CHINESE WHISPERS

WHY EVERYTHING YOU’VE HEARD ABOUT CHINA IS WRONG

BEN CHU

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It’s 2030. We’re in a high-tech lecture theatre in Beijing, adorned with a giant portrait of Chairman Mao. A Chinese professor is explaining to his Chinese students why great empires fall. ‘Ancient Greece, Rome, the British empire. America. They all make the same mistakes – turning their back on the principles that made them great. America tried to tax and spend its way out of a great recession. Of course we owned most of their debt.’ The professor emits a cold chuckle. Then his eyes narrow malevolently. ‘So now they work for us’. The students roll around in their seats laughing.

This was an advert produced by an American right-wing pressure group, Citizens Against Government Waste, in 2010. ‘You can change the future, you have to’ was the urgent concluding message. ‘Join Citizens Against Government Waste to stop the spending that is bankrupting America’. The authors of this propaganda might not have known it, but the buttons of public fear they were reaching for in order to advance their conservative political agenda (the prospect of China ruling the world and the consequent subjugation of the rest of us) have been pushed many, many times before.

Such premonitions of a Chinese takeover are not new. On a visit to Hong Kong in 1899 Rudyard Kipling dined with some of the local colonial commercial bosses. These ‘Taipans’ were, he discovered, financing railways in mainland China in order to deepen their trade links with the Oriental behemoth. But was it wise, the poet and short story author wondered, to force these ‘stimulants of the West’ on this vast and dangerous country? ‘What will happen’ he asked ‘when China really wakes up, runs a line from Shanghai to Lhassa, starts another line of imperial Yellow Flag immigrant steamers, and really works and controls her own gun-factories and arsenals?’

Such anxious thoughts seemed to preoccupy eminent Victorians. Field Marshal Garnet Joseph Wolseley was one of the military supermen who characterised the age. The curriculum vitae of this dashing figure reads
like an index of all the dramatic moments of nineteenth-century Britannic imperialism. He was mentioned in dispatches for his valiant conduct in the Crimean War, when Britain and France vied for supremacy in the Black Sea with Russia. He distinguished himself at the relief of Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny. And he was present too when British forces burned down the Qing emperor’s Summer Palace in 1860. Such was Wolseley’s reputation for military efficiency that the phrase ‘everything’s all Sir Garnet’ entered common parlance as a shorthand for ‘all is well’. In his memoirs in 1904 Sir Garnet reviewed all the foreigners that he encountered in his career and concluded that it was the Chinese who were the most formidable. ‘[They] are the most remarkable race on earth and I have always thought, and still believe them to be, the coming rulers of the world’ he wrote. ‘They only want a Chinese Peter The Great or Napoleon to make them so.’

Others saw the material of supremacy in the Chinese too. Arthur Henderson Smith, the most famous American Protestant missionary in China at the turn of the twentieth century, held the inhabitants of the land to whom he had proselytised in awe. ‘If the time should ever come,’ he wrote ‘as come it may, when the far-distant West comes into close and practical competition with the patient Chinese for the right to exist, one or other will be behindhand in the race. And I shall venture the prediction that it will not be the Chinese!’

It was but a short step from awe to fear. The bold colours painted by Smith may have fed into Sax Rohmer’s ghastly portrait of his fictional Chinese super villain, Fu Manchu who, we are breathlessly told, ‘sought no less a goal than Yellow dominion of the world!’

A coming day of Chinese rule continued to haunt the Western imagination after the First World War. In 1920, William Somerset Maugham wrote a short story in which a Chinese philosopher with an uncannily impressive grasp of English tells the narrator, in an echo of Kipling’s fear, that the West had made a terrible mistake in forcing China into the modern world through violence. ‘Do you not know that we have a genius for mechanics?’ he asks. ‘Do you not know that there are in this country four hundred millions of the most practical and industrious people in the world? Do you think it will take us long to learn? And what will become of your superiority when the yellow
man can make as good guns as the white and fire them straight? You have appealed to the machine gun and by the machine gun shall you be judged. But could these Westerners have been merely channelling the words of Wen Hsiang, a senior imperial counsellor at the late Qing court?

When China was forced to open up to European trade in the nineteenth century, the imperial rulers were also compelled to hand over responsibilities for import tax collection to the British. Some of the money went to the Qing treasury. But the bulk was syphoned off to pay for the fines, known as ‘indemnities’, the foreigners had levied on the Chinese empire for daring to resist their incursions. The European customs officials carried out their duties from grand neo-classical customs buildings in Canton, Hankou and the Shanghai Bund. At the head of the bureaucracy was Sir Robert Hart, an Ulster-born Briton, who was Inspector-General from 1863 to 1908, an astonishingly long posting even by Victorian standards. In his memoirs of 1901, Sir Robert recounted a warning that Wen Hsiang had issued to the Western states whose militaries had casually opened up China. ‘You are all too anxious to awake us and to start us on a new road and you will do it’ said Hsaing. ‘But you will all regret it, for once awakened and started we shall go fast and far – farther than you think – much farther than you want.’

But did Wen Hsiang really say those words? Or might Hart, one of the early adopters of the term ‘the Yellow Peril’, have been recycling the most famous Western prophecy of all on China, reportedly expressed by Napoleon Bonaparte? The French emperor, according to legend, one day pointed at a large chunk of Asia on a map of the world and remarked: ‘Let China sleep, for when the dragon awakes she shall shake the world.’

Of course, China resembled a beaten dog rather than Napoleon’s mighty dragon throughout the first half of the twentieth century as the country was ravaged by Japanese occupation and then civil war between the Nationalists and Communists. Fears of Chinese world domination came flooding back when Mao’s forces finally seized power and consolidated their rule. In 1964 the US War Office produced the propaganda video entitled ‘Red Chinese Battle Plan’. Above a soundtrack of menacing martial brass, the narrator tells of Mao’s plan to ‘divide and encircle, conquer’. The conclusion: ‘Thus
does militant Communist China and Mao Zedong see the day when Peking becomes the ideological centre of a world enslaved’. From the Yellow Peril to the Red Peril: the colours changed but the message remained the same.

And now we have the Chinese Capitalist Peril. A popular literary theme has emerged in recent years: Western leaders humbled before their Chinese counterparts. In *Super Sad True Love Story* the satirical novelist Gary Shteyngart depicts a future United States that is on the brink of economic collapse with its Chinese creditors weighing up whether to pull the plug or not. The scenario bears a similarity to the imagined opening passage of Arvind Subramian’s 2011 *Eclipse*, in which a future US President in 2021 applies for a bailout from the Chinese-run International Monetary Fund. To drive home the point, the cover of Subramian’s book features Barack Obama appearing to bow while shaking the hand of the former Chinese president Hu Jintao.

There’s another striking act of imagination in the 2010 book *Why the West Rules – for Now* by the Stanford historian Ian Morris. Unlike Shteyngart and Subramian, Morris goes back, rather than forward, in time. He kicks off his ambitious global history of mankind with an imagined ‘what-might-have-been’ scene that involves Queen Victoria kowtowing before a victorious Chinese general at a London dockside. The historian Niall Ferguson dispensed with all the imaginary tropes and said bluntly what everyone was thinking in his 2012 television series on China: ‘We’re having to kowtow to new Asian masters.’

‘East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet’ wrote Kipling. But there is a new truism for our own age, a formulation that no serious work of geopolitical punditry can be without: ‘Power is shifting from west to east’. Those words, or some variation thereof, turn up in countless newspaper columns, think-tank reports and politicians’ speeches. They are a stamp of intellectual seriousness, as seemingly necessary as the ‘amen’ at the end of a prayer. The same thought echoes across thousands of dinner tables and bars. It’s a staple of internet forums. The idea that the future belongs to China is the conventional wisdom of our age.

Investors and financial analysts sing from the same hymnbook. ‘The 19th century belonged to England, the 20th century belonged to the United States,
and the 21st century belongs to China. Invest accordingly.’ That was the advice of the world’s most successful stock picker, Warren Buffett. Bankers and captains of industry, as we saw in the last chapter, have been duly queuing up to sound a fanfare for ‘The Chinese Century’.

There is more to the prophecies than a redistribution of economic power. We’re told that China has imperial intentions too. According to the American political theorist Robert Kagan, China has ‘a nineteenth-century soul’. This means the country is ‘filled with nationalist pride, ambitions, and resentments, consumed with questions of territorial sovereignty.’ Stefan Halper, a former adviser at the Reagan White House, on the other hand, sees China’s modern imperialism as driven less by ideology, than materialism. To deliver economic growth sufficient to legitimise its domestic rule, he argues, the Communist Party has no choice but to ‘exploit and co-opt’ the rest of the world’s natural resources.8

Either way, a new age of imperial struggle is envisaged. ‘Imagine a rerun of the Anglo-German antagonism of the early 1900s, with America in the role of Britain and China in the role of imperial Germany’ warns Niall Ferguson.9 The chief economist of the bank HSBC, Stephen King, tells us that non-Western nations are ‘beginning to enjoy their time in the economic sun,’10 dusting off Kaiser Willhelm II’s 1901 promise that Germany would not be denied its share of Africa’s spoils by Europe’s other colonial masters.11 Juan Pablo Cardenal and Heriberto Araujo, two Spanish journalists, argue that China is engaged in an ‘unstoppable and silent world conquest.’12

Such fears have been legitimised by those at the summit of American politics. In a speech in Zambia in 2011 the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insinuated that the Chinese are the ‘new colonisers’ of the African continent with their large increases in investment.13 ‘We saw that during colonial times, it is easy to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders and leave,’ she cautioned. A Human Rights Watch report that same year chronicling ‘brutally long shifts’ imposed on the workers at Chinese-owned copper mines in the country seemed to justify that image of nineteenth century-style exploitation.

A headline in the Daily Mail newspaper, spelled out the danger bluntly:
‘How China’s taking over Africa and the West should be very worried’. The author of the piece concluded that ‘the people of this bewitching, beautiful continent, where humankind first emerged from the Great Rift Valley, desperately need progress. The Chinese are not here for that. They are here for plunder. After centuries of pain and war, Africa deserves better.’

And just as the Britannia sent out its sons to administer the British Empire 150 years ago, some believe China has also secretly begun to seed the world with its inhabitants. According to the Forbes writer Joel Kotkin ‘the rise of China represents the triumph of a race and a culture. Indeed for most of its history China’s most important export was not silk or porcelain but people. To measure the rise of the Sinosphere, one has to consider not just China itself but … the “sons of the Yellow Emperor”.’

To Kotkin and others the 50 million-strong Chinese diaspora is merely the advance guard. Could it be that we’re all already part of this new Chinese imperium and we just haven’t yet realised it?

Yan Xuetong has a look of contempt in his eyes. ‘You obviously know very little about China,’ he tells me. My mistake has been to ask the Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Beijing’s Tsinghua University whether he thinks it conceivable that China could ever launch a military intervention in Taiwan.

Taiwan, I’m firmly told, is a part of China, so China could no more ‘intervene’ on the island than the US could intervene in Hawaii or Britain could intervene in the Isle of Wight. Having put me straight on that basic point, Yan, who is sitting next to me at a dinner at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, proceeds to describe to the rest of the table how he expects that, sooner or later, China will be forced to engage in an overseas military intervention, perhaps in Africa, in order to protect its own citizens threatened by an outbreak of civil disorder. The Chinese public will demand it. And the leadership in Beijing, he says, will have the means to deliver. To listen to Yan Xuetong is to be left in no doubt that China has ‘stood up’.
It was on 21 September 1949 that the world was first told so. Mao Zedong rose in front of China’s constitutional convention in Beijing. The Nationalist party of Chiang Kai Shek had fled to Taiwan. The long civil war was over. Now it fell to the preeminent leader of the Communists to articulate the historical significance of the moment. ‘The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation’ Mao told the delegates. ‘It is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. And that was due entirely to oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism and domestic reactionary governments. … Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up.’

For many decades that boast rang hollow as Mao’s economic incompetence cut off the country at its knees. But after thirty years of spectacular growth since Mao’s death the world has started to look at those founding words of modern China in a new light. If China is now indisputably rising to its feet, what does this mean for the rest of the world?

Nothing good, say many, pointing to an increasingly belligerent intellectual climate in China. In 1996 a group of Chinese academics produced a bestselling collection of polemical essays entitled China Can Say No. In its pages they argued that China was sufficiently economically developed to start imposing itself. The same clique followed that up in 2008 with Unhappy China, which made the case for China to claim its rightful position on the world stage in even starker terms. ‘With Chinese national strength growing at an unprecedented rate, China should stop self-debasing and come to recognise the fact that it now has the power to lead the world’ they wrote. In a direct challenge to the West, they added: ‘You can start a war if you have the guts, otherwise shut up!’ Some have called these authors ‘Neocomms’ because, unlike the cautious technocrats on the Politburo, they think China should stand tall, just as the ultimate Communist strongman, Mao, wanted.

Neocomm pressure does appear to have injected some backbone into China’s foreign policy in recent years. China was blamed by the US for blocking a deal on a new global treaty to reduce carbon emissions at the 2009 United Nations summit in Copenhagen. Many interpreted this disagreement over carbon dioxide emission targets as a proxy battle in the larger struggle
between the existing superpower and the ‘challenger’.

There are other signs of assertiveness from Beijing. In 2010 Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat for ramming a Japanese patrol vessel in the East China Sea. A few months later, China drastically cut its exports of rare earth metals to Japan. These materials are essential to Japan’s high tech manufacturing sector and Tokyo accused China of engaging in an illegal act of economic retaliation.

China seems increasingly less concerned with global opinion. Despite a swelling chorus of international objections, Beijing has continued to sponsor some of the most repressive regimes on the planet, such as North Korea, Burma, Iran and Zimbabwe. In Central Asia, China’s leaders appear to have designs on leading a new axis of autocracy. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which first met in the Chinese commercial capital in 1996, brings together China with a host of other human rights abusing states, including Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In an echo of the days before the Sino-Soviet split, China in 2005 staged joint military exercises with Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Beijing has been prepared to block multilateral action against rogue states when it feels Western powers are throwing their weight around. In 2012 China vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution to impose sanctions against Bashar Al-Assad’s Syria.

China’s military capacity is growing too. Beijing commands the largest military in the world, numbering three million personnel. Defence budgets have been growing at an average annual rate of 16 per cent each year for the past 20 years and some expect the level of spending to equal America’s some time in the 2020s. China’s first aircraft carrier has entered service and Beijing is rumoured to be investing in stealth technology and exploring the possibilities of space military capacity. The country has unresolved territorial and maritime border disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and India. And China’s generals have been sounding increasingly assertive over all of these potential conflict zones in recent years.

Officials talk of the country’s ‘peaceful rise’. But Deng Xiaoping, the man who reversed the country out of the dead end of Maoism, had a different phrase: ‘Tao guang yang hui’. This has the more ambiguous meaning of
'hide your light and rise in obscurity'. Could China be biding its time for sinister reasons? Doesn’t this pattern of behaviour suggest that Beijing, with its expansionist soul, is secretly planning to rule the world? Are we witnessing a nascent hegemon? To give an answer we must first establish what these emotive phrases – rule the world, new hegemon – actually mean.

**THE RISE OF CHANGST**

It was the autumn of 2011 and China was being lined up to save the eurozone. European journalists were told that the then French President Nicholas Sarkozy would soon be making a telephone call to his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao. The pliant Hu would, we were told, agree to pump a hefty portion of Beijing’s national savings into a European sovereign debt insurance scheme so complex that not even the finest minds in Brussels were able to explain how it worked. ‘Will China rescue the West?’ asked the BBC’s business editor. ‘China to the rescue?’ echoed *The Economist* magazine. It never happened, of course. Hu had apparently not been informed of the French script. Beijing decided that if the Europeans were not willing to take the financial risk of propping up their own currency, it wasn’t for China to do so.

Yet in some ways what was more interesting about the episode than the chutzpah of Sarkozy and the desperation of the eurocrats was the symbolism of a global shift in financial might. No one seemed to find the idea of China bailing out Europe outlandish. And, after all, why would they? Everyone knows the Chinese are rich now. As a new economic superpower they can afford to extend credit to whichever corner of the planet they desire.

The reality of modern China belies such assumptions. The country is large, but it is also relatively poor. Adjusted for the differences in the purchasing power of the national currency, China could be the world’s biggest national economy by 2016, overtaking the United States. But divide that vast economic output by an almost equally vast population and one has a picture of a country in which most of the population survives on relatively little. GDP per head in China was just over $9,000 in 2012. To put that in context, GDP per capita in America in the same year was $50,000 and in Britain it was $37,000. Even
in the least wealthy eurozone nation, Greece, per capita GDP was $25,000, more than two and a half times larger than in China.¹⁷

Average annual incomes in urban China in 2010 were just $3,000. And in rural China, where half the population still lives, people scuffled by on $1,000 – the price, roughly, of just two iPads in the US. On the United Nations Human Development Index, which uses metrics such as life expectancy and education, China ranks 101st in the world. States such as Sri Lanka and Algeria, not renowned for their high levels of development, are judged wealthier and healthier. China has come a long way in recent decades, but it has an even greater distance to travel if it is to join the ranks of the ‘rich’ nations of the earth.

Yet the fear of China’s economic rise is palpable. A survey in 2012 found that nearly half of Americans believe China’s growth will have a negative impact on the US economy.¹⁸ It is common to hear China’s economic growth presented as a ‘challenge’ to Western prosperity. ‘While the world will have more, we will have less of it’ lamented a columnist in the impeccably liberal Guardian newspaper in 2012 in response to some projections of the shape of the global economy in 2060 showing a larger China.¹⁹ Such anxiety, what I earlier called ‘Changst’, is rife in popular discourse.

It is generally unhelpful to think about countries as if they were individuals, but in this case such a thought experiment is useful. If your neighbour manages to turn his life around and pull himself out of poverty, does that damage your own standard of living? Does a better life for one’s neighbour and his family constitute a threat to your own family’s prosperity? Most of us would answer in the negative and regard anyone who replied ‘yes’ as unreasonable and paranoid. Yet when we interpret rising incomes in China as something to be feared we have fallen prey to this peculiar logic. Would we really be happier if Chinese living standards were falling, rather than rising? Strip away all the clichés about ‘power shifting to the east’ and that is the rather ugly sentiment that underlies a great deal of our response of China’s growth.

We were once more far sighted. Politicians saw the beneficial global economic and security harvest to be reaped from drawing China out of its Maoist seclusion, starting with Nixon in the early 1970s. Multinational
firms from the US and Europe helped to integrate China into the global economy by transferring capital, technology and managerial expertise, just as their Victorian forebears had done in the late Qing and republican periods. American and British universities trained Chinese students. Governments encouraged trade. Those were wise decisions precisely because they have helped to raise the living standards of the population and to integrate China into the world community. ‘Trade freely with China and time is on our side’ said the former US President George Bush in 2000. And he was right. The pity now is that so many of us seem to regret the inevitable consequences of that positive engagement.

What about the detrimental impact of greater economic ‘competition’ from China that politicians and pundits now frequently refer to? Isn’t this one of the clear ways that China’s rise harms us, as global capital and jobs are ineluctably sucked eastwards? While the supposed rising income threat is based on a perverse mean-mindedness, this idea is based on an economic fallacy. China’s growth since its opening up has, it is true, been tremendously boosted by low-cost manufacturing. Some manufacturing jobs in the West have indeed been lost and effectively exported to China (although the largest victims of the ‘China price’ have been other developing nations which had a niche in cheap manufacturing). But we also have to weigh against such costs the considerable economic benefit to us of cheaper manufactured imports. A nation such as Germany, which has a specialism in precision engineering, has seen its exports to China surge. Notwithstanding our habitual over-estimation of the size of the China market, there will indeed be plenty of other opportunities for firms to sell into China in the coming years, opportunities that will create jobs. Free trade is today as mutually beneficial as it ever was.

China’s economic catch-up does not constitute a threat to our living standards. In any nation, what drives up wages over the long run is domestic productivity growth, in other words, the amount of output per hour of work. As discussed previously, China can – and indeed must – increase its productivity so its income levels can continue to rise. But nothing that China does will prevent us doing exactly the same. Relative economic decline does not mean pauperisation. The British economy was overtaken in size by
America in the 1870s, but Britons today are far wealthier than they were when Queen Victoria was on the throne. Why? Because Britain’s economic productivity has risen in that time, enabling incomes and living standards to rise.

But doesn’t size matter in other ways? Will not China become the most influential nation state when it attains the status of the world’s largest economy? Not necessarily. There is much more to economic leadership than a large GDP. Despite China’s stellar growth its economy has produced no world-class technology companies capable of competing with the likes of Apple, Rolls-Royce or Sony. Chinese firms are cash rich and the state’s sovereign wealth funds are looking to snap up Western firms, but China’s own state-owned enterprises are badly managed and grossly inefficient. They have a lamentable record of technological innovation. While the number of patents filed in China has risen, they have yet to bear any fruit. Many filings seem to be attempts to scoop up government subsidies rather than genuine innovations. If state corporations were stripped of their state protected monopolies, most of them would haemorrhage domestic market share to foreign competitors. This is not a business sector set to conquer the world. As the dissident artist Ai Weiwei has pointed out, the iPad might be assembled in China, but it is impossible yet to imagine the device being designed there.

In any case, the shift may not be as dramatic as is often assumed. According to the OECD economic think tank the US made up 28 per cent of global output in 2011, China 17 per cent and the euro area 17 per cent. By 2030 it expects the China to make up 28 per cent of global output, the US 18 per cent and the euro area 12 per cent. Its vision of 2060 is remarkably similar, with China accounting for 28 per cent of global output, the US 16 per cent and the euro area 9 per cent. If this forecast is accurate, the popular image of a Chinese economic colossus, outweighing the rest of the globe put together, begins to look overblown.

And financial power? China’s leaders have been talking in recent years about creating an alternative global reserve currency to the American dollar. And some large Western banks, sensing a commercial opportunity to dominate a new market, have been promoting the renminbi as that alternative. Yet this
is likely to prove another fairy tale. Would global investors be happy to see their assets denominated in the Chinese currency while the workings of the monetary authorities in Beijing are opaque and the country’s capital markets are closed to outside investors? To spell out the question is to draw attention to how ludicrous the idea is. So long as China’s financial system remains closed, investors will keep their money in currencies they understand. In any case, China has floated this idea out of desperation rather than calculation. Beijing would welcome a new reserve currency because it has, as we saw in the last chapter, channelled such a huge amount of its surplus cash into dollar assets that are now slowly depreciating as the US currency falls relative to the renminbi.

NO MOTOWN, NO HOLLYWOOD

The American political scientist Joseph Nye made a lasting contribution to the study of international relations with his coinage ‘soft power’. To Nye this is the ability of a nation to get its way in the world not through economic force or military threats (which are classic ‘hard power’) but through the attractions of its culture to people in every country on the planet. China has very little on this front to offer yet – and Beijing knows it. As the reformist former prime minister Wen Jiabao put it: ‘China has a massive trade surplus, but a vast cultural deficit with the world’.

The leadership has been establishing hundreds of Confucius Centres in foreign states to promote Mandarin language and export Chinese culture. While such initiatives are not worthless, the inescapable fact is that state-sponsored culture has nothing like the reach of the private variety. Motown and Hollywood are the towns that have spread American music and film around the world, not Washington. China, of course, has its own domestic entertainment industries. But beyond the cinematic martial arts epics of Zhang Yimou, they have made very few international breakthroughs. And they are unlikely to as long as the Chinese government continues to censor its artists.

Beijing’s urge to control its culture is as pronounced as ever. In 2012 the film director Lou Ye removed his name from his new film, Mystery, after
the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television in Beijing took their scissors to the work shortly before release. ‘A lot of Chinese film directors avoid making films about the reality of life because of the risk of censorship,’ Lou explained on his website. ‘No film is safe, no film investment is safe, no director’s creation is safe.’ Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, the first Chinese to receive the accolade. But novelists are subject to interference too. ‘I can clearly feel the impact of censorship when I write’ says Murong Xuecun. ‘For example, I’ll think of a sentence, and then realize that it will for sure get deleted. Then I won’t even write it down. This self-censoring is the worst.’ There are 143 Chinese authors in prison for dissent according to the campaign group The Independent Chinese PEN Center. It scarcely needs to be said that these are not the actions of the next cultural superpower.

Soft power also flows from political example. Much of the prestige of the US and Europe stems from the fact that so many people from around the world want to live in those countries. No matter how aggressively or recklessly certain developed states behave in the global arena, the West’s open institutions and their relative lack of corruption have a powerful attraction. It is impossible to say the same about China under the Communist Party. Authoritarian government and mass censorship have little global appeal, except perhaps to a handful of tyrants looking for new repressive techniques. My dinner companion, the Neocomm Yan Xuetong, has argued on another occasion that in the twenty-first century ‘the country that displays more human authority will win’. If this is the test, then China, under the present human rights abusing regime, has already lost, and our intellectual fretting over the wider implications of China’s belated economic catch-up represents an unwarranted loss of nerve in the power of the values of the open society. China is not, in short, about to take up a global mantle of cultural hegemony.

As these pages have noted, we have tendency to look into Chinese history to interpret the nation’s present. But one lesson somehow never seems to be drawn. Before the middle of the nineteenth century China was the largest economy in the world. In 1820 it accounted for 30 per cent of the globe’s economic output²² – more than Europe and the United States combined. Yet
in that era China’s influence was barely felt outside of East Asia. Instead, it was the far smaller maritime powers of Europe that turned the world of mighty China upside down. Economic size does not automatically translate into hegemony. Unless China reforms, it is perfectly conceivable that the country could, once again, be the world’s biggest economy, yet only a rather small influence beyond its borders.

**THE MINNOW AND THE WHALE**

If the trumped-up scare story of an authoritarian China becoming a global hegemon is placed to one side, a narrower question comes into focus: how dangerous is the Beijing regime? Could the Party menace East Asia and suck the US into a regional conflict? Again, the alarm is overblown. Even in its own backyard China is, at the moment, a military minnow compared to the US whale. Despite those increases in China’s military budget in recent decades, American spending on its armed services in 2012 was still eight times larger. The US budget was $700 billion in that year, against China’s $143 billion. Even in relative terms, China’s outlays were smaller, with the US spending 4.7 per cent of GDP on its military, against 2 per cent in China.

The US has fifty formal military alliances around the globe and 500,000 troops stationed abroad. Washington intends to keep 60 per cent of its navy in the Pacific for the foreseeable future. And Japan, Australia and South Korea all host American troops and bases. China only has formal allies in North Korea and Pakistan. And, of course, America has twenty times more nuclear warheads than China. There is a question mark over the capabilities of the Chinese military too. China might have three million soldiers, but few of its officers or troops have battlefield experience. China has not fought in a war since 1979, when it launched a punitive strike on Vietnam. Contrast that with the US whose forces have seen action in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq in the last 15 years alone.

Like all insecure autocracies, the Chinese government is unpredictable. There are some paranoid hardliners close to the centre of power who ignore all the economic assistance China has received from outsiders. Some senior
military officers, in common with the academic Neocomms, have convinced themselves that the West, in particular America, is attempting to thwart China’s economic rise. Colonel Liu Mingfu, a senior officer in the People’s Liberation Army argues that a military conflict with the US is inevitable and says it will be the ‘duel of the century’.

Yet there is no evidence that China seeks colonies abroad or that Beijing secretly desires to project its military power to all the corners of the earth. China’s conduct in Africa, which triggered Hillary Clinton’s lurid warning about neo-colonialism, has been subject to a great deal of misrepresentation. Chinese investment in the African continent has certainly soared, rising from $100m in 2003 to $12 billion in 2011. But, according to Deborah Brautigam, an American academic who has studied the role of Chinese companies in Africa in detail, these investments are not some kind of concealed territorial grab, but straightforward transactions: the Chinese build roads and factories in return for long-term commodity contracts.23

In the late nineteenth century some ten million people in the Belgian Congo, under the control of King Leopold II, were killed through murder, starvation and disease.24 If Congolese villagers failed to hit quotas of sufficient quantities of rubber to their colonial masters, squads of mercenaries were sent to slaughter them. The Belgian authorities demanded that these mercenaries cut off the hands of their victims to prove that their bullets had not been wasted. In German South-West Africa, modern-day Namibia, at the start of the twentieth century the Second Reich perpetrated genocide against the Herero and Nama people, forcing the rebellious cattle herders to starve to death in the Omaheke Desert. Survivors were put in concentration camps and forced to perform slave labour.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that what is taking place in Africa today, as Chinese investment flows in, cannot credibly be compared with the kind of barbaric treatment that Africans received from European states in the nineteenth century seeking ‘a place in the sun’. Indeed, many African states have welcomed the Chinese investment as a preferable alternative to Western aid. As for the abuses at Chinese-owned copper mines in Zambia, they should not be minimised, but Human Rights Watch reported that they
occurred because the Zambian government failed to enforce its own domestic labour laws. It is interesting to note that a 2012 BBC poll showed residents of African countries where China has heavily invested tended to be much more favourable to Beijing’s economic rise than many in the West. Some 89 per cent of Nigerians and 75 per cent of Kenyans felt positively towards China’s influence in the world, as compared with 42 per cent of Americans and 57 per cents of Britons. Those nations have trusted their own eyes, rather than listened to Chinese whispers.

What China’s rising African investment flows really underline is that Beijing’s priorities are essentially domestic. Commodity scarcity at home, not an imperial ideology, has compelled China to venture abroad. Indeed, it is this resource poverty that lies, in part, behind Beijing’s support for repressive regimes such as Iran and Sudan. China needs their oil more than it needs the good opinion of our own governments. In other words, Beijing’s foreign policy tends to be dictated by weakness, rather than strength.

THE ANGRY YOUTH

Li Jianli was beaten almost to death for driving the wrong sort of car. On Saturday 15 September 2012, Li, a 51-year-old factory worker, got into his Toyota Corolla in the city of Xi’an along with his wife and son and set off to look at some apartments they were considering buying. But when they reached the city centre the family was engulfed by an angry mob. The crowd surged around the car and some proceeded to smash it with steel bars. Li got out and pleaded with the assailants to stop. In doing so, he made himself a target. One of the thugs sprang towards the driver and battered him four times on the head with a metal bar. Li slumped against the back of a white van, blood pouring from his head. By the time he reached hospital Li was partially paralysed.

Li Jianli was attacked for one reason: he was driving a Japanese manufactured car. The attack in Xi’an was merely the foulest of many appalling incidents that took place in 85 cities across China that month. Crowds thronged on the streets attacking any ‘Japanese’ target they could find. Factories were looted,
shops trashed and vehicles vandalised. The violence was sparked by a flare-up in a long-running dispute between China and Japan over the sovereignty of some tiny, uninhabited, rocks in the East China Sea known by the Chinese as the Diaoyus and by the Japanese as the Senkakus.

Such episodes, understandably, raise questions. How nationalistic are the Chinese people? And, even if the regime’s priority is stability at home rather than expansion abroad, could popular sentiment force the party chiefs of Beijing into a military confrontation with a neighbour? Many point to an ominous trend. Under the rule of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping nationalist demonstrations were rare in China. But such eruptions of popular anger have become increasingly common over the past fifteen years. In 1999 there were hysterical anti-American protests in Beijing after the accidental Nato bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Balkan conflict, which killed three Chinese journalists. Protestors tried to burn the US consulate in Chengdu. Many foreigners working in China were stunned by the popular rage that the incident inspired and the conviction of many Chinese that the bombing must have been deliberate. The sceptical tone of one letter, published in the Guangming Daily, the newspaper to which two of the dead journalists belonged, was typical. ‘I believe that we should stop calling Nato’s bombing of our embassy a ”barbarous act” – a “terrorist act” would be more appropriate … Something “barbaric” stems from ignorance, but American-led Nato’s despicable act was clearly premeditated…This was a terrorist attack through and through.’

There was a further burst of rage two years later when an unmanned American surveillance plane collided with a Chinese jet over Hainan Island, killing the Chinese pilot. The Japanese were targets of popular protests in 2005 when Tokyo approved a school textbook that downplayed Japanese war crimes in China in the 1930s and 1940s. There were yet more outbreaks of anti-foreign resentment when the Olympic torch relay through the streets of Paris and London before the 2008 Beijing Olympics was disrupted by pro-Tibet protests. Netizens organised a boycott of Chinese branches of the French supermarket chain Carrefour in retaliation.

Dissent from angry nationalism seems to be an invitation to abuse. That
same year, 2008, Wang Qianyuan, a 21-year-old Chinese girl who was studying at Duke University in North Carolina, attempted to mediate during a face-off between pro-Tibet protestors and Chinese students on campus. When footage of her attempted peace-making was posted on the Internet, Wang was branded a ‘race traitor’. Nationalist netizens published the address of Wang’s family in Qingdao and encouraged others to intimidate them.

The nationalists are getting younger too. ‘Fen Qing’, or ‘angry youth’ are an increasingly common feature of Chinese life. These young men and women, most of them born after 1990, are intensely sensitive about perceived slights to China by other nations and tend to advocate violence as a response. It’s frequently said that these young hotheads scare even the Communist Party, reflected in the fact that officials have issued public pleas for calm when demonstrations have threatened to get out of hand.

Yet this image of a virulently nationalistic and mindlessly aggressive Chinese population is one more misleading caricature. There are many people in China who deplored the behaviour of the violent anti-Japanese rioters in 2012. During the disturbances in Xi’an one publicly spirited man stood by the roadside holding a homemade placard warning drivers of Japanese-made cars to turn back to avoid being attacked. His action was applauded online. And the attack on Li Jianli unleashed a deluge of condemnation from Chinese netizens. One was keen that the foreign media should not assume the mobs were representative of all Chinese: ‘Foreign reporters, when you cover anti-Japanese protests in various cities, can you please give up the use of terms that may hurt many innocent people by mistake, like “residents in Beijing” and “citizens of Shanghai”? Can you be more direct and accurate? Like “hundreds of suspicious people in Beijing,” “A great batch of dumb-asses in Shenzhen.”’

That netizen had a point. I live in London and would have been irritated if, during the 2011 riots, outsiders had assumed that everyone who resided in the British capital was committing arson on the streets, rather than recognising those acts as the responsibility of a criminal minority.

The attacks on Japanese property by thugs in China in recent years are deplorable. To interpret them simply as bursts of mindless rage would not
be especially helpful. There is a context that, while certainly not justification, does offer an explanation. Memories of the atrocities inflicted on the Chinese by the Japanese military during the Second World War are still vivid in China. My great uncle recalls being close to starvation during the Japanese occupation of Guangdong as civilians were forced to flee the advancing forces of General Hideki Tojo. In 1937 the Japanese military slaughtered more than 250,000 people in the city of Nanjing, most of them civilians. Two army officers, Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda, engaged in a competition to see which of them could behead more Chinese. There was no attempt to hide this war crime. The headline in the Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun newspaper on 13 December 1937 read: ‘Incredible record – Mukai 106, Noda 105 – Both 2nd Lieutenants go into extra innings.’

My cousin works in a large Western hotel in Guangzhou where many Japanese business visitors stay. ‘Relations are fine, we must be friends,’ she told me. ‘What we cannot accept is that if they try to deny what happened in the Second World War.’ That does not seem such an unreasonable position. Consider what the reaction would be in Europe if the German government approved textbooks for use in schools that downplayed the atrocities of the Nazis in the Second World War, the equivalent of what Tokyo did in 2005. What would happen if the Chancellor of the Federal Republic attended a memorial service at which Nazi war criminals were honoured, as Junichiro Koizumi did for their Japanese equivalents throughout his premiership in the 2000s when he visited the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo? One suspects that the outrage of the world would be loud. And would it not be justified?

But we also need some perspective. Shortly before the 2012 anti-Japanese riots I happened to be in Shanghai. In a noodle house on Nanjing South Road I got into a conversation with some cheerful students who turned out to be from my father’s home province of Guangdong. The connection, I was proudly informed, as we slurped beef noodles, made us ‘old kinfolk’ or ‘lao xing’. But the connection looked like it might be in jeopardy when I mentioned that I couldn’t see what all the fuss about the uninhabited Diaoyu islands was. Why not, I wondered aloud, simply abandon them? Let neither side have them. Unthinkable, I was told. One girl who had taken the English name Helen told
me that it was impossible for China to relinquish its territorial claim: ‘It’s important that China does not lose face.’ Her friend, Cherry, agreed: ‘It’s as if someone takes over a part of your house. No one would be able to accept that.’

Was this the angry youth before me, I wondered? And yet if it was, they didn’t seem hugely animated. The Diaoyus weren’t a subject that particularly interested the students. They preferred to talk about their desire to study abroad. I think most Chinese young people are like Helen and Cherry than those who go out to attack Corolla drivers, or the raging Fen Qing who fill Internet message boards with chauvinistic bile. The caricature of the Chinese as proto-Fascists, waiting to throw their support behind some sort of aggressive military adventure, is hard to recognise.

Yet there is no question that the Chinese are patriotic. And to understand the nature of Chinese patriotism we have to look at China’s recent history. We tend to assume that when China’s leaders relinquished Maoism they created an ideological vacuum in the society, which they have desperately filled with aggressive nationalism. It’s sometimes said that Chinese anti-colonial sentiment is a product of a successful party propaganda campaign that began in the late 1980s, with school children being raised on the ‘wolf’s milk’ of belligerently nationalistic history textbooks.

Those textbooks are certainly unhelpfully emotive when it comes to the nineteenth-century Opium Wars. As Yuan Weishi, a professor at Guangzhou’s Zhongshan University, has pointed out, they paint China as a passive victim of imperial aggression, ignoring cases of Chinese collaboration with Europeans. Yet it may be a mistake to interpret Chinese anti-colonial feeling as merely the consequence of state brainwashing.

In 1839 a Chinese official called Lin Zexu, who we met briefly in the education chapter, destroyed stocks of Indian-grown opium that the British had imported into China in contravention of imperial law. The British navy, in response, undertook a punitive strike on old Canton. The Chinese forces were swiftly routed and the Daoguang emperor was compelled to allow Britain to import opium at will. The British also seized control of the island of Hong Kong. The future British Prime Minister, William Gladstone (a man
presumably uninfluenced by modern Chinese textbooks) put the case against the military action in 1840: ‘A war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know, and I have not read of... [our] flag is hoisted to protect an infamous contraband traffic.’

The Qing rulers of China had banned the sale of opium in their territory out of a concern over its harmful social effects. The British state, under the influence of a merchant lobby, picked a fight and imposed the drug on Chinese markets by force. One can argue, as many Chinese do, that the Qing were foolish to attempt to insulate their country from European influence. But it is strange leap to argue that Chinese isolationism justified the conduct of the British or the other European powers that piled into China after Britannia had kicked the door open. One defence sometimes still aired is that the British were merely meeting a demand for the drug in China. By this rationale the Mexican military today would be justified in launching a bombardment of American border towns on the grounds that cocaine is popular in America and US prohibition is damaging the bottom line of its drug cartels. Some of the Qing aristocracy were partial to opium, say the apologists. Do they seriously believe that international relations should be established on the principle that nations with hypocritical rulers can legitimately be invaded? In the end all this desperate rationalisation demonstrates our own continuing state of denial when it comes to facing up to our colonial history.

China was never colonised in the manner of India or parts of Africa. Yet for most Chinese this is a distinction without a real difference. The Chinese state was forced to hand over territory and trading rights at gunpoint. And the state was subjected to a series of punitive expeditions by European, Japanese, American and Russian forces, including the one that looted and burned down the Summer Palace in 1860. Field Marshal ‘Everything’s all Sir Garnet’ Wolseley’s description of that event in his memoirs makes it clear this was an attempt by the British army to terrorise the population. ‘A gentle wind carried to Pekin dense clouds of smoke from this great conflagration, and covered its streets with a shower of burnt embers, which must have been to all classes silent evidences of our work of retribution. I am sure it was taken as
an intimation of what might befall the city and all its palaces unless our terms of peace were at once accepted.’ Wolseley added: ‘The great, the essential aim of our policy was to make all China realize that we were immeasurably the stronger, the more powerful nation’.

Other European nations were keen to teach the Chinese the same lesson. German troops were dispatched to China to protect Western citizens and commercial interests of the Second Reich after the Boxer Rebellion in 1899. Kaiser Wilhelm II addressed soldiers in the port of Bremerhaven as they prepared to set sail: ‘When you come upon the enemy, smite him. Pardon will not be given. Prisoners will not be taken. Whoever falls into your hands is forfeit. Once, a thousand years ago, the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one still potent in legend and tradition. May you in this way make the name German remembered in China for a thousand years so that no Chinaman will ever again dare to even squint at a German!’

The German troops lived up to this exhortation. Though they arrived too late to suppress the undoubtedly murderous Boxers, they behaved with extreme brutality in the Chinese countryside. And everyone knew in Europe knew it. The Kaiser’s reference to Attila in his speech was what won German troops the nickname of ‘Huns’ in the First World War. The soldiers of other nations were rapacious too. In the post-Boxer chaos, a French novelist and adventurer called Pierre Loti broke into the Forbidden City. ‘It is fun to open cupboards and chests every day to explore the marvels here. I left home with a single suitcase. I will return with a huge load of baggage’ he bragged in a letter to his wife. One does not need to be a frothing Fen Qing to feel distaste at such scenes. Our historians have a tendency to suck their teeth, shake their heads and point out that China ‘turned her back on the world’ during the Ming Dynasty when the emperor banned overseas expeditions. Yet one can imagine many ordinary Chinese, at the end of the traumatic nineteenth century, wishing that the nations of Europe had been equally disposed to mind their own business.

But there is another vital element in Chinese nationalism that the common view misses, namely its close historical association with the political reform movement. Liang Qichao was the cynosure of the reformist Chinese
intelligentsia in the late Qing era. And what radicalised Liang was China’s defeat by the modernised Japanese military in the war of 1895. The defeat, wrote Liang, had awoken the Chinese people ‘from the dream of 4,000 years’. He studied European political philosophers and came to the conclusion that the power of industrialised Western nations flowed from their political constitutions. These countries were powerful because they were democracies.

The constitutional monarchy that Liang advocated would create individual rights and involve the public in determining the fate of the nation, but it would also put national defence at the heart of political life. Liang’s rival, the republican dissident Sun Yat Sen, also built his programme around nationalism, making it one of his ‘Three Principles of the People’. The nationalist-democratic connections grew stronger as the years went by. The student protests and intellectual flowering known as the May Fourth movement was sparked in 1919 by widespread anger at the post-First World War Versailles Treaty, in which European powers determined to hand over Germany’s Chinese territories in Shandong to Japan, rather than returning them to China. The driving force behind May Fourth, Chen Duxiu, described why nationalism and democracy were both necessary for national salvation. ‘We have to follow the times, and nationalism has truly become the best means by which the Chinese can save themselves’ he argued. ‘To use this doctrine, the Chinese must first understand what it means … contemporary nationalisms refer to democratic nations, not nations of enslaved people.’

That ideological cord linking nationalism and political reform is as strong today as ever. Nationalists tend to advocate not only a more assertive foreign policy, but political liberalisation too. In 1999, after the protests outside the American embassy in Beijing, Wang Xiaodong, one of China’s Neocomm authors, denounced the state-controlled news channels for failing to report that the Chinese government had agreed to pay for damage sustained by the Beijing embassy building in the protests. Wang said that China needed a media that told the truth and a government that sought popular consent before making such concessions. He added, in a direct challenge to the Party, that people should have a right to vote out political leaders who failed to defend national interests. More recently, anti-Japanese protestors in 2012 in
Guangzhou carried a banner that read: ‘Turn fury into power. Desire political reform.’ The Communist Party might well fret about street nationalism getting out of hand and undermining China’s economy. But what terrifies the cadres still more is the prospect of being swept away by the nationalists’ pro-democratic tendencies.

One nationalist blogger, Li Chengpeng, wrote recently of how he became disillusioned with his own government when he learned that schools that collapsed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, killing hundreds of children, had been constructed to poor standards due to the corruption of local government officials. And Li called for a new kind of patriotism, one that put political reform at home first. ‘Patriotism is about constructing fewer extravagant offices for the bureaucrats and building more useful structures for farmers’ he said. ‘Patriotism is about drinking less baijiu [a Chinese spirit] using public money. Patriotism is about allowing people to move freely in our country and letting our children study in the city where they wish to study. Patriotism is about speaking more truth. Patriotism is about dignity for the Chinese people.’

This is not to argue that Chinese nationalism is some wholly benign force. But we must understand its progressive dimension. There is a lively debate in China about the right way for people to exhibit their patriotism. Yuan Weishi, the historian, came to prominence in 2006 when he wrote an essay for *Freezing Point*, a supplement of the state-controlled *China Youth Daily*, in which he criticised Chinese school history textbooks. In that essay Yuan advocated a progressive and open-minded patriotism. ‘It is obvious that we must love our country’ he wrote. ‘But there are two ways to love our country. One way is to inflame nationalistic passions … In the selection and presentation of historical materials, we will only use those that favour China whether they are true or false. The other choice is this: we analyse everything rationally; if it is right, it is right and if it is wrong, it is wrong; calm, objective and wholly regard and handle all conflicts with the outside.’

The Communist Party’s control of the school history curriculum and the regime’s constant references to China’s ‘century of humiliation’ will, no doubt, make it harder to attain this maturity. So will the fact that the regime
is incapable of facing up even to its own history. The twin twentieth-century disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are glossed over in school textbooks because they were the work of the Party. Yet there is no reason to believe a more mature and tolerant patriotism will forever be beyond the reach of the Chinese people. And there is no reason why the Chinese outlook must always be shaped by historic ‘resentments’, any more than those European nations that also suffered so grievously in the fires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like Russia, China must navigate the transition out of totalitarian Communism. Like India, it must come terms with the legacy of colonial violence. China faces steep challenges, but these challenges are not unique.

**COLONIAL DREAMS**

Meanwhile, we should attempt some honest introspection of our own. The constant talk of China ‘ruling the world’ betrays a mental universe still crowded with gunboats and pith helmets. Chinese investments in Africa, viewed through this prism, become not trade agreements between equal nations but a colonial-style resources grab, a repeat of the behaviour of Belgians in the Congo, the Germans in South-West Africa, or the British in Kenya. While we talk about protecting the ‘liberal democratic order’ our colonial fixation suggests that what is really worrying us is the prospect that China will have the opportunity to throw its weight around on the global stage in the manner of European states 150 year ago.

The endless talk of China becoming a new ‘superpower’ is just as revealing and out-dated. There is no doubt that America is influential and powerful, especially so since the implosion of the Soviet Union. But it hardly enjoys untrammelled power. The military quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq have exposed the limits of America to reshape the world in its own image through military might alone. Even with its massive economy and dominant military the US does not ‘rule the world’. And, more to the point, nor will China. Nor will any nation over the coming century. The entire concept is an illusion in an era of nuclear weapons and rising equality between nations. And if higher
living standards in China – and also India, Brazil and Turkey – will help to dispel that illusion so much the better.

Our fixation on nebulous concepts such as hegemony is dangerous because it distracts attention from the real geopolitical challenges of the century. With the end of the Cold War no great ideological differences over the economic future remain between the most powerful nations. China’s Communist Party is Communist in name only. All of the world’s major powers have a common interest in a host of areas, from counter-terrorism, to preventing nuclear proliferation, to security of global sea-lanes, to ensuring the stability of world trade and the robustness of global finance.

The Economist magazine argues that China’s economic rise has already made the rich world ‘worse off’ because the country’s appetite for naturals resources has pushed up global oil prices, making petrol more expensive.\(^\text{30}\) That’s one, somewhat selfish, way of looking at things. Another, more constructive, framing of the issue would be to interpret the higher fossil fuel prices as a market signal for all economies to develop alternative, sustainable, forms of energy, which will reduce the world’s dependence on finite and polluting hydrocarbon resources such as oil.

Above all else, the world’s nations have a mutual interest in environmental sustainability and preventing runaway climate change. China might be the world’s largest national producer of carbon dioxide emissions, but its emissions per capita are only a seventh of the US. Only 3 per cent of the Chinese population owns a car. The biosphere simply cannot cope with a world in which every Chinese has the energy inefficient lifestyle of a twenty-first-century American. The 2009 Copenhagen talks failed, but the urgency of the need for the nations of the world to co-operate to cap emissions and to develop new forms of low-carbon energy production has only intensified.

Runaway climate change would spell mutually assured ruin across the planet. Crops yields would collapse as average temperatures crept up, low-lying cities would be inundated by rising sea levels and the world would see hundreds of millions of environmental refugees. China is probably even more vulnerable in the early stages of global warming than Europe and America since it needs to feed a fifth of the world’s population with less than 10 per
cent of its arable land. The Middle Kingdom sits firmly in a global ‘arc of instability’ of areas likely to suffer acute water shortages by 2025.

In the context of such planetary-scale challenges the concept of ‘ruling the world’ feels irrelevant. Western alarmists and Chinese militant nationalists who talk up the inevitability of military confrontation are two cheeks of the same wobbling posterior, each seeming to justify the other’s existence. In an era when the major threat is environmental collapse it threatens to be truly disastrous if international relations become framed as a game of chess, a zero-sum exercise in which one player must win and one must lose.

This is not to say that our governments can afford to be complacent about the behaviour of the regime in China. The US and Europe should understand they are dealing with an inherently unstable autocracy. It is conceivable that desperate leaders in Beijing might, one day, take up arms in the East or South China Seas in order to distract public attention from some domestic scandal. Alternatively, they might feel too weak to avoid a conflict, with chaotic events forcing their hand. There is plenty of scope for accidents to happen. A collision between Japanese and Chinese vessels in the East China Sea has already created one spark in recent years. Responsible nations have no choice but to treat this danger as a fact of life – and to try to head off a conflict early, or end it through negotiation if they cannot.

Yan Xuetong may be right that threats to the lives of Chinese workers abroad will trigger a Chinese military intervention abroad. Public pressure could demand it. That is not so unusual. Exactly the same social demands weigh on Western politicians. The goal of our leaders should not be to frustrate that impulse, but rather to channel it through the world’s existing multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. There is already a platform to build on. China already has more troops and police (1,870 in 2012) deployed on United Nations peacekeeping missions than the US, Russia and the UK combined.

Our challenge over the coming decades will be to break out of the mental chains of paranoia and to end the counterproductive obsession with inappropriate concepts such as hegemony. Fretting about the aggregate size of China’s economy is an invitation not to thought, but to thoughtless fear.
If we treat China like an enemy it is liable to become one. The mentality of a zero sum world will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Both sides need to accept the inevitability of greater international equality and multilateralism if the challenges facing the peoples of all nations are to be properly addressed, never mind solved. The world needs to be saved, not ruled.
NOTES

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