



**THE NON-WESTERN CHALLENGER?
THE RISE OF
A SINO-CENTRIC CHINA**

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Abstract

What are the implications of China's rapid rise for international order? This report seeks to answer the question from an identity perspective.

The key argument is that China is currently undergoing an identity shift towards Sino-centrism, that is, a self-centering tendency to turn narrative attention towards the internally generated, specifically *Chinese* hallmarks associated with China's civilizational past and cultural heritage.

The bulk of the report analyzes the four identity markers of Sino-centrism: Sino-civilization, Confucian philosophy, dynastic authoritarianism, and Han-ethnocentrism. It is argued that these identity markers provide China with a distinct, non-Western, societal template that may potentially set a new course for Chinese foreign policy.

Finally, the report discusses the likely characteristics of a Sino-centric foreign policy and suggests how it may bring China in conflict with several aspects of the current international order as well as the United States itself.

Preface

This DIIS report is about the rise of a Sino-centric tendency within Chinese self-understanding, that is, the emergence of a self-centering tendency to turn narrative attention inwardly towards the internally generated, specifically *Chinese* hallmarks associated with China's civilizational past and its cultural heritage. The bulk of the report is devoted to exploring this Sino-centric tendency, while a secondary purpose is to reflect on the likely implications of this development for Chinese foreign policy. It should be stressed from the outset that the report is based on a review of mostly secondary literature on Chinese identity, rather than on an in-depth discursive analysis of official Chinese documents. While the latter approach may seem like the obvious choice for uncovering state identities, there are certain advantages involved in employing a more indirect perspective. For one thing, the report seeks to capture an emerging tendency within Chinese self-understanding that has yet to be fully translated into official policies. For another, some elements of this Sino-centric tendency may actually never be officially acknowledged by the Chinese government, notwithstanding the fact that they represent important undercurrents within Chinese politics.

Furthermore, in the hope of forestalling misunderstandings, a prefatory note on the civilization and identity concept is in order. The civilization concept is widely used among the Chinese themselves, primarily as a way to stress the far-reaching cultural and historical heritage on which modern-day China rests.¹ Even though the report taps into this vocabulary of civilization and in addition introduces the notion of an internally generated Sino-centric identity narrative, any connotation of cultural essentialism is *not* intended.² In fact, as pointed out in chapter two, a specific identity narrative is only able to hold periodic sway over politics, and the hegemonic narrative may come to be based on very different, both internally and externally generated, identity markers. In other words, if China – as this report suggests – adopts a Sino-centric self-understanding, it might contribute to revitalizing the idea of civilizational distinctiveness. However, there always exist alternative narratives and different organizational logics (such as economic incentives or institutional dynamics), which limit the range and effects of any such specific self-understanding.

¹ For instance, according to the first few lines in the aforementioned official portrayal of "China's peaceful development": "People of all ethnic groups in China [...] have created a splendid civilization." (The Information Office of the State Council, 2011, Chapter I, "China's peaceful development", *ibid.*)

² Such essentialism is usually associated with Samuel Huntington's famous "Clash of Civilization" article in *Foreign Affairs* (1993, #72, 3).

Introduction

Civilizational distinctiveness

The rise of China and other emerging powers seems to be a defining moment of the 21st century, as it holds the potential to fundamentally redefine the centre of gravity of international politics. Much to the chagrin of the Western powers, the newcomers have not simply embraced the whole package of Western values, norms and institutions, upon which the current international Liberal Order builds. As the frontrunner of the emerging powers, China is by far causing the most concern. Officially, Chinese policy-makers have coined phrases such as ‘peaceful rise’ and ‘harmonious world’ to reassure the outside world of China’s benign and responsible intentions.³ To some degree China has even backed up its words with deeds by undertaking a larger responsibility in areas such as international peacekeeping missions and the financial stability of the global economy. Still, the lingering question in the West remains: Will China turn out to be a revisionist state?

To be sure, the illiberal and non-democratic nature of China’s polity engenders much of the Western skepticism towards the Chinese.⁴ However, there is at the same time a growing realization in the West that China represents a non-Western power in not merely a political, but also a cultural sense. In the words of Henry Kissinger: “...*China is not a nation-state, but a continental expression of an ancient and great culture.*”⁵ Indeed, among the Chinese themselves there is a widespread belief that China represents a distinct civilization, although such distinctiveness has so far been downplayed officially to avoid fueling Western concerns.⁶ But as China’s rapid rise and the wane of communist ideology are bringing identity-related questions to the fore in Chinese media and academic debates, it seems reasonable to expect that Chinese civilizational distinctiveness will play an increasingly

³ Zheng Bijian (2005), “China’s Peaceful Rise to Great-Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs* 84(5); for a recent example see “China’s peaceful development”, *The Information Office of the State Council*, September 2011, the Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354_2.htm [accessed 21.09.2011]

⁴ See, for instance, James Mann (2007), *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*, New York: Viking; Aaron Friedberg (2011: 42-45), *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

⁵ Henry Kissinger (2010), “Global Security Governance, and the Emerging Distribution of Power”, Keynote Address at *The 8th IISS Global Strategic Review*, September 2010;

⁶ As for China’s civilizational distinctness, see, for instance, Martin Jacques (2009), *When China Rules the World*, London: Penguin Books; William Callahan (2010), *China: The Pessimist Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

prominent role in this “self-investigative” process,⁷ not least because there exist a number of deeply rooted identity markers that may provide the ideational contents of a distinct Chinese self-understanding.

This report will first of all explore the main points of reference in the constitution of Chinese identity with the aim of establishing the extent to which China regards itself as distinct from the outside world. Specifically, the report will pinpoint the identity-borne differences between China and the West in order to discuss how they *may* translate into significant lines of political difference with potential implications for international order and security in the 21st century. So far in the post-Cold War era China has involved itself actively in the institutions of international society in line with the globalist precepts of Beijing’s official “peaceful rise/harmonious world” discourse. On the other hand, Beijing still tends to distance itself from the Western powers, particularly in matters of international security.⁸ As an ascending China gradually finds itself in a key position internationally, the question of whether Beijing will follow its own course is becoming far more critical than it was back in the twentieth century, when China lacked the resources to assume the role of great power. In a similar vein, it raises the question of what a *Sino-centric* – i.e. self-centered Chinese – version of international order will look like. This report argues that China is on its way to becoming increasingly Sino-centric and that a Sino-centric China will propagate a different vision of world order than the current liberal one instituted by the Western powers.⁹

Overview of report

The first chapter of the report introduces an academic perspective on the rise of China in order to lay down the theoretical premises of the argument. The first section presents the two dominant theoretical approaches to the implications of China’s rise, both of which consider China to be motivated by universal factors such as economic and institutional incentives in the case of liberalism, and power

⁷ This self-investigative process has been discussed by, among others, Zhu Liqun (2010: 13), “China’s Foreign Policy Debates”, *Chaillot Papers*, Paris: EU’s Institute for Security Studies; David Shambaugh (2011), “Coping with a Conflicted China”, *The Washington Quarterly* 34(1); Callahan (2010: 191-218), *China: The Pessimist Nation*, *ibid*; Joseph Fewsmith (2011), “Debating the China Model”, *China Leadership Monitor* 35, Summer 2011, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

⁸ Barry Buzan (2010: 14, 31-34), “China in International Society”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(1); see also Yitzhak Shichor (2006): “China’s Voting Power in the UN Security Council”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, China Brief 6(18).

⁹ The Liberal Order will be defined in the second section of chapter 4 as part of the discussion of a Sino-centric world order.

and security-related incentives in the case of realism. The second section challenges liberalism and realism from a constructivist perspective by arguing that more attention should be paid to how the self-understanding of China constitutes its overall interests and thus its foreign policy. In other words, chapter two puts forward an alternative, identity-based way of understanding the rise of China and its consequences for world order.

The second chapter identifies the so-called identity markers of Chinese self-understanding and explores their historical roots and present stature in Chinese thinking. The report emphasizes four fundamental identity markers – ‘Sino-civilization’, ‘Confucian ideology’, ‘dynastic centralism’, and ‘Han-ethnocentrism’ – each of which contains specific norms and values that guide societal behavior. The basic contents of the four identity markers will be explicated with a view to illustrating their particular ‘Chineseness’ in relation to core elements within Western self-understanding. It is argued that the four identity markers are an integral part of Chinese self-understanding, even though they have been temporarily repressed during China’s communist era.

The third chapter contains a discussion of how the four identity markers represent the potential building blocks of a non-Western, i.e. a Sino-centric narrative of Chinese self-understanding and how this narrative may influence Chinese foreign policy in the 21st century. The first section provides a three-pronged argument as to why the four Sino-centric identity markers are likely to become increasingly prominent within Chinese self-understanding, thereby filling the ideological vacuum of communism and supplanting the globalist precepts within the ‘peaceful rise/harmonious world’ discourse.¹⁰ The second section seeks to demonstrate in what respects the policy prescriptions of a more Sino-centric China will be at odds with the values and norms of the Western Liberal Order. It is argued that a Sino-centric world order will be more unilateralist, collectivist and hierarchical than the Liberal Order.

The fourth chapter presents the conclusions of the report along with the most important reservations about the overall argument, then suggests some overall policy recommendations for how to approach China as it adopts an increasingly Sino-centric foreign policy.

¹⁰ These globalist elements refer to a largely instrumental support for the institutional architecture of the current Liberal Order, which has been critical in accommodating the outside world during China’s economic transition.

Below, the rest of this introduction frames the Western anxieties accompanying China's ascent and specifies the claim that it is the non-Western identity of China that will cause it to challenge the Liberal Order.

A state of Western uneasiness

On August 24, 2011, the Pentagon released its congressionally mandated, annual report on the state of China's military capabilities.¹¹ Even though the findings of the report appeared somewhat toned down compared to the previous year, it still caused apprehensive headlines in leading U.S. news media, as well as indignant rebuttals from the Chinese authorities, thus reflecting the underlying tensions between the U.S. and China.¹² In fact, tensions were particularly high during 2010 with a whole string of diplomatic encounters between Beijing and Washington marking the year as a new bilateral low since 2001.¹³ It began with the White House's announcement of arms sales to Taiwan and ended with the human rights dispute accompanying the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. In between, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, clashed several times over the status of the South China Sea, most of which Beijing claims to be part of its territory. Furthermore, there was the ongoing controversy about how to tackle North Korean aggressions such as the sinking of the South Korean navy ship Cheonan in March and the shelling of a South Korean island in November. On top of all this, the recurrent skirmishes between Washington and Beijing about their skewed economic relationship in general and the exchange value of the renminbi in particular added an extra layer to the confrontational atmosphere.¹⁴

While 2011 has seen fewer encounters between Beijing and Washington owing partly to the unfolding of spectacular events elsewhere (not least the Arab Spring), their

¹¹ "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", *Office of the Secretary of Defense*, 2011, downloaded from: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_cmpr_final.pdf [accessed 25.08.2011]. A discussion of the report can be found in Andreas Bøje Forsby (2011), "USA bløder op over for Kina", *Analyse in Politiken*, 30.08.2011.

¹² For American and Chinese media response, see <http://warnewsupdates.blogspot.com/2011/08/pentagon-annual-report-on-chinas.html> [accessed 28.08.2011].

¹³ Back in April 2001 the so-called Hainan island incident also placed serious strains on the Sino-American relationship (see Peter Hayes Gries, 2004: 135-47, *China's New Nationalism*, Berkeley: University of California).

¹⁴ For a more elaborate discussion of the Sino-American relationship in 2010, see IISS (2011: 353-63) "Strategic Survey 2011: The Annual Review of World Affairs"; *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. See also Andreas Bøje Forsby (2010), "Raslende sabler eller klingende mønt", kronik i *Berlingske Tidende*, 22.08.2010.

relationship is still weighed down by a lack of mutual trust.¹⁵ This raises the question of why China evokes such concern, not least in the United States. One obvious reason is the realization that China's catching up with the United States to become the world's largest economy has been further accelerated by the financial crisis. As history suggests, economic power almost invariably translates into military power, which means that sooner or later China will be able to close the gap in military capabilities. Another reason is that until recently the Sino-American relationship was largely sheltered by the War on Terror, which kept the Americans deeply preoccupied with the theatres in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the War on Terror is gradually loosening its grip on the Pentagon, the US administration faces a period of strategic revision, as indicated in the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review of 2010 and furthermore illustrated by the Obama plan to scale down American combat forces in Afghanistan from July 2011.¹⁶ The rise of China seems to feed such revision by offering a new strategic focus. As observed by several analysts, the United States has recently taken a number of initiatives to reinforce its military presence in South East Asia at a time when budgetary restraint is otherwise dominating the Pentagon's agenda.¹⁷

However, the fact that China represents a *non-Western* rising power in a political as well as cultural sense is probably the most important cause for concern. The democratic nature of India – the other great emerging power of the 21st century – thus goes some way to explain the relaxed attitude of the West towards its rise. After the Cold War, there was a widespread belief in the West that Chinese economic growth would be accompanied by political reforms and that China would eventually embrace liberal democracy.¹⁸ But even though China has by now been intricately integrated into the global capitalist economy, as manifested by its membership of IMF in 1986, the WTO in 2001, and the G20 in 2008, no parallel political reform has taken place. China is

¹⁵ Or, as Hillary Clinton recently put it with direct reference to China in a much-cited article on US grand strategy in Asia and the Pacific: "We all know that fears and misperceptions linger on both sides of the Pacific." Although Clinton went on to reject such anxieties, she also emphasized "that we have to be honest about our differences". Hillary Clinton (2011), "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, An FP Special Report: "What Ails America", November 2011.

¹⁶ Report downloaded from: <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/> [accessed 20.08.2010]. The Obama administration's strategic reorientation is also made explicit in Hillary Clinton's above-mentioned article in *Foreign Affairs*, Clinton (2011), "America's Pacific Century", *ibid*.

¹⁷ See e.g. Jonathan Holslag (2011: 7-18), *Trapped Giant: China's Troubled Military Rise*, Adelphi Series, IISS, London: Routledge; see also Josh Rogin (2011), "Gates: Despite budget woes: U.S. military commitment to Asia will increase", *Foreign Policy*, online article, June 3, 2011.

¹⁸ Such beliefs have been expressed, among others, by Bill Clinton (1996: 36), *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st century*, Random House; and by George W. Bush (2000), "Renewing America's Purpose", speech at Boeing Plant, May 17: http://www.issues2000.org/Celeb/George_W__Bush_China.htm [accessed 29/11/2011].

still an authoritarian regime with no separation of powers, a restricted judiciary and a toothless parliament; it monopolizes political mobilization within the Communist Party and forcibly discourages political opposition; it monitors and censors the mass media; it violates basic human rights and uses its armed forces to quell ethnic unrest; and it retains political-administrative control over the economy.

Apart from the political/ideological divide between China and Western countries, there is the cultural dimension to China's non-Western identity. Indeed, this report argues that China's identity-related distinctness to a large extent rests on civilizational, ethnic and moral-philosophical elements that may all be regarded as part of China's cultural heritage. To the extent that such cultural factors are perceived as significant to Chinese self-understanding, the non-Western aspect of Chinese identity may easily persist even in the unlikely event that China were to adopt the liberal-democratic institutions of the West. Interestingly, China is already being viewed as an alternative societal model, which is better able to combine political stability with economic growth while retaining its cultural distinctiveness.¹⁹ As such, the Chinese model could well become an ideal to be emulated by other developing countries, although so far the Chinese government has not officially endorsed the idea of a specifically China model.²⁰ In any case, with the rise of a non-Western great power it becomes all the more crucial to investigate the foundations of its main foreign policy interests. In other words, how will China position itself internationally in the coming decades? The next chapter of this report claims that such overall foreign policy interests are first of all generated by China's self-understanding.

¹⁹ Joshua Cooper Ramo has called this alternative model "the Beijing Consensus" in Ramo (2004: 3-4), "The Beijing Consensus", London: Foreign Policy Centre; see also Ian Bremer (2009), *State Capitalism Comes of Age*, *Foreign Affairs* 88, 3; Shaun Breslin (2011), "The China Model and the global crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese mode of governance?", *International Affairs* 87(6).

²⁰ See, for instance, the recent discussion of the China model in Joseph Fewsmith (2011), "Debating the China Model", *ibid.*

Chapter I. Theorizing the rise of China

Rising within liberal institutions or realist anarchy?

The Western version of the debate on how to approach China's rise has primarily been characterized by an ongoing disagreement between American liberals and realists.²¹ Although this report favors a constructivist approach for reasons presented below, the realist and liberal standpoints will be sketched out first, since they constitute the main fault lines in the debate. Apart from these three different approaches to studying China, the Western version of the debate also encompasses several so-called area specialists (sinologists), some of which the report will refer to extensively in chapter 2.²²

Liberals²³ share several theoretical premises with the realists, but they differ with respect to the possibility of overcoming cooperation barriers such as uncertainty and insecurity, and the importance they ascribe to economic interdependence and liberal-democratic institutions. First of all, liberal institutionalists perceive states to be motivated by shared interests and absolute-gains thinking, which causes them to be cooperative. In addition, liberals emphasize the strength, autonomy and inclusive nature of the current Liberal Order's basic institutions and the way these institutions underpin the cooperation of states.²⁴ Thus, when it comes to China, liberals assume that, by engaging China and entangling it in a mesh of liberal institutions, China will gradually be turned into a fully fledged member of the Liberal Order, in the process liberalizing its own polity.²⁵ Arguably the most prominent protagonist, G. John Ikenberry, has phrased the liberal institutionalist view this way:

²¹ Aaron Friedberg (2005), *The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict inevitable?*, *International Security* 30(2); Thomas Christensen (2006), "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster: The Rise of China and US Policy toward East Asia", *International Security* 31(1); Bates Gill (2007: 17-18), *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy*, Washington: the Brookings Institution; Charles Glaser (2011: 81), "Will China's Rise Lead to War: Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism?", *Foreign Affairs* 90(2).

²² These include, among others, prominent China researchers such as John Fairbank, David Lampton, Andrew Nathan, Lucian Pye and David Shambaugh. For an introduction to the Chinese version of the debate, see, e.g., Zhu Liqun (2010), "China's Foreign Policy Debates", *ibid.*; David Shambaugh (2011), "Coping with a Conflicted China", *ibid.*

²³ The term 'liberals' is used here as a shorthand-expression for *liberal institutionalists*. Hence, the focus is on the international rather than domestic aspects of a liberal approach to China.

²⁴ E.g. Bruce Russett and John Oneal (2001), *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence and International Organizations*, New York: W.W. Norton.

²⁵ E.g. Michael Oksenberg and Elizabeth Economy, eds. (1999), *China Joins the World: Progress and Prospects*, New York Council on Foreign Relations; Ann Kent (2007), *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations and Global Security*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

“The more this order binds together capitalist democratic states in deeply rooted institutions, the more open, consensual, and rule-based it is; and the more widely spread its benefits, the more likely it will be that rising powers can and will secure their interests through integration and accommodation rather than through war.”²⁶

During his visit in 2009 to Fudan University in China, Barack Obama gave a speech that to some extent echoed a liberal philosophy:

“Because of our cooperation, both the United States and China are more prosperous and more secure. We have seen what is possible when we build upon our mutual interests, and engage on the basis of mutual respect. [...] The United States insists we do not seek to contain China’s rise. On the contrary, we welcome China as a strong and prosperous and successful member of the community of nations.”²⁷

The openness of the Liberal Order has allowed China to transform itself from a near pariah to a regular member of international society over the last three decades, on its way joining institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, IAEA, NPT, WTO and G20. However, while China has liberalized its economy, there has been no corresponding liberalization of its polity, inasmuch as the CCP still retains an unrestricted grip on society by systematically limiting freedom of speech, assembly and religion.²⁸ To the liberals, the lack of political reform in China seems to pose a serious challenge, as it questions the future coherence of the Liberal Order with an illiberal China on the top of the heap. Still, liberals ground their optimism on the belief that *in time* China will have to embark on political reforms in order to stay internationally competitive, as well as to meet the demands of its growing middle class.²⁹ And even if this turns out not to be the case, the Liberal Order is sufficiently resilient and inclusive enough to accommodate the rise of a non-liberal China.³⁰

²⁶ John Ikenberry (2008: 34): “The Rise of China and the Future of the West”, *Foreign Affairs* 87(1).

²⁷ Quoted in Nina Hachigian and Yuan Peng (2010: 70), “The US-China Expectations Gap: An Exchange”, *Survival* 52(4).

²⁸ See Amnesty’s assessment of the situation in China: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/china> [accessed 05.01.2011].

²⁹ Will Hutton (2006: 135-162): *The Writing on the Wall: Why We Must Embrace China as a Partner or Face it as an Enemy*, London: Free Press.

³⁰ John Ikenberry (2010), “The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents”, *Millennium* 38(3); Trine Flockhart and Li Xing (2010), “Riding the Tiger: China’s Rise and Liberal World Order”, *DIIS Policy Brief*.

Most realists are much less optimistic about the implications of China's rise and stress instead the inescapable logic of anarchy that prevents states from transcending traditional rivalries and power politics. In general, realists point to the risks of conflict that stem either from the offensive agendas of power-oriented states or from uncertainty and misperceptions among security-seeking states.³¹ On the one hand, some realists emphasize how a rising state will come to harbor expansionist ambitions to gain access to resources and new markets, extend its zone of influence or even forge a new international order.³² In the words of Aaron Friedberg: "...an unchecked China would be well situated to enforce claims over resources and territory that are currently disputed by its weaker neighbors."³³ According to a leading realist like John Mearsheimer: "...[N]o amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia."³⁴ On the other hand, less "offensively informed" realists stress how rising great powers exacerbate existing security dilemmas by destabilizing the balance of power and provoking arms races that increase the risks of miscalculation and unintended conflict.³⁵ Hence, even if China and the U.S. are both status quo-oriented powers, there are plenty of conflict-generating tripwires in the South East Asian region, with the unresolved status of Taiwan and North Korea's idiosyncrasies being palpable examples.

With respect to the Liberal Order most realists consider it to be a reflection of U.S. hegemony, which is why a rising China will sooner or later want to challenge it.³⁶ In this sense, China is likely to be a latent 'revisionist state' that only abides by the rules of the current order, as long as it lacks the power to forge a new order of its own. Similarly, the Chinese government's use of the 'Peaceful Rise'-label and its adoption of a more multilateralist diplomatic approach should primarily be seen as instrumental means of reassuring the outside world while patiently improving China's power position.³⁷

³¹ This realist distinction separates so-called offensive realists from defensive realists: see Michael Brown et al., eds. (1995), *The Perils of Anarchy – Contemporary Realism and International Security*, London: The MIT Press.

³² John Mearsheimer (2001: 55-82, 400), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

³³ Aaron Friedberg (2011: 7), *A contest for Supremacy...*, *ibid.*

³⁴ John Mearsheimer (2006: 162), "China's Unpeaceful Rise", *Current History*, Vol. 105, no. 690. See also Robert Kaplan (2010), "The Geography of Chinese Power", *Foreign Affairs* 89(3). For a similarly realist Chinese perspective see Yan Xuetong (2010: 289), "The Instability of China-US Relations", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3(4).

³⁵ See Robert Gilpin (1981: 48), *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Marc Beeson (2009: 97-98), "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?", *Review of International Studies* 35(1).

³⁶ Michael Mastanduno (2009: 123-27), "System Maker and Privilege Taker", *World Politics* 61(1).

³⁷ Joshua Kurlantzick (2005), "How China is Changing Global Diplomacy: Cultural Revolution", *New Republic*, June 27.

Who is rising? An identity-structural approach

This report does not adhere to an omnifarious constructivist reading of China's rise. It does contend, however, that a constructivist focus on identity structures yields important insights, many of which are neglected in the current debate between realists and liberals. Briefly put, both realists and liberals disregard the specific *character* of states, relying instead mostly on systemic incentives in what is basically a top-down generated story of state interests. Constructivists, in contrast, seek to endogenize – i.e. to explore from within – the interest formation of states by relating interests to socially constructed variables on either the systemic or domestic levels. In a manner similar to sinological studies, this report adopts an inside-out approach to Chinese interest formation, in line with the report's choice of a constructivist focus on Chinese self-understanding in order to arrive at the overall foreign policy interests of China. To believe that China represents just another rising great power – as realists and liberals seem to do – is thus to underestimate the potential challenge to Western-style international politics that China poses.

Even though constructivists are usually branded optimists with respect to international cooperation, there is no intrinsic optimism to a constructivist argument.³⁸ Instead, the *mainstream* version of constructivism adhered to in this report rests on a number of theoretical premises, three of which are relevant in this context. First, constructivists study the socially constructed, rather than materially conditioned, nature of international relations, and they emphasize how social meaning is structured within specific identities, norms, beliefs and cultures.³⁹ Secondly, collective identities encompass fundamental, ideational logics such as beliefs about legitimate membership or the role of the community, and these logics generate the motivational disposition – or simply put, interests – of its respective communities.⁴⁰ Thirdly, state identities may be quite stable in the sense of being deeply structured, but competing identity narratives with alternative ideational logics always exist.⁴¹ In line with these theoretical premises, Chinese identity is viewed as an evolving formation of structural elements

³⁸ Especially Alexander Wendt's seminal work on constructivism in IR has earned constructivism a reputation for optimism: Alexander Wendt (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁹ E.g. Jeffrey Checkel (1998: 328), "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory"; *World Politics* 50(1); Alexander Wendt (1999: 130-36), *Social Theory...*, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Christian Reus-Smit (1999: 29), *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*; Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press; Alexander Wendt (1999: 225), *Social Theory...*, *ibid.*

⁴¹ See Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (2002: 20-49), *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of the Nordic States*, Routledge: London.

– conceptualized here as identity markers with specific ideational logics – some of which are combined into a more or less coherent, hegemonic narrative of China for a certain period of time. It is furthermore claimed that the ideational logics within the hegemonic narrative function as a “navigation compass” guiding Chinese policy-makers in their foreign policy-making.⁴²

In general, identity markers derive from cultural, ethnic, religious, political, ideological, geographical and historical hallmarks of the collective entity in question.⁴³ The specific markers emphasized within the hegemonic narrative may vary in terms of their relative inclusiveness/exclusiveness, thus constituting the dividing line between “the inside” and “the outside” in different ways. That is, political and ideological markers tend to be more inclusive than cultural or ethnic ones. With regard to China, one may identify a number of identity markers of varying inclusiveness; yet, not all of these markers have been continuously framed within the *hegemonic* narrative. Some identity markers may become muted, even actively repressed, and stay dormant for a period, only to be revived when new leaders come into office. This has been the case with some of the Chinese identity markers during the Communist era (see chapter 4). Moreover, the hegemonic narrative may also partly be based on external identity markers such as norms and values imported from or imposed by international society, which has been the situation in China for some decades (see chapter 4). However, due primarily to its formidable recent rise, China’s identity-constituting process is changing in a way that increasingly redirects narrative attention towards the internal dimension of ‘the Chinese self.’

By employing a constructivist-informed, inside-out approach to Chinese identity constitution, this report treats China as a self-contained entity for the sake of illustrating the internal ideational dynamics of the ‘Chinese self.’ To be sure, China is still in important respects constituted by international society,⁴⁴ but there are several reasons – China’s current ascendancy aside – to downplay the influence of international society and to give precedence to a unit-level perspective. For one thing, the sheer size and strength of China increases the relative importance of its internal

⁴² For an elaboration of the idea of “state identities as navigation compasses”, see Andreas Bøje Forsby (2011a), “Staters sikkerhedspolitik i spændingsfeltet mellem magt og identitet”, *Internasjonal Politikk* 69(1).

⁴³ Anthony Smith (1991: 4-8), *National Identity*, London: Penguin.

⁴⁴ After all, a key priority of the constructivists has been to demonstrate how states tend to accommodate themselves and to learn cognitively from the prevailing culture of international society in order to gain legitimacy as well as to facilitate interaction, with the result that state identities themselves often change during the process (see e.g. Alastair Ian Johnston, 2008, *Social States: China in International Institutions 1980-2000*, Princeton: Princeton University Press).

identity dynamics; for another, the millennia-old and largely uninterrupted Chinese civilization provides the country with a strong and distinct sense of self.⁴⁵

A characteristic feature of the existing debate on Chinese identity – especially the Chinese version of it – is that it mainly revolves around the so-called *social role* aspect of China's identity in relation to international society.⁴⁶ More specifically, constructivists are discussing which international role China should opt for, as well as the pros and cons of the various roles that China may assume, i.e. that of a developing nation, responsible stakeholder, self-assertive great power etc.⁴⁷ The problem is that this debate is unfolding without much appreciation of the identity-structural disposition of 'the Chinese self'. In other words, from an inside-out perspective the debate becomes sort of detached from the underlying reasons for taking on a specific international role. Instead, this report argues that we are likely to witness an internally generated and motivated shift in Chinese identity construction. In doing so, the report builds on a small, but expanding literature that focuses on the identity-related differences that exist between China and the West.⁴⁸

An inside-out constructivist perspective might tempt one to overstate the uniqueness of China and accordingly the discrepancies and conflict potential between China and the West. On the other hand, as the following chapters make clear, China is in many respects a non-Western country that may indeed challenge the established order. In exploring the structural composition of Chinese identity, this report seeks to present an informed conjecture regarding China's overall foreign policy course in the coming decades. The next chapter sets out by presenting four identity markers that constitute an integral part of Chinese self-understanding. The description is based on a wide selection of secondary sources on Chinese identity, since the format of this report does not allow for an in-depth discursive analysis of all the relevant primary sources.

⁴⁵ Martin Jacques (2009:12-15), *When China Rules the World*, London: Penguin Books.

⁴⁶ On the role identity aspect, see Alexander Wendt (1999: 224-33), *ibid.*

⁴⁷ For an overview of the Chinese version of the debate on China's role identity, see Zhu Liqun (2010: 37-47), "China's Foreign Policy Debates", *ibid.* Western scholars who focus on China's role identity include Joshua Kurlantzick (2007), *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Alastair Ian Johnston (2008), *Social States*, *ibid.*; Yong Deng (2008), *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; David Shambaugh (2011), "Coping with a conflicted China", *ibid.*

⁴⁸ See Lucian Pye (1992), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*; Peter Hayes Gries (2004), *China's New Nationalism*, *ibid.*; David Kang (2007), *China Rising: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia*, New York: Columbia University Press; Martin Jacques (2009:12-15), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*; William Callahan (2010), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid.*

Chapter 2. Chinese identity markers

‘Sino-civilization’: furnishing Chinese history with cultural depth and distinctiveness

“China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations. China is a civilization pretending to be a state”⁴⁹ The widespread tendency to refer to China as a ‘civilization’ rather than merely a nation state derives from China’s specific developmental path. First of all, China is able not only to trace its historical roots further back than most other nation states, but also to identify strong and distinct lines of cultural continuity throughout Chinese history.⁵⁰ Furthermore, for centuries dynastic China exerted an enormous cultural influence on the Asian continent that extended far beyond the shifting territorial boundaries of ‘the Middle Kingdom’. The nation-state category was in effect imposed on China during the nineteenth century by the Western powers, which dismantled the Chinese empire piece by piece and eventually forced it to adopt a Western-style, sovereignty-based, territorially demarcated nation-state model.

What, then, is Chinese civilization? To capture its identity-constituting potential, a good starting point is to emphasize the distinctiveness, longevity and greatness of Chinese civilization. Its *distinctiveness* rests on several elements that together form a particular Chinese heritage:

- Confucian moral philosophy (see below, second section).
- The strong dynastic state (third section).
- Ethnic homogeneity (fourth section).
- The Chinese *language* dating back more than three thousand years and comprising all the various Sinitic dialects by means of a standardized idiographic writing system. The vast majority of Chinese speak the Mandarin dialect (>800 million).
- The historic Chinese *homeland*, usually defined as the central plains around the Yangtze and the Yellow river systems that formed the cradle of an advanced agrarian civilization. From its northern heartland the Chinese civilization gradually spread outward to absorb the surrounding, mainly southern territories through migration, cultural assimilation or outright conquest.
- The ritualized honoring of *forefathers*, which entails a widespread mythological

⁴⁹ Lucian Pye (1992: 235), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Kishore Mahbubani (2008: 146-49), *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Power to the East*; New York: Public Affairs; Ramo (2004: 31-32), “the Beijing Consensus”, *ibid.*

belief in a common Chinese descent reaching back to the “Yellow Emperor”, who – as legend has it – was born in 2704 BC. This belief also rests on a popular assumption that the so-called “Peking man” discovered in 1929 is the ancestor of a specific mongoloid and thus Chinese race.⁵¹

- The imperially organized *tributary system* that constituted a specific Sino-centric world order on the East Asian continent for more than two millennia. With the Chinese emperor at the apex, neighboring states and tribes were indirectly ruled by virtue of a tributary system, where each ‘subject’ was given a number of rights and duties according to its respective status, which primarily reflected its degree of similarity with Chinese civilization.⁵²

The second essential characteristic of Sino-civilization is its longevity and continuity, providing a stable frame of reference for ‘the Chinese self’.⁵³ Wang Gungwu has described it this way: “*what is quintessentially Chinese is the remarkable sense of continuity that seems to have made the civilization increasingly distinctive over the centuries.*”⁵⁴ China’s civilizational continuity is based on several factors. Its dominant position in East Asia and its virtual isolation from peer civilizational rivals allowed it to develop a distinctive pattern of its own. To be sure, the Chinese dynasties did face mighty military rivals like the Mongols and the Manchus – and were at times even defeated by them – but since they did not possess a competitive civilization of their own they instead ended up being *Sinicized*.⁵⁵ In other words, during millennia of consecutive dynasties a civilizational fabric evolved that was not seriously challenged until the middle of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the Western powers.

The third fundamental trait of Sino-civilization is its historical greatness compared to the outside world. On the one hand, Chinese greatness was an indisputable fact, as the Chinese displayed scientific and practical excellence in many fields. Major inventions such as paper, gunpowder, the wheelbarrow, the compass, the spinning machine and wood-block printing were all of Chinese origin, and for centuries the Chinese were the most literate and numerate people in the world.⁵⁶ Moreover, from around the Han-dynasty (206 BC =>) the Chinese public examination system and bureaucracy became increasingly sophisticated, enabling the Chinese state to exert administrative

⁵¹ Martin Jacques (2009: 236-37), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*

⁵² John Fairbank (1968: 4-14), *The Chinese World Order*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

⁵³ See Lucian Pye (1992: 12), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Wang Gungwu (1991: 2), *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁵ John Fairbank (1968: 9), *The Chinese World Order*, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Martin Jacques (2009: 76-77), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*

control and create political unity to a degree that was unparalleled in the rest of the world for a long time. On the other hand, civilizational greatness also rested on a more subjective feeling of superiority generated by the numerous encounters with what were perceived as “barbarian” tribes and peoples along the dynastic borders. In fact, the gradual incorporation and Sinification of these neighboring peoples into ‘the Middle Kingdom’ served to consolidate the Chinese belief in their own superiority.⁵⁷ To sum up once again in the words of Lucian Pye: “*The most pervasive underlying Chinese emotion is a profound, unquestioned, generally unshakeable identification with historical greatness.*”⁵⁸

To fully capture the identity-constituting logic of the civilizational identity marker, it is necessary to emphasize how Sino-civilization was deprived of its glorious status during the so-called ‘century of humiliation’ which followed the first major confrontation with the Western powers in 1839-42 (the First Opium War). Not only did the British defeat numerically superior Chinese forces, they also imposed the Treaty of Nanjing on China, setting the stage for an unequal and humiliating relationship between the Qing dynasty and the Western powers. The Chinese defeat was succeeded by numerous others, leading to a whole array of unequal treaties with the great powers and – even worse – with a rising Japan that for centuries had been a vassal state. Not until the Communist revolution of 1949 did China finally expel the foreign intruders and establish a sovereign state, but the century had left an impoverished people and a dismantled Chinese empire.⁵⁹

There is little doubt that the distinctiveness, longevity and greatness of Sino-civilization have instilled in the Chinese a sense of ‘exceptionalism’, that is, a belief that the Chinese civilization constitutes a unique culture in some senses superior to that of other civilizations.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, the ‘century of humiliation’ inscribed on the Chinese soul an inferiority complex that has mostly manifested itself as revanchism directed at the Western powers and in particular Japan.⁶¹ Combining these two identity constitutional tendencies, one may argue that together they create the following impetus: to promote the glory and distinctiveness of Sino-civilization,

⁵⁷ Wang Gungwu (1968: 36-38): “Early Ming relations with Southeast Asia: background essay”, in John Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Lucian Pye (1992: 50), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman (2006: 201-05), *China: a New History*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

⁶⁰ Lucian Pye (1992: 50-52), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Gries (2004: 43-54), *China's New Nationalism...*, *ibid.*

and thereby to revive the ‘Middle Kingdom’ to its historical position at the center of the world order.

‘Confucian philosophy’: imbuing the Chinese community with a collectivistic creed

*“Working to ensure social harmony among the common people [...] this might be called wisdom.”*⁶² Confucianism has variously been dubbed “a civil religion”, “a social philosophy”, “the cultural DNA of Southeast Asia” and a “feudal relic of the past”.⁶³ Notwithstanding the latter phrase, which stems from the Communists’ intended break with China’s dynastic past, Confucianism still plays a strong role in Chinese self-understanding. It was conceived by Confucius (Kǒng Fūzǐ, 551-479 BC) during “the Warring States Period”, where political fragmentation and rivalry between independent warlords pervaded the Middle Kingdom, and in this way Confucianism is a deliberate praise of societal order and harmony.

Even if Confucianism over the years developed into a composite mode of thinking incorporating elements from various philosophers and even other ideologies, the original ideas of Confucius and his disciple Mencius (372-289 BC) remain by far the most important. Spanning more than two millennia and encompassing seemingly inconsistent elements, the Confucianist legacy in Chinese thought is not easily defined. However, it seems relatively uncontroversial to emphasize the following four moral-philosophical tenets that are relevant in this identity-constituting context:

- Human nature is considered to be malleable, and for that reason *human beings are teachable and improvable* through personal and societal endeavor. Indeed, every human being should strive for moral virtue – such as deference, loyalty, benevolence – and constantly seek to educate, discipline and cultivate him- or herself to the greater benefit of society. Adapting the individual to the roles and institutions of society thus becomes the overriding concern within Confucianism.⁶⁴

⁶² Confucius (6.22), *Analects*, translated by Edward Slingerland (2003), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

⁶³ On “a civil religion”, see Judith Berling (1982), “Confucianism”, *Focus on Asian Studies* 2(1).; on “a political philosophy”, see Leonard Hsü, 2005[1932], *The Political Philosophy of Confucianism*, Abingdon: Routledge.; on “the cultural DNA”, see Merkel-Hess, Kate & Jeffrey Wasserstrom (2011), “The Many Chinas”, *Time Magazine*, online article, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2042222,00.html> [accessed 16.08.2011]; on “a feudal relic”, see John Dotson (2011), “The Confucian Revival in the Propaganda Narratives of the Chinese Government”, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report.

⁶⁴ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman (2006: 51-53), *China: A New History*, *ibid.*

- It is *the collective unit* and its well-being – not the individual *per se* – that is given precedence within Confucianism. The family constitutes the basic collective unit, and the primary socialization of individuals takes place within a paternalistic family structure. Society itself is modeled as a hierarchical and organic extension of the family, with ancestor worship providing a crucial link of historical identification with the Chinese people. In this sense, the cohesion, solidarity and self-perpetuation of the Chinese people are the main Confucian guidelines for exemplary state governance.⁶⁵
- *Social harmony and order* are key priorities within Confucian societies. At the individual level, differences of age, sex and status are managed by virtue of a complex system of rituals and moral precepts for how to behave properly in social relationships such as those between husband and wife, elder and younger, ruler and subject. At the societal level, harmony is attained not only by everyone knowing their place in the social order, but also by the morally informed governance of the state. Hence, the state – embodied by the ruler – becomes an intrinsic part of Confucianist societies, as it holds a moral high ground that enables it to embrace and “harmonize” the various differences and factions of society.⁶⁶
- Intrinsically, the philosophical guidelines of Confucianism are *universalistic*, providing Confucianist societies with a considerable potential for inclusiveness. On the one hand, this universalism applies within society, insofar as access to basic societal institutions like the bureaucracy has been based on meritocratic standards from the Han dynasty (206 BC) onwards. On the other hand, the universalistic nature of Confucianism has historically implied that non-Chinese groups or states could become affiliated to or even assimilated within the Chinese empire if they adhered to the main tenets of Confucianism. This is exactly what happened for centuries in East Asia, with China at the centre as the promulgator of Confucianist norms and values.⁶⁷

These four tenets of Confucianism have come to form the basic creed of the Chinese people, subsuming traditional folklore religion (like Daoism) and leaving little room for the established religions (except to some degree Buddhism). As Confucianism was anchored in feudal customs and dynastic bureaucracy, the Communist regime under Mao officially distanced itself from it and actively repressed its cultural mani-

⁶⁵ Richard Nisbett (2003: 15-20) *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why*, New York: Free Press; Deepak Lal (1998: 46), *Unintended Consequences*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

⁶⁶ Richard Nisbett (2003: 51-56) *The Geography of Thought*, *ibid.*; Lucian Pye (1992:15) *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ John Fairbank (1968: 6-7), *The Chinese World Order*, *ibid.*

festations – especially the ritual/ceremonial ones – during the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-76). However, following Deng’s takeover in 1978, Confucianism has gradually experienced a revival that is not merely symbolic.⁶⁸ Confucian monuments, museums and schools are being established all over China, Confucius’s birthday is now being officially commemorated again, two million Chinese have been recognized by the authorities as descendants of Confucius (as of 2009), more than 300 Confucian institutes have been set up abroad to disseminate knowledge about China’s Confucianist and civilizational heritage, and Communist leaders are openly paraphrasing Confucian tenets on social harmony, among other things.⁶⁹

The extent to which Confucianism still permeates Chinese thinking has been elaborately pointed out by the psychologist Richard Nisbett. By conducting comparative cognitive experiments on American students and Asian students from Confucian cultures, Nisbett is able to demonstrate systematic, perceptual differences between the two groups, leading him to claim, among other things, that: *“The collective and interdependent nature of Asian society is consistent with Asians’ broad contextual view of the world.”*⁷⁰ In other words, it is the very collectivistic nature of Confucianism that marks it out as a significant identity marker to the Chinese people, not least in the face of the individualist character of Western societies. The Chinese are taught their social role and accorded their status within their primary institutions (family, school, work place), while the state assumes a morally ordained power and responsibility for providing harmony and order among its subjects. Last but not least, there is a universalistic drive to the Confucianist creed producing a rather holistic identity-constituting tendency: to harmonize differences at home and abroad for the sake of order.

‘Dynastic centralism’: forging the Chinese polity through hierarchy and unity

*“...Chinese politics after chaos and revolution has always returned to being elitist and hierarchical in organization, closed and monopolistic in spirit.”*⁷¹ In a similar vein, even though the Middle Kingdom has at times been marred by social turmoil, challenged

⁶⁸ Dotson (2011), “The Confucian Revival...”, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ “Confucian Family Tree Triples”, *BBC News*, online article, September 25, 2009: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8275269.stm>; “China’s Thriving Confucian Schools”, *BBC News*, online article, January 3, 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7169814.stm>; “The Debate over Universal Values”, *The Economist*, online article, October 2, 2010: <http://www.economist.com/node/17150224> [all articles accessed 12.01.2011].

⁷⁰ Richard Nisbett (2003: xvii), *The Geography of Thought*, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Lucian Pye (1992:13): *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

by feudal rivalries, and besieged or even conquered by foreigners, such upheavals have never really shaken the authoritarian character of Chinese politics. Hence, new rulers have always managed to restore the omnipotent role of the state within society, providing the state with sole responsibility for defining and safeguarding the overall needs and interests of the Chinese people. The dynastic nature of the Chinese polity can be more fully captured in terms of its hierarchizing and unifying organization.

Throughout Chinese history a *hierarchical*⁷² mode of politics has prevailed, though the ruling ideology itself has varied. During the first dynasties hierarchical authority rested rather implicitly on feudal norms of hereditary privileges, which were not seriously challenged until the “Warring States Period” (475-221 BC), when several new philosophical outlooks emerged. Chief among these were Confucianism and legalism, both of which were to exert great influence on the wielding of dynastic authority, with Confucianist thinking usually having the upper hand. While legalism grounded authority in the rigid enforcement of stringent rules, Confucianism insisted on an equally elitist and top-down, but morally justified reign.⁷³ The exclusion of the people from political power was regarded as a positive virtue insofar as it freed the emperor to govern in line with the highest ethical principles. In fact, if the emperor did not heed the stipulated moral obligations, his somewhat ambiguous ruling mandate – known as “the mandate of heaven” – could be withdrawn by the people, as happened on rare occasions. Moreover, from the Qin dynasty (221 BC) onwards, hierarchical authority was exercised through the establishment of an unprecedentedly vast and efficient bureaucratic system in order gradually to undermine the hereditary power of local aristocrats. The bureaucratic elite came to enjoy unparalleled authority, and the early use of written instructions greatly enhanced centralized ruling power.⁷⁴

The second element of the dynastic character of Chinese politics is its totalitarian tendency, reflecting a deep-seated desire for *political unity* and therefore a strong urge to counter any oppositional or fragmentation forces in an empire as vast as the Chinese.⁷⁵ It means, on the one hand, that local rulers – be they aristocratic elites or provincial city municipalities – have never enjoyed any formal power

⁷² As indicated above, *hierarchy* is also closely related to the Confucianist identity marker; see Shogo Suzuki (2009: 36-37), *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society*, London: Routledge.

⁷³ Yongjin Zhang (2001: 46, 50), “System, empire and state in Chinese international relations”, *Review of International Studies* 27(5).

⁷⁴ Lucian Pye (1992:15,17), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman (2006: 47), *China: a New History*, *ibid.*

status, but have instead had to rely on the arbitrary delegation of power or in some cases the ability to ignore the biddings from central quarters.⁷⁶ On the other hand, the striving towards political unity implies that the state has actively – and often brutally – sought to prevent other societal actors like religious denominations, scientific associations, feudal landowners, merchants and workers from organizing their members independently. By denying these societal actors any formal, recognized and autonomous platform of power from which to advance political demands or take part in governance, the state and its ruling elite has been able to become nearly coterminous with society. In other words, the complete absence of any societal checks and balances on the government has sown the seeds of a totalitarian mode of politics.⁷⁷

The same kind of elitist, hierarchical logic also shaped the way the Chinese managed their foreign relations during the dynastic era. The sheer political and cultural gravity of the Middle Kingdom enabled it to organize its neighboring kingdoms and tribal peoples into what has been labeled a tributary imperialist system. The key aspect of this system was the formal recognition of the Chinese emperor's supremacy by the suzerain, tributary kingdoms and peoples, which, moreover, were obliged to pay largely symbolic tribute at predetermined, rather infrequent intervals. While the relational logic of this imperial tribute system was hierarchical in line with the Chinese polity itself, it did not display the unifying (totalitarian) drive of domestic Chinese politics.⁷⁸ The Chinese thus rarely attempted to interfere directly in the affairs of tributary states or peoples like Korea, Japan, Annam (Vietnam) or the central Asian nomadic tribes. The main reason for this seems to have been a lack of power rather than will, because whenever the Middle Kingdom did succeed in conquering new territory, it was soon subjected to central, administrative control.

Dynastic China never experienced a period of enlightenment similar to that of Europe, which could have paved the way for a gradual erosion of centralized authority.⁷⁹ As the winds of ideological change finally swept the Chinese polity in the twentieth century, dynastic rule was replaced first by nationalist despotism and then by communist dictatorship, the latter evincing an ideologically driven

⁷⁶ Lucian Pye (1992: 22-23), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Martin Jacques (2009: 207-08), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ See John Fairbank (1968), *The Chinese World Order*, *ibid.*; Yongjin Zhang (2001: 55-57), "System, Empire...", *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Will Hutton (2007: 50-51), *The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century*, London: Little Brown.

totalitarianism far more exhausting than at any period during dynastic China.⁸⁰ To be sure, the recent ideological relaxation of communist doctrines has been accompanied by some curtailments of the communist regime's monopoly on power. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that there is still a conspicuous lack of formal, codified constraints on the exercise of power by the Communist party, the state and its bureaucracy, thus enabling the regime to tighten its grip whenever oppositional voices need to be quelled. After all, the communist party is in firm control of all the central institutions of society like the army, the judiciary, the parliament, the ministries, the media, and the ubiquitous state-owned enterprises.⁸¹

The identity marker of dynastic centralism still permeates Chinese political self-understanding, even if it no longer holds an absolute, totalitarian sway over the Chinese polity. Given the world's longest and possibly strongest tradition of centralized, bureaucratized state authority, China's century-long status as a semi-colony and its late attainment of sovereign statehood merely contributed to bolstering the hierarchizing and unifying tendencies in Chinese politics. Despite the recent, growing pluralism of Chinese society, a strong Chinese state is still generally viewed as necessary to safeguard the interests of the Chinese people.

'Han-ethnocentrism': providing the Chinese people with a particularistic mind-set

*"The idea of overwhelming racial homogeneity, in the context of a huge population, makes the Chinese in global terms, unique."*⁸² Compared to other populous great powers like the United States and India, China seemingly stands out as a "racially" homogenous whole. More than 90% of China's inhabitants are not only officially labeled, but also define themselves as Han Chinese, and they constitute a vast majority in every province of China except for Tibet and Xinjiang, where they are (apparently) still outnumbered by Tibetans and Uighurs respectively. Moreover, the bulk of the 55 ethnic minority groups, which are officially recognized as such, are either almost indiscernible from the Han Chinese or live in one of the five semi-autonomous regions in the north-western and southern parts of China. Whether to describe this relative homogeneity in terms of ethnicity, race or nationality has been an ongoing issue of

⁸⁰ Lucian Pye (1992), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, ibid.

⁸¹ Will Hutton (2007: 130-35), *The Writing on the Wall*, ibid.

⁸² Martin Jacques (2009: 266), *When China Rules the World*, ibid.

contention among the Chinese themselves,⁸³ but the important thing to emphasize in this context is the racial/biological connotations that are usually associated with using the Han Chinese category. Accordingly, to invoke the referent object of Han Chinese is to frame the Chinese people in terms of an exclusive community.

Like other large-scale ethnic or racial referent objects, the Han Chinese can be viewed as an artificial construct, an imagined community based on a myth of common ancestral descent, which was envisioned and promulgated by nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁴ In the face of invading forces and the increasingly impotent Manchu-based Qing dynasty, the “invention” of the Han Chinese category quickly acquired widespread popularity as part of a nationalist reaction against foreign domination. While the Han concept is thus of recent origin as a *racial* category, there is, on the other hand, a certain underlying “material reality” to the Han Chinese understood as a more loosely defined *ethnic* group formed by millennia of ethnic amalgamation.⁸⁵ Through a combination of migration, conquest, absorption and miscegenation, ethnic diversity has to a considerable degree been washed away, creating a Chinese people that has gradually come to be regarded as a relatively homogenous group.⁸⁶ In this sense, even though one may question the validity of referring to a distinct Han race from a purely genetic perspective, there seems to be a good case for employing the broader term of ethnic group to underline the common descent of the Han Chinese and to delineate them from some of the non-Han minority groups within China.

Regardless of terminology, the Han-Chinese identity marker involves a thorough particularism, which more specifically encompasses two related constitutional logics. The first one can be described as a strong advocacy for the *homogeneity* of the Han-Chinese that actually predates the nationalists’ late 19th century efforts to invoke the racial category.⁸⁷ Hence, concurrently with the process of cultural and social “Sinification”, where non-Chinese people became Chinese by adopting the norms

⁸³ Cf. Martin Jacques (2009: 250-52), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid*; William Callahan (2010: 127-59), *China: The Pessimist Nation*, *ibid*.

⁸⁴ The nationalists distinguished the Han-race from the Manchu-, Mongol, Tibetan and Muslim races living within China (Prasenjit Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation”, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 30, 1993: 22).

⁸⁵ Following Anthony Smith (1991: 20, *National Identity*, London: Penguin), an ethnic group is here defined as a collectivity that emphasizes common descent in addition to common cultural traits such as language, religion and customs.

⁸⁶ Prasenjit Durara (1993: 21-24), “De-constructing the Chinese Nation”, *ibid*.

⁸⁷ Wang Gungwu (1968:), “Early Ming relations with Southeast Asia”, *ibid*.

and customs of the Sino-civilization and the Confucianist creed (described above), there existed periodically the exact opposite tendency to stress the exclusiveness of the Chinese people in terms of its specific ancestral roots (bloodlines) and to actively promote the homogeneity of the Chinese. During these periods the ongoing ethnic amalgamation was weakened by countermeasures of segregation, expulsion and sometimes outright annihilation of minority groups.⁸⁸ More recently, this preoccupation with ethnic/racial homogeneity is demonstrated, among other things, in the way that overseas Chinese stick to themselves and form distinct diaspora communities within their settling countries and in the way the Communist regime has used migration of Han-Chinese as an instrument to change the population composition in Tibet and Xinjiang.⁸⁹

Secondly, the particularism of the Han Chinese identity marker entails a firm belief in the *primacy* of the Han Chinese, a belief that manifests itself in discrimination against ethnically or racially different groups. In fact, although it is a controversial and therefore not well-documented phenomenon, there are a few studies suggesting that ethnocentrism and racism are both deeply ingrained and widespread within Chinese self-understanding.⁹⁰ Traditionally, the Chinese referred to other “races” as ‘barbarians’ or ‘foreign devils’ as a way of expressing the Chinese feeling of superiority and of justifying indifference, contempt or even hostility towards foreigners. Nowadays, the Chinese seem to be informed by racial stereotypes based on racial hierarchies with yellow and white people on the top, followed by people with darker skins and with black people of African descent at the absolute bottom. In some respects, with fashion being the most conspicuous example, a white skin and features are even more coveted by Chinese woman than a yellow skin and Asian features. More disturbingly, African students in China have been subjected to racially motivated discrimination or even mass protests several times in the last couple of decades.⁹¹

During the ideologically fervent Mao-period of Communist China, the Han Chinese identity marker was deemed utterly incompatible with the universalistic aspirations

⁸⁸ Prasenjit Durara (1993: 4-6), “De-constructing the Chinese Nation”, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Pye (1992: 56-57), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid.*; Callahan (2010: 151-55), *China: The Pessimist Nation*, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ E.g. Frank Dikötter (1992), *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, London: Hurst and Company; Wang Gungwu (1991) *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Martin Jacques (2009) *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*; William Callahan (2010: 127-59), *China: The Pessimist Nation*, *ibid.*

⁹¹ Martin Jacques (2009: 125-28, 258-61), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*; Peter Hays Gries (2005: 10), *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, London University of California Press.

of communism and therefore relegated to political obscurity. However, with the ideological loosening of Sino-communism, accelerated by the end of the Cold War, China has witnessed something of a revival of the ethnic and racial agenda. This time, the Han Chinese particularism has mostly been incorporated into more general nationalist attitudes fueled by feelings of civilizational greatness or the humiliation and injustice caused by foreign great powers.⁹² Still, some of the most prominent nationalist outbursts in China in recent years – following the local anti-Han riots in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 respectively – were actually first and foremost driven by the twin identity-constituting tendencies of Han ethnocentrism: the advocacy of ethnic homogeneity, and the belief in the primacy of the Han Chinese.⁹³ The decisiveness of ethnicity and race in Chinese self-understanding has been stated bluntly by Lucian Pye: “(Their) sense of identity is thus derived less from the content of culture, which is always somewhat vague and ambiguous, and more from the fact of race, which is biologically unambiguous.”⁹⁴

An inside-out perspective on the structural composition of Chinese identity

Figure 1 (below) provides a conceptual overview of the argument in the preceding sections, summing up the characteristics of each identity marker. For the sake of clarity, the four identity markers have been depicted as disparate points of reference for Chinese self-understanding related to cultural history, moral philosophy, mode of politics and ethnic composition. In this sense, the four identity markers differ significantly from one another primarily in terms of the relative inclusiveness or exclusiveness envisioned for the Chinese community. Still, it should be underlined that, even though the markers are treated here as separate structural elements of Chinese identity for analytical purposes, the discursive borders of each identity marker are in practice fuzzy and somewhat overlapping.

Moreover, it is not implied that the four identity markers represent the only building blocks of Chinese narrative construction, or that all four markers have continuously been part of the hegemonic identity narrative (see next chapter). Rather, it is claimed that they are the most important *Sino-centric* identity dynamics in the sense that they all refer to internally generated, specifically Chinese hallmarks. As the next

⁹² See Peter Hays Gries (2005: 116-135), *China's New Nationalism*, *ibid*; William Callahan (2010: 154-55), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid*.

⁹³ See William Callahan (2010: 131), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid*.

⁹⁴ Lucian Pye (1992: 56), *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, *ibid*.

chapter argues, two ideological, non-Sino-centric identity markers – communism and globalism – still hold a prominent position within Chinese self-understanding, in which they counteract the Sino-centric tendency.

Finally, in line with the constructivist theoretical premises set out in chapter 2, the four Sino-centric identity markers are to be viewed as potential ideational guidelines for Chinese policy-makers in their foreign policy-making. That is, in so far as (some of) the four markers have become part of the hegemonic narrative of Chinese self-understanding, they will function as a “navigation compass” to guide Chinese policy-makers in their *overall* decisions about how to position China in relation to the outside world and about what kinds of relations and institutions China will seek

Figure 1. The four basic identity markers of a Sino-centric Chinese self-understanding

<i>Name of identity marker</i>	Sino-civilization	Confucian philosophy	Dynastic centralism	Han-ethnocentrism
Referent Object	Cultural community → civilization	Moral community → family/society	Political community → state	Ethnic community → race
Identity constitutional tendency <i>[of referent object]</i>	Promote greatness & distinctness	Create order & harmony	Ensure unity & hierarchy	Seek primacy & homogeneity
External differential logic <i>[of referent object]</i>	Historical exceptionalism	Collectivistic universalism	Tributary imperialism	Hereditary particularism
Terms of exclusiveness/inclusiveness <i>[vis-à-vis the other⁹⁵]</i>	Sinification of or isolation from the <i>other</i>	Societal assimilation of the <i>other</i>	Indirect subordination of the <i>other</i>	Segregation or expulsion of the <i>other</i>

⁹⁵ The term *other* is used here in a simple manner to denote the primary group(s) – historically not necessarily states – of foreigners/outside with whom the Chinese interact. No assumption of enmity is implied.

to establish with other countries. As such, an identity-based approach to explaining foreign policies is instructive primarily as long as one sticks to the general level rather than the specifics of foreign relations (see also the reservations in chapter 4).

Chapter 3. A Sino-centric foreign policy

Abandoning communism and globalism? An identity shift in the making

*“Six decades of Communist rule has not changed the Chinese soul, which was developed over thousands of years.”*⁹⁶ As communism has gradually been stripped of its ideological power, leaving China as an empty vessel in search of “a new self”, the Chinese have undertaken a self-investigative project that may result in a fundamental reorientation of China’s self-understanding. The previous chapter introduced four identity markers that are integral to Chinese self-understanding and that are likely to play a key role in this self-investigative process. In fact, the chapter showed that some of the identity markers have experienced quite a revival since the end of the Cold War. It is argued in this section that we are witnessing an ongoing identity shift towards a Sino-centric China – i.e. an increasingly self-centered China more attuned to its distinct civilizational history.⁹⁷

The report does not present any direct evidence that an identity shift is in fact taking place. Official Chinese government parlance is still primarily characterized by a peculiar combination of red slogans like “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the discourse on “peaceful rise/harmonious world”, which is often associated with a so-called globalist outlook.⁹⁸ Interestingly, while much of this government parlance has a rather airy and rhetorical character, one may actually easily discern Confucian and civilizational elements related to China’s cultural heritage. Moreover, if one turns to the editorial line of an influential CCP-related newspaper like the *Global Times*, the Sino-centric tendency becomes all the more explicit.⁹⁹ However, this report will not state the case for an identity shift by means of a discursive analysis. Instead the present section advances a more indirect, three-pronged argument as to why China has embarked on a Sino-centric course.

During most of the twentieth century, China shied away from invoking its own civilizational past as a discursive asset. Sun Yat-sen, China’s great reformer of the

⁹⁶ Kishore Mahbubani (2008: 149), *The New Asian Hemisphere*, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ A similar point has been made by, e.g., Li Mingjiang (2008: 292), “China Debates Soft Power”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2(2); Yan Xuetong (2011), *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹⁸ See Shambaugh (2011: 20-21), “Coping with a conflicted China”, *ibid.*

⁹⁹ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/OPED/Editorial.aspx>.

past century, pushed this to extremes when he said that, “*we, the modern people of China, are all useless, but if in the future we use Western civilization as a model, we can easily turn weakness into strength, and the old into the new.*”¹⁰⁰ Later in the Mao era “the century of humiliation” was seen as a corollary of adhering too strictly to ancient Chinese norms and traditions, giving the communists an excuse for eradicating rival value systems. Yet, starting in the late 1970s with the opening up of China, the communist ideology has been toned down, paving the way, especially since the end of the Cold War, for two different identity-constituting dynamics. On the one hand, there has been a Sino-centric tendency to direct attention inwardly towards the distinctiveness of Chinese identity, most conspicuously demonstrated by the rise of nationalist rhetoric from the 1990s onwards, but also evident in the growth of government-sponsored initiatives to pay homage to China’s cultural past.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, this development has been accompanied by the official coinage of “peaceful rise/harmonious world” and related globalism thinking, signaling China’s intention to accommodate the outside world by appearing as a benign and responsible great power firmly enrolled in the institutions of the Liberal Order.¹⁰² However, the report argues that the former tendency will prove the stronger one, gradually turning China into a more self-centered country and affecting Beijing’s willingness to abide by the current international order.

First of all, from greater material power flows greater ideational power. Just as American preponderance in the twentieth century was a key factor in propagating liberal-democratic values, so rising Chinese power will pave the way for the spread of Chinese ideas. Indeed, “*for both reasons of national pride and security, China wants to project its model abroad.*”¹⁰³ The often heard Western reservation that China does not possess a persuasive soft power appeal is not so much erroneous as it is irrelevant.¹⁰⁴ As seen above, China’s Confucian and dynastic roots provide it with a collectivist and authoritarian template that may seem attractive to (parts of) the outside world, not least as long as China maintains its current growth pattern. More importantly,

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Mahbubani (2008: 128), *The New Asian Hemisphere*, *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Some aspects of this Sino-centric tendency were addressed in chapter 3. For general overviews, see e.g. Gries (2004), *New Chinese Nationalism*, *ibid.*; Jacques (2009), *When China Rules the World*, *ibid.*; Callahan (2010), *The Pessimist Nation*, *ibid.*; Dotson (2011), “The Confucian Revival”, *ibid.*

¹⁰² See Zheng Bijian (2005), “China’s Peaceful Rise to Great-Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs* 84(5); Youngnian Zheng (2007), “Harmonious Society and Harmonious World: China’s Policy Discourse under Hu Jintao”, Briefing Series, Issue 26, The University of Nottingham. For a recent example see “China’s peaceful development”, *The Information Office of the State Council*, September 2011, the Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354_2.htm [accessed 21.09.2011].

¹⁰³ Ramo (2004: 28), “The Beijing Consensus”, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, Buzan (2010: 22), “China in International Society”, *ibid.*

however, it does not necessarily require a universalistic identity logic to nourish – or for that matter justify – a great power’s identity project. All it takes is some measure of dissatisfaction with the existing international order, combined with a belief that an alternative order provides greater benefits. So far, Chinese policy-makers have deliberately refrained from promulgating an alternative China model, but they have on the other hand been consistent in describing China’s development path with apposite phrases such as “with Chinese characteristics” to signal the distinctiveness of China.¹⁰⁵ With the “century of humiliation” discourse firmly embedded in Chinese thinking, an ascending and increasingly self-confident China appears to be fertile ground for the adoption of a more independent, i.e. Sino-centric identity project.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, a global post-Cold War trend towards populist and nationalist politics is altering the political landscape even of Western countries, as new right-wing parties gain a strong foothold. China is by no means exempt from this trend, although its monopolistic mode of politics ensures the Chinese regime considerable control over possible outlets. While Western observers are accordingly used to viewing Chinese nationalism as a top-down phenomenon, a number of recent studies have documented its bottom-up nature, as witnessed, among other things, by the numerous Chinese internet sites with nationalist leanings.¹⁰⁷ With regime legitimacy no longer resting on communist doctrines of elite avant-gardism, the regime must not only fill an ideological void, but also increasingly incorporate popular inputs. Hence, a preoccupation with regime survival may, in fact, prove to be the strongest reason for translating popular nationalism into a more particularistic and self-assertive identity narrative of China.

Finally, several China observers have recently described how the communist regime is increasingly being challenged by a wide array of semi-autonomous actors (the army, business interests, provinces etc.), as well as a cacophony of voices from the

¹⁰⁵ On the reluctance of Chinese policy-makers to promote a China model, see Joseph Fewsmith (2011: 5-6), “Debating the China Model”, *ibid.*; for an example of the use of the phrase “with Chinese characteristics”, see Yang Jiechi (2011), speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China at the Luncheon Hosted by the National Committee on US-China Relations and the US-China Business Council, New York, 22 September, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Wei Pan (2010), “Western System versus Chinese System”, Briefing Series, Issue 61, *The University of Nottingham*; William Callahan (2010: 193), *China: the Pessimist Nation*, *ibid.* For an opposite (liberal-constructivist) argument stating that China has deep interests in maintaining a globalist, status quo-orientation, see e.g. Johnston (2008), *Social States*, *ibid.*; John Ikenberry (2011), “The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism after America”, *Foreign Affairs* 90(3).

¹⁰⁷ See for instance Callahan (2010: 65), *China: the Pessimist Nation*, *ibid.*; Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox (2010: 45-46) “New Foreign Policy Actors in China”, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 26, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

rapidly expanding media channels.¹⁰⁸ This development may in itself create strong counteracting incentives to mobilize the Chinese behind presenting a clear identity profile towards the outside world. To be sure, a number of constraining conditions may reduce the likelihood of the proposed identity shift, of which China's dependence on the global economy and its military inferiority *vis-à-vis* the United States stand out. However, due to the increased significance of China's home market, China's impressive competitive power, its bountiful financial resources, its comprehensive military modernization and its growing ability to offset American power capabilities asymmetrically, one may argue that China is becoming gradually more capable of conducting an independent foreign policy. This begs the question of what an identity-generated change of foreign policy will look like.

A challenge to the Liberal Order?

The argument so far in this report can be condensed into the following propositions: state identities shape interests and thus overall foreign policies; four specific identity markers are central to Chinese self-understanding, although they have been partially suppressed during the communist era; and rising Chinese power is provoking an identity shift towards a more Sino-centric China based on the four identity markers. If this argument is accepted, then a number of tentative conclusions follow with respect to Chinese foreign policy and the international order.

To begin with, no matter whether a Sino-centric China will seek merely to revise the current international Liberal Order or rather to build a rival order, its identity-derived "construction manual" will differ significantly from that of the West. To clarify these differences, a crude definition of the Liberal Order is necessary. Even though the current Liberal Order should not be regarded as a coherent monolith, nor should it be seen as coterminous with the Western countries, it does possess a number of hallmarks, which originated in the West and which are still most firmly embedded in the United States and Europe. These include not only the general openness, rule-based character and multilateralism enshrined in international organizations such as the WTO and the UN, but also individualism and the derivative human rights regime that inform most of the recent multinational interventions

¹⁰⁸ Susan Shirk (2007): *China: Fragile Superpower*; Oxford: Oxford University Press; Jakobson and Knox (2010), *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, *ibid.*

being carried out on behalf of the international community.¹⁰⁹ As long as China sticks to globalism as an official guiding principle, or at least keeps a relatively low profile in international affairs, the communist regime will continue to appear as a status quo power with respect to the Liberal Order.¹¹⁰ However, keeping a low profile in international affairs is increasingly viewed as an untenable option among Chinese experts and policy-makers, primarily due to an ascending China's expanding interests.¹¹¹ Indeed, even the Americans have for some time been urging Beijing to become a responsible stakeholder in the current international order.¹¹²

To rule out in advance the possibility that China may gradually become a committed stakeholder in the Liberal Order would be unwarranted. Such a scenario would at the very least require Chinese policy-makers to renew and strengthen their support for what has been referred to here as the globalism discourse. Moreover, for China to become a *committed* stakeholder of the Liberal Order, it would most probably also have to undergo political reforms that would bring it significantly closer to the liberal-democratic Western model. Yet, there are few indications in today's China that a scenario like this is approaching. On the contrary, globalism attracts far fewer exponents in China than just a couple of years ago.¹¹³ Hence, in the absence of an ideological revival of communism, another scenario seems more likely: the further development of a Sino-centric Chinese self-understanding.

This report suggests that, to the extent that Chinese foreign policy in the coming years will be guided by a Sino-centric self-understanding, it is likely to display five tendencies that may be in potential conflict with the Liberal Order. The first four tendencies are based on each of the Sino-centric identity markers, while a fifth tendency – dealt with separately in the next section – concerns the overall identity-constituting effect *vis-à-vis* the United States. Two things should be stressed from the outset. What are described below are *potential tendencies* – rather than firmly

¹⁰⁹ Ikenberry (2011: 56, 60), "The Future of the Liberal World Order", *ibid.*; for a more extensive discussion, see John Ikenberry (2011: 279-360), *Liberal Leviathan: The origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹¹⁰ The idea of maintaining a low profile in international affairs was formulated by Deng; see Deng Xiaoping (1994: 350), *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, vol. 3, 1982-92*, Beijing: Foreign Language Press.

¹¹¹ See e.g. the influential IR scholar Wang Jisi (2011), "China's Search for a Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90(2); see also Michael Swaine (2010), "Perceptions of an Assertive China", *China Leadership Monitor* 32.

¹¹² See Robert Zoellick (2005), "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility", Remarks to National Committee on US-China Relations, September 21, 2005; see also Thomas Christensen (2011), "The Advantage of an Assertive China", *Foreign Affairs* 90(2).

¹¹³ See, for instance, Wei Pan (2010), "Western System versus Chinese System", Briefing Series, Issue 61, *The University of Nottingham*; David Shambaugh (2011: 23), "Coping with a Conflicted China", *ibid.*

substantiated characteristics – of Chinese foreign policy. What is more, attention is directed towards those elements of a Sino-centric foreign policy that are more likely to produce tensions in relation to the current Liberal Order.

First, emphasizing the civilization marker in Chinese foreign policy may lead Beijing to adopt the culturally based exceptionalism characteristic of the Middle Kingdom mentality. Only, this kind of exceptionalism will not be balanced by an equally strong liberal-democratic creed, as applies in the case of the United States.¹¹⁴ In other words, one may expect a civilization-oriented China to favor a unilateralist approach to international relations and only resort to multilateralism for instrumental reasons.¹¹⁵ During the first decade of the 21st century, China actually deepened its international engagement even in matters of security, joining several multilateral institutions, both regionally and globally. Yet, several observers have noted a recent shift towards a more self-assertive attitude in Chinese foreign policy that may be seen as an early indication of a new unilateralist tendency.¹¹⁶ Most conspicuously, during 2010 China in reality abandoned a multilateral approach to resolving territorial issues in the South China Sea in favor of a tougher posture, which involves an increased deployment of both military and civilian vessels into or near disputed areas.¹¹⁷ In addition, not only has Beijing been indicating for the first time that the South China Sea constitutes a core national interest, Chinese leaders have also demanded that territorial issues be handled on a bilateral basis.¹¹⁸ In effect, such bilateralism may easily take a unilateralist form, given the overwhelming nature of China's bargaining power *vis-à-vis* its littoral neighbors.

Secondly, to the extent that the Confucian philosophy marker affects Chinese foreign policy, it will bring with it a collectivistic notion of societal organization

¹¹⁴ Cf. Vibeke Schou Pedersen (2003), "In Search of Monsters to Destroy: The Liberal American Security Paradox and a Republican Way Out", *International Relations* 17(2).

¹¹⁵ This point has previously been made by David Shambaugh from a somewhat different perspective; David Shambaugh (2001: 28), "China or America: Which is the Revisionist Power?", *Survival* 43(3): 25-30.

¹¹⁶ This change has been observed e.g. by Elizabeth Economy (2010: 149), "The Game Changer: Coping with China's Foreign Policy Revolution", *Foreign Affairs* 89(6); Thomas Christensen (2011: 54-55), "The Advantage of an Assertive China", *ibid.*; Michael Swaine (2010), "Perceptions of an Assertive China", *China Leadership Monitor* 32, Spring 2010; David Shambaugh (2011: 24), "Coping with a Conflicted China", *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Michael Swaine and Taylor Fravel (2011), "China's Assertive Behavior: The Maritime Periphery", *China Leadership Monitor* 35, Summer 2011; Bernard Gwertzman (2011), "Regional Turbulence over South China Sea: An interview with Joshua Kurlantzick" *Council on Foreign Relations*, online-article: <http://www.cfr.org/china/regional-turbulence-over-south-china-sea/p25319> [accessed 02.09.2011].

¹¹⁸ See, for instance, Edward Wong (2011), "China Hedges over Whether South China Sea Is a 'Core Interest' Worth War", *New York Times*, March 30, 2011; Michael Swaine (2011), "China's Assertive Behavior: On Core Interests", *China Leadership Monitor* 34, Winter 2011.

that runs counter to the individualistic philosophy of the West. If this version of collectivism, which champions order, harmony and a communitarian approach to interest formation, gains a stronger voice internationally, the human rights regime of the current Liberal Order is likely to be increasingly neglected by states within China's orbit. Since collectivistic thinking is also a central feature of communism, it is actually not so much China's changing identity in this respect as the fact of its rising power that will pose a challenge to the individualistic outlook of the West. An example of this came during 2010, when China used its leverage to put pressure on several governments to prevent them from attending the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and thus from praising the Chinese dissident advocate of human rights, Liu Xiabo.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Western countries have gradually become more cautious of raising human rights issues with China; some countries such as France and Denmark have even published diplomatic notes and communiqués, which in effect prevent them from interfering in human rights matters related to Tibet.¹²⁰ More generally, one may expect the emerging UN-sponsored norm of "R2P-interventions" (Responsibility to Protect) to be gradually eroded by China's rise, not so much because of Beijing's devotion to the principle of non-interference (see below), as because China is likely to have different interests and priorities than protecting civilians against state repression.

Thirdly, provided that the dynastic centralism marker continues to be an integral part of Chinese self-understanding – that is, no democratization takes place – Chinese politics will follow a hierarchical pattern that could easily be translated into its foreign affairs. Beijing already wields substantial political and economic power that may gradually take a semi-imperialist form in the sense of China pressurizing dependent countries to accommodate themselves to Chinese interests. Most of the examples so far concern Chinese sanctions against countries that have violated what Beijing regards as its core national interests in relation to Tibet and Taiwan.¹²¹ However, there are also some early indications that some African countries such as Zambia and Sudan have been exposed to economic pressure from Beijing to achieve specific political

¹¹⁹ Adrienne Woltersdorf (2010), "Nobel award ceremony defies Chinese pressure tactics", *Deutsche Welle*, online article, December 10, 2010: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,6317601,00.html> [accessed 14.09.2011].

¹²⁰ Clemens Stubbe Østergaard (2009), "Vikings vs. the new economic superpower: the Tibet issue in Sino-Danish relations", *AsiaPortal – Infocus*, online article, December 14, 2009: <http://infocus.asiaportal.info> [accessed 14.09.2011].

¹²¹ See e.g. Andreas Fuchs and Niels-Hendrik Klann (2010), "Paying a Visit: The Dalai Lama Effect on International Trade", *Center for European Governance and Economic Development Research Paper* No. 113; Fergus Hanson (2010), "New Dragon in Town: Chinese Aid in the Pacific", *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*, online-article: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISN> [accessed 02/12/2011].

results.¹²² Interestingly, such a development would at the same time work against China's long-term, anti-imperialist adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, which was originally a result of military weakness and communist ideology.¹²³ Yet, inasmuch as economic progress is already changing China from a third-world developing country into a great power, Beijing will come to identify itself still less with developing countries, with the likely result that anti-colonialism will give way to a more self-centered great power attitude. Put differently, as China keeps extending its economic and military power, Beijing may be increasingly inclined to disregard a strict application of sovereignty and to intervene more or less directly into the affairs of dependent states in line with its dynastic tradition.

Fourthly, on the face of it the Han ethnocentrism marker seems an unlikely point of reference for Chinese foreign policies, but as argued above ethnic nationalism has recently gained a stronger foothold, forcing the Chinese authorities periodically to channel it more directly, as witnessed, for instance, in the state-run media's coverage of the riots in the Tibet and Xinjiang provinces during 2008-09.¹²⁴ In so far as China more generally gravitates towards ethnic nationalism, its foreign policy would probably display the following proclivities.¹²⁵ Most importantly, China would seek to establish closer ties with the numerous overseas Han Chinese communities, especially in South East Asia, which have been an invaluable asset in the modernization of China, thanks to their massive investments in mainland China (accounting for 80% of all FDI since 1978¹²⁶). Already now, Beijing has launched several initiatives to strengthen its bonds with the overseas Chinese, using Chinese language media, Confucian Institutes and cultural networks as bridgeheads in order to influence the attitudes and loyalties of the overseas Chinese.¹²⁷ Such ethnically informed policies may eventually develop into a more assertive desire to protect the interests of the overseas Chinese. Finally, there is not much doubt that a nationalist-oriented China would further reinforce the suggested particularistic drive of Chinese foreign policies by allowing ethnocentric notions of primacy to gain a stronger position.

¹²² See e.g. Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Frans Paul van der Putten (2009: 2), "China's Rise and the Changing Rules of the Game in the International Order", *CEPS Commentary*, Centre for European Policy Studies.

¹²³ See Johnston (2008: 204-05), *Social States*, *ibid.* In fact, one might have included yet another Chinese identity marker based on anti-colonialism and absolute sovereignty, but this is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

¹²⁴ See Callahan (2010: 127-29), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ The foreign policy agenda of Chinese nationalists has been published in the so-called "Dissatisfaction literature", notably Wang Xiadong et al. (2009), *China is Unhappy*, Beijing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe. This literature propagates a patriotic rather than ethnic version of nationalism, though.

¹²⁶ Callahan (2010: 129), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid.*

¹²⁷ Callahan (2010: 150-52), *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, *ibid.*

A coming Sino-American rivalry?

Perhaps most unsettling, the bilateral Sino-American relationship is likely to be significantly affected if the four Sino-centric identity markers come to hold sway over Chinese self-understanding. In terms of identity, the United States itself rests on a number of powerful identity markers that have endowed Americans with a strong missionary zeal. However, these identity markers almost stand in diametrical opposition to those of a Sino-centric China, thereby providing their mutual relationship with a potentially conflictual identity-constituting dynamic. Americans believe strongly in individualism and the Bill of Rights as opposed to the Confucian collectivism of the Chinese; Americans fiercely uphold republicanism and the checks and balance system, whereas the Chinese are firmly embedded in a political culture of dynastic centralism; Americans advocate multiculturalism and societal pluralism, contrary to the still mostly latent Han ethnocentrism of China; and Americans exhibit their own version of exceptionalism stemming from a deep-seated belief in “the Manifest Destiny of a chosen people”, which is very different from the cultural exceptionalism originating from Sino-civilization.¹²⁸

Given that the United States is by far the most powerful state in a more or less uni-polar system, international order still largely hinges on American dispositions, even though the U.S. is no longer able to dictate the premises of order. Consequently, it is probably not so much the implications of the four Sino-centric identity markers taken individually, as the overall potential antagonism between the U.S. and China that may turn out to be the largest obstacle in ensuring continued great power cooperation within the Liberal Order. As John Ikenberry has argued, the current Liberal Order displays “a remarkable capacity for integrating rising powers”, owing not least to its open and inclusive character.¹²⁹ But if the United States and China end up antagonizing each other based on seemingly unbridgeable identity differences, then not even the Liberal Order will be able to contain both powers. Two scenarios may be imagined in such a situation. The first scenario entails a return to the Cold War era, when China held aloof from the international order without Beijing being able to build a rival order of its own. This time Chinese aloofness would not so much be the result of a lack of power as perhaps a lack of the ideational potential to be able to attract sufficient followers to forge a rival block. The second scenario implies that

¹²⁸ On the basic identity markers of American self-understanding, see, for instance, Seymour Martin Lipset (1996), *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, New York: WW Norton & Company; Phillip Jenkins (2003), *A History of the United States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Peter Spiro (2008), *Beyond Citizenship: American Identity after Globalization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹²⁹ John Ikenberry (2008: 6), “The Rise of China and the Future of the West”, *Foreign Affairs* 87(1).

China possesses both the requisite resources and the ideational potential – irrespective of the particularities of Sino-centrism – to set up a rivaling international order, a Pax Sinica, so to speak. Such an international system encompassing two rival centers would no doubt be a conflictual one.

In some respects, the relationship between China and the United States is already burdened with rivalry thinking. This is not only clear from the way Washington monitors China's military modernization and from the skepticism with which many American politicians regard China's rise (cf. chapter 1). It is also discernable from the way the U.S. military is increasing its presence in South East Asia at a time when budgetary restraints are imposing a stern downsizing-agenda on almost all military activities.¹³⁰ Indeed, the United States has recently stepped up its military cooperation with several South East Asian states (notably Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines), adding further to "the feeling of containment" which pervades strategic thinking in Beijing due to existing U.S. military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand and the close U.S. military ties with Taiwan and Singapore.¹³¹

These indications of a growing Sino-American rivalry cannot – this report claims – solely or even primarily be explained by the fact of rising Chinese power, as the realists would have it (cf. chapter 2). Rather, the potential for rivalry rests on differences of identity between the United States and China. While such differences have always existed to some extent, they will become severely aggravated if China chooses a Sino-centric foreign policy. Moreover, the absence of "overlying events" such as the Cold War and to a lesser degree the War on Terror will only increase the risk that mutual differences of identity will be regarded as prominent, not least if the globalist discourse within China continues to lose ground. Irresponsible politicians on both sides may thus be tempted to frame the identity differences, thereby sparking off a new great power rivalry. However, since identity narratives are not automatically constructed from available identity markers, there is considerable narrative freedom to avoid an oppositional framing of the Sino-US relationship. In addition, the intense economic relations that have been allowed to develop between the two parties to some degree militate against framing the other party as an outright enemy. Still, it will require a good dose of pragmatism or perhaps rather a great deal of visionary statesmanship on both sides to steer the Sino-US bilateral clear of conflict in the coming years.

¹³⁰ AP (2011), "Gates pledges wider US military presence in Asia", *USA Today*, online article from Associated Press, April 6, 2011: http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-06-03-robert-gates-china_n.htm [accessed 14.09.2011].

¹³¹ Jonathan Holslag (2011), *Trapped Giant...*, *ibid.*

Chapter 4. Findings of the report

Conclusions

What impact will the rise of China have on the international order in the coming decades? This report answers the question from an International Relations perspective, which is not part of the (American) mainstream debate on China's rise. Mainstream answers are provided on the one hand by liberalists who believe that economic interdependence and the institutional framework of the Liberal Order will ensure that China remains a status quo-oriented power, and on the other hand by realists who emphasize how China's ascent will intensify regional power and security dynamics and how the interests of a rising China will be (perceived as) revisionist. Instead of focusing on the general systemic incentives and constraints facing a rising state like China, this report has given analytical pre-eminence to the specific character of China, and more specifically to its self-understanding. Given China's demographic gravity, its cultural heritage and not least its long history as a relatively distinctive civilization, there seem to be strong reasons to direct attention to the way the Chinese understand themselves as a community. The underlying assumption is that Chinese identity formation – and more specifically the central points of reference for 'the Chinese self' – is shaping the overall interests that guide Chinese foreign policy. Hence, by analyzing Chinese identity constitution, this report presents an alternative approach to gaining insight into the foreign policy of a rising China.

The key argument of the report is that China is currently undergoing an identity shift, which is likely to have a significant impact on Chinese foreign policy. In the post-Cold War era, China has gradually abandoned its communist ideology and partially replaced it by a globalist identity narrative of "peaceful rise/harmonious world", reflecting a deliberate, official attempt by Beijing to accommodate the outside world and reassure it of China's willingness to act as a responsible stakeholder of the current world order. However, the globalist discourse seems to be increasingly challenged by another identity-constituting tendency, which this report refers to as Sino-centrism, that is, a self-centering tendency to turn narrative attention inwardly towards the internally generated, specifically *Chinese* hallmarks associated with China's civilizational past and its cultural heritage. The report identifies four different points of reference – so-called identity markers – of Sino-centrism, which are quite different from one another in the way they frame the Chinese community and in their respective ideational logics. Still, taken together these four Sino-centric identity markers represent a distinctly Chinese societal template that

may potentially set a new course for Chinese foreign policy. The main endeavor of the report is to capture and systematize Sino-centrism in terms of the following four identity markers:

- According to the *Sino-civilization* marker, China should be depicted as a cultural community by emphasizing the distinctiveness, longevity and greatness of Chinese civilization. This creates a mentality of exceptionalism, which provokes strong feelings of both superiority and inferiority towards the outside world.
- According to the *Confucian* marker, China should be viewed as a moral community imbued by the historical wisdom of Chinese moral philosophy, which accentuates the belief in enlightened rule and the adaptation of the individual to the roles and institutions of society. This fosters a decisively collectivistic creed and a universalistic aspiration to create order and harmony.
- According to the *dynastic centralism* marker, China should be seen as a unified political community epitomizing the world's longest and possibly strongest tradition of centralized, bureaucratized state authorities. This tradition manifests itself as an ever-present urge to submit Chinese politics to a hierarchizing and unifying formula.
- According to the *Han ethnocentrism* marker, China should be regarded as an ethnic community based on the notion of common ancestral descent among the Han Chinese people. This produces a strongly particularistic mindset that manifests itself in the primordial belief in the homogeneity and primacy of the Han Chinese race.

Together these four markers constitute a Sino-centric tendency of Chinese identity formation at the beginning of the 21st century. While there are some obvious similarities, Sino-centrism should not simply be equated with or disavowed as Chinese nationalism, since the former spans a broader and more multi-faceted field of elements. The report does not present any direct evidence of an emerging identity shift towards Sino-centrism; instead, the four Sino-centric identity markers and their increasing significance within Chinese self-understanding are established from a review of the growing secondary literature on the subject. On the basis of this analysis, the report suggests that the emerging Sino-centric identity shift will have a number of implications for Chinese foreign policy in particular and the international Liberal Order more generally:

- Firstly, emphasizing the civilization marker may easily lead Beijing to favor a culturally based exceptionalism, which in itself implies a *unilateralist* approach to

international relations and thus an entirely instrumental approach to multilateral institutions.

- Secondly, the Confucian philosophy marker will bring with it a *collectivistic* notion of societal organization that runs counter to the individualistic philosophy of the West, with the likely result that the current human rights regime will be increasingly neglected by states within China's orbit.
- Thirdly, the dynastic centralism marker entails a *hierarchical* mode of politics that could easily be translated into the foreign affairs of an ascending China in the sense of Beijing putting more direct pressure on dependent countries to accommodate themselves to Chinese interests.
- Fourthly, provided the Han ethnocentrism marker gains a stronger foothold, China is likely to adopt a more ethnically *communitarian* foreign policy approach by establishing closer ties with overseas Han Chinese communities in order to represent and even protect their interests more directly.
- Finally, by embracing a Sino-centric self-understanding, China will not least affect the bilateral Sino-American relationship, given that the main identity markers of the United States are almost in diametrical opposition to those of a Sino-centric China. In other words, it would provide the Sino-American relationship with a potentially conflictual identity-constituting dynamic that – in the absence of “overlying” events such as the Cold War or the War on Terror – would probably intensify the rivalry between what seem to be the 21st century's two greatest powers.

Qualifications and policy implications

There are at least three types of main qualifications to the above argument that should be stated before addressing the policy implications of the report. The *first qualification* concerns the fact that Chinese foreign policy is shaped by other factors than identity constitution. This not only includes the power and security dynamics emphasized by realists, as well as the institutional and economic incentives accentuated by liberals, but also a number of other factors omitted here. One such factor is the increasingly non-coordinated influence that individual actors (such as the People's Liberation Army and some of the biggest Chinese companies) exert on Chinese foreign policy. Another factor is the CCP's preoccupation with regime survival and social stability, which sometimes have a subsuming or even distorting effect on China's foreign policy. As all these factors contribute in shaping Chinese foreign policy, it would be wise not to overstate the explanatory power of Chinese identity constitution. However, when it comes to the *overall* direction of Chinese foreign policy – that is, China's

position within the international order – identity-related dynamics do seem to play a greater role than most other factors (cf. chapter 2).

The *second qualification* regards the identity approach employed in this report. The identity mapping reflects an attempt to delineate and systematize the main tendencies of current Chinese identity constitution. For the sake of clarity, the four Sino-centric identity markers have been depicted as disparate points of reference for Chinese self-understanding – related respectively to cultural history, moral philosophy, political organization and ethnic composition – even though in practice their discursive borders are fuzzy and partly overlapping. In other words, the identity mapping of China is a simplification of a complex reality, which is furthermore not easily accessible and thus verifiable as an empirical phenomenon due to the illiberal character of the Chinese polity. This means that the report – as noted in the introduction – deliberately seeks to avoid any identity-based essentialism. The report directs attention towards certain *tendencies*, not unambiguous facts of Chinese self-understanding. Still, the report is grounded on an extensive review of the available secondary literature on the subject conducted in order to substantiate the identity mapping of China.

The *third qualification* concerns the specific identity mapping of China in this report. It may appear somewhat odd to focus on a Sino-centric tendency within Chinese self-understanding which is often disregarded officially by Chinese policy-makers and even by Chinese academics. Chinese policy-makers do increasingly recognize China's Confucian and civilizational heritage, as witnessed by recent political initiatives (cf. chapter 3); yet, officially Chinese policy-makers still largely cling to a peculiar mixture of “red slogans” and globalist thinking. This report has been at pains to avoid simply echoing more or less official versions of Chinese self-understanding, preferring instead to present an identity mapping of China, which is based primarily on non-Chinese, secondary sources. Whether such an approach leads to a more reliable mapping of Chinese identity at the beginning of the 21st century remains to be seen.

Given the above qualifications, this report has two main policy recommendations of relevance to Western governments. *The first recommendation* is for Western governments to reconcile themselves to the continued rise of a non-Western challenger. For one thing, this report shows there is little reason to believe – as some Western observers do – that China will eventually embrace all the norms and values of the Western Liberal Order. For another, China's self-understanding is firmly embedded in a set of distinctly Chinese, ideational structures of a cultural, philosophical, political and ethnic nature. To be sure, this Sino-centric tendency may only periodically be

able to hold an absolute sway over Chinese politics in the sense of all four ideational structures being part of the prevailing identity narrative. However, the Sino-centric tendency does seem sufficiently strong to ensure that an ascending China will constitute a non-Western challenger in relation to at least some of the norms and values of the international order. Accordingly, Western governments would be well advised to renounce the often-heard claim about the universality of Western norms and values. Individual liberal rights, political republicanism and multilateralism are definitely worth upholding on the international stage, but to reduce the risk of ideological conflict, Western governments should not proclaim such institutions to be universal standards.

The second recommendation is for Western governments to support the globalism-oriented discourse of peaceful rise/harmonious world propagated by Beijing while at the same time taking the necessary precautions to hedge against the rise of a potentially Sino-centric China. First of all, even though this report argues that the Sino-centric tendency is gaining prominence in China, such a development may be counteracted by lending credence to those actors within China who favor a globalist-integrationist outlook. One way to do this would be to cater to the globalist segment within the CCP regime by officially backing China's strong aspirations to be recognized as a market economy or by granting China a stronger representation in the global financial institutions architecture in line with the recent decision at a G20 summit to increase China's voting power in the IMF. As long as the Chinese government sees a clear prospect of stimulating its growth and enhancing its economic power by integrating itself more deeply into the global economy, Sino-centric identity dynamics will most likely be checked by the central economic actors within China. On the other hand, the West – that is, the United States – may want to hedge against the possibility of an increasingly Sino-centric China by retaining its forward presence in South East Asia to ensure that these countries do not feel compelled to submit to particularistic Chinese interests. In other words, China should be encouraged to stick to the globalism path, but it makes good sense, according to this report, to prepare for alternative scenarios.

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