relations will increase.”¹³

From the US standpoint, this is probably the most dangerous school of thought. It paints China as both a defensive and a dissatisfied rising power: as one professor wrote in 2008, “China is not satisfied with this

¹¹ E.g., Ma Zhen'gang, “Zhongguo de zeren yu ‘Zhongguo zeren lun’” (China's responsibility and the ‘China responsibility theory’), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* 2007-03 (May-June 2007), p.2; Ding Yifan, paraphrased in Li Nan, “Zhongguo de guoji zeren guan’ yanjiuhui zongshu” (Summary of Seminar on “The Concept of China's International Responsibility”), *Dangdai Yatai* 2008–06 (November/December 2008), p. 152.

¹² Li Nan, “Summary of Seminar on ‘The Concept of China's International Responsibility,’” pp. 151-152.

¹³ Wang Te-chen, “Zhong-Mei yuedi duihua zhuanjia cheng yin guangfan” (China-US dialogue will start toward end of this month; expert says the subjects will be wide-ranging), *Da Gong Bao* (22 July 2009).

arrangement, but lacks the capability to manipulate it.”¹⁴ And it blames Western nations for this unsatisfactory situation, portraying them as fundamentally unable or unwilling to restore China to a position of respect and influence in the global arena. It further promotes the importance of building up China’s diplomatic and military strength as quickly as possible, to make it more able to stand up against future foreign aggression. For instance, PLA Major General Zhu Chenghu has explained China’s desire for rapid military modernization as stemming from these experiences: “In modern times China suffered over 100 years of being invaded. As the popular saying goes, once bitten by a snake, a person may be afraid of a rope for ten years.”¹⁵

View #2: China should use its growing influence to adapt the existing system

An alternative viewpoint contends that China should accept the current international system. For these figures, China has already achieved an acceptable level of attention and respect from the world, or is close to doing so – thus restoring its lost national dignity. Some suggest that China’s historical humiliations of the 19th century have been overtaken by its growing power and influence in the 21st: after the conclusion of the successful Beijing Olympics, for instance, one commentator wrote in *China Daily* that “having realized the ‘dream of the century,’ perhaps it is time to relegate the ‘Century of Humiliation’ to history where it belongs ... The glow of the Games should have dispelled any lingering bitterness from the humiliating defeats China suffered at the hands of imperialist aggressors in the past century.”¹⁶

These figures tend to argue that China’s growing power and influence have brought it closer to equality with the great powers, so that it can now successfully interact with them without fear of subjugation. Indeed, some imply that in a world of more equal powers, the more harmful aspects of international competition may be tempered – thus creating a less conflictual, more equitable world going forward.

Two separate commentaries on the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue provide a useful example. One author wrote that “The premise of ‘dialogue’ is equality ... [it] differs from negotiations in that it seeks as much mutual understanding as possible ... ‘dialogue’ does not involve competition to gain the initiative.” Another added that the premise of establishing the S&ED was that “in order to play an important role in major international and regional issues, the United States needs to cooperate with China, and the two should not cut the ground from under each others’ feet or come into conflict with one another.”¹⁷

In this view, a rising China should seek to understand, respect, and engage with the present-day international system. A professor at Fudan University’s School of International Relations and Public Affairs has written, for instance, that “as a newly rising great power, China needs [to spend] more time to learn the rules of the game among the great powers and should respect and be sensitive to those rules.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Liu Jinghua, paraphrased in Li Nan, “Summary of Seminar on ‘The Concept of China’s International Responsibility,” p. 152.

¹⁵ Wu Yurong, “Meiguo yaoqiu Zhongguo duideng junshi touming bu heli, ye wufa shixian” (The US demand on China for equal levels of military transparency is neither reasonable nor feasible”), *Dongfang Zaobao* (13 November 2009).

¹⁶ Hong Liang, “Time to Drop the Baggage of History,” *China Daily* (2 September 2008), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2008-09/02/content_6988865.htm.

¹⁷ Lu Ning, “Zhong-Mei zhanlüe yu jingjui duihua kaishi ‘pingqi pingzuo’” (China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue begins on an ‘equal footing’”), *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (29 July 2009); Zhang Rui, “Zhong-Mei zhanlüe yu jingjui duihua de liangdian yu kandian” (Highlights and viewpoints on the Sino-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue), *Zhongguo Jingji Shibao* (30 July 2009).

¹⁸ Shen Yi, “Consensus Based on Mutual Respect and Equality: The Cornerstone of ‘Strategic Reassurance,’” *Pacnet* 73A (12 November 2009), p. 1.

These “rules” include the obligation to engage. The general consensus among this group seems to be that China should seek to move to a more central role on the international stage – where it will have more influence, but also greater responsibility. Much of the PRC’s participation in multilateral activities such as peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations are couched in terms of China’s responsibility to undertake “international obligations” to cooperatively address problems of global concern.¹⁹

At the same time, these thinkers suggest that a more powerful China can inject into this system the peaceful cultural values that it inherited from its past and that were reinforced by China’s experiences during the Century of Humiliation – thus adapting and improving the current system without fundamentally changing it. These values include, for instance, the need to protect weaker states from subjugation by strong ones. China’s insistence on a multilateral approach (particularly through the UN) to global challenges such as piracy and peacekeeping is often couched in these terms, “so that future matters in the world cannot be dictated by one single country or group of countries.”²⁰

For the US, this is potentially the most productive line of reasoning. This view essentially paints China as a satisfied rising power. Its confidence in the respect and equality it receives from other strong nations allow China’s leadership to slightly modify earlier stances on issues, such as its long-standing opposition to ‘interference’ in other nations’ domestic affairs, in order to work cooperatively with other nations to secure international peace and stability.²¹

View #3: China can help transform the international system to one that is more equitable and non-competitive

Finally, a third school of thought contends that the international system is malleable and that China can – and should – play a central role in transforming it into a different system in the future. This view derives elements from both of the previously-discussed viewpoints: its adherents agree, with those who are suspicious of current arrangements, that the present-day international system is inadequate to meet the needs and interests of many nations including China; and they suggest, along with those in the second camp, that China is now in a position to actively shape the international system. Where they differ from both is in their assessment that the current system can be peacefully transformed into something entirely new: a non-competitive, non-conflictual model of international relations.

China has made a call for such interactions in its bilateral relations for some time. The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” established in the early 1950s, and the more recent “New Security Concept” (1997), establish the importance of “dialogue, cooperation, mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and coordination.” Many in China have called for a broadening of these values to encompass the entire world, asserting that it is now time for all nations to move beyond the competitive international system. They argue, for instance, that zero-sum, conflictual relations between nations are disadvantageous even to those that occupy a strong position in the system. They remark that the US’s continued adherence to what they label a “Cold War mentality” of international competition makes it impossible to establish cooperation or lasting global peace.²² In a new international order, they assert, the world must move beyond

¹⁹ Zhang Rui, “Highlights and Viewpoints on the Sino–US Strategic and Economic Dialogue.”

²⁰ Former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxin, quoted in “China denounces unilateralism [*sic*], external interference in its internal affairs,” *Renmin Ribao* (English edition) (7 March 2004).

²¹ Allen Carlson, “Helping to Keep the Peace (Albeit Reluctantly): China’s Recent Stance on Sovereignty and Multilateral Intervention,” *Pacific Affairs* 77:1 (Spring 2004), p. 10.

²² See, e.g., Xia Liping, “Lun Zhongguo guoji xin linian zhong de xin anquan guan” (The New Security Concept in China’s new thinking of international strategy), *Guojia Wenti Lun*, 34 (Spring 2004), pp. 4-23.

“conventional alliance-based systems of security” and allow “states to treat each other as neither friend nor foe.”²³

In establishing this new order, they say, China is uniquely qualified to lead the way. Like their 19th-century predecessors, they assert that there are fundamental civilizational differences between China and the West that shape the vision each has of international relations, and add further that China’s perspective is superior – both because of its inherently peaceful cultural outlook, and because China’s experiences during the Century of Humiliation have made it more sensitive to the necessity of maintaining equitable, harmonious relations among nations. In 2009, for instance, then-PRC Ambassador to Great Britain explained in a public speech that “China has never been a country that enjoyed war. The essence of Chinese culture opposes aggression and hegemony . . . The Chinese people were victims of aggression and bullying, and will never agree to make their own country one of hegemony.”²⁴ As a result, she remarked, a powerful China could act differently from all other rising powers in the past.

This position posits that as China’s power and influence in the international system continue to grow, it is in the interest both of China and of other powers to seek peaceful transformation of the global system. If this commitment to a peaceful transition is sincere, it holds great prospects for international cooperation. However, this position does not assume a transformation in the mindset of other great powers; most of these thinkers still assert that Western nations have a “hegemonic” mindset that will make this transformation unpalatable to them. Thus China must work hard to persuade these powers that a more harmonious international order is in all their interests.

This view holds mixed possibilities for the United States. On one hand, it places high value on peaceful, equitable interactions between nations that could be used as an aspiration for future Chinese behavior. On the other hand, it maintains that China and the West maintain fundamentally different worldviews, thus allowing for continued suspicion of Western motivations. It is also worth noting that this position, despite its seemingly revolutionary views on interstate relations, in fact retains many of the principles of the current system. Chinese elites still discuss foreign policy in terms of China’s “national interest”; they do not question the existence of nation-states; and they remain deeply rhetorically committed to the principle of state sovereignty – thus suggesting that there remain many limits to China’s willingness to accommodate other countries’ interests.

The road ahead

What do these different lessons from the Century of Humiliation mean for the future direction of Chinese foreign policy?

Beyond the near-unanimity on the importance of restoring Taiwan to PRC control, there is little agreement on China’s future global position. In presenting this panoply of worldviews, experiences and lessons from the Century of Humiliation, my aim has been to show that although there is a high degree of consensus within the PRC on where China has come from, there is far less on where it is going and how it should behave in order to get there. Moreover, although all of the viewpoints presented here assume that China’s growing economic, military, and diplomatic power allow it more control over its destiny than in the past, they do not agree on whether the current level of power is enough to overcome China’s past

²³ Shi Jing, “Getting China Right: The Chinese World Order and Asia-Pacific International Integration,” *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (English-language edition), 18:6 (Nov-Dec 2008), p. 86.

²⁴ Ambassador Fu Ying, “Is China a Power? Speech at Oxford University” (18 May 2009).

humiliations. These debates show us that China's elites are themselves still trying to figure out what China's increased capabilities and global standing mean for its future role in the international system.

As observers of China's foreign policy debates, we should not assume that the valorization of China's defensive stance and its stated preference for peace and harmony is disingenuous. The notion that China is fundamentally culturally different from Western nations has been inculcated in many generations of young Chinese, and I believe this view is sincerely held by many in China today. Trying to persuade China's leaders through rhetoric or historical example that the US has or has not behaved a certain way in the past is almost certainly a useless endeavor.

Rather, the aim of US interactions with China should be to show its leading thinkers and policy-makers why one future path is preferable for Chinese interests than another. US policy-makers must assess the extent to which the founding narrative of the Century of Humiliation, and the values and aspirations derived from it, can be used today to persuade China's leaders to move down an accommodating, peaceful path. Some of the viewpoints presented here promote cooperation with other nations, while others put China in a permanently defensive position.

Moreover, we should keep in mind that these narratives have shown themselves to be sufficiently flexible to allow China's leaders to modify certain firmly-held stances, such as the principle of non-intervention, as China's national needs and interests have changed. This suggests that, if approached with sensitivity toward lingering national suspicions and fears, there is the possibility of further evolution in the future, even on issues where the current distance between the US and the Chinese positions is great. The aim of US policy toward China on issues that touch on historical sensitivities should be, in part, to help China's leaders to "save face" in front of the Chinese populace, so that they are not backed into a corner by their long-standing rhetoric and their sincerely-held concerns.