

Three Kingdoms:

Three Paths for China's Future

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Introduction

On June 22nd, 2015, I joined hundreds of American and Chinese representatives to attend the opening ceremony of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. At the ceremony, I heard two competing views about China's behavior on the world stage. Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong and U.S. Secretary John Kerry praised China for becoming a world leader, helping the U.S. to fight Ebola, bring Iran to the negotiation table, and jointly develop Afghanistan. But Vice President Joe Biden took a more negative stance. He said that if China really wants to be a "responsible competitor," it must respect international law, ensure freedom of the seas, and protect human rights.¹

Despite more than 200 years of Sino-U.S. relations, China still remains an enigma to American policy makers and scholars. Will China play along with the existing international order, or will it seek to undermine the system and establish a new one that better serves its interests? One way to anticipate China's future behavior is to look at its past. William Alford observed that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has a close "intimacy with history" in which "scholars, bureaucrats, and ordinary people alike...draw examples from the Chinese past to illustrate points about the present."² Today, Chinese leaders still draw on China's 5,000 years of ancient texts for wisdom to devise modern strategy. They use lessons from historical eras like the Warring States Period (475BC-221BC) and ancient military texts such as the *Thirty Six Strategems* and Sunzi's *Art of War* to inform their political, economic, and military strategies today.

¹ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/244120.htm>

² Quoted in Christopher Ford. *The Mind of Empire: China's History and Modern Foreign Relations*. University of Kentucky Press, 2010. 15

However, scholars have paid little attention to another important era in Chinese history: The Three Kingdoms period (220AD-280AD). This period, expressed in Luo Guanzhong's Chinese classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, continues to be a source of relevance for Chinese society. Mao Zedong frequently quoted *Three Kingdoms* in his speeches. In 1943, he encouraged his Communist comrades to come together to defeat the Guomindang, saying "three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the master mind."³ This common idiom alludes to the famous *Three Kingdoms* military strategist, Zhuge Liang. In a June 1953 speech to the Communist Youth League, Mao encouraged the young audience to be "present-day Zhou Yushu," referring to a young military general from the Three Kingdoms era.⁴ Years later, Deng Xiaoping called Cao Cao a "first-class politician" who was able to "unify China" under one mission.⁵

Chinese President Xi Jinping has also alluded to Three Kingdoms in his professional career. When Xi was sent to the countryside town of Liangjiahe during the Cultural Revolution in 1968, he often shared stories with his colleagues about classic Chinese novels like *Three Kingdoms* as they slept in a lice-infested cave.⁶ In a November 2015 speech in Singapore, Xi said that the characters from classics such as *Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* demonstrate the core values of the Chinese people: loyalty, humility, and determination.⁷ In China today, references of the Three Kingdoms "pepper everyday speech at least as much as Western

³ Select Works of Mao Zedong. *Get Organized!* November 29, 1943.

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_17.htm

⁴ Select Works of Mao Zedong. *The Youth League in its Work Must Take the Characteristics of Youth into Consideration*. June 30, 1953. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_29.htm

⁵ 袁永松, 邓小平评历史, Volume 3, 中国言实出版社, 1998. 2,421

⁶ John Garnaut. *The Creation Myth of Xi Jinping*. Foreign Policy Magazine. October, 19th, 2012.

⁷ 新华网:习近平在新加坡国立大学的演讲。November 7, 2015. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-11/07/c_1117071978.htm

Europeans might allude to Grimm’s fairy tales, biblical stories, or Greek myths.”⁸ It is for this reason, then, that the Three Kingdoms analogy can be used as a framework to analyze China’s political, economic, and military strategies.

This framework is not a crystal ball to see into the minds of Chinese leaders. Nor am I suggesting that Chinese leaders dwell on Three Kingdoms all day to inform their decisions. It is a tool that U.S. and Chinese academics and policymakers can use to better understand what China’s aspirations might be in the future and what means it might use to get there. This framework can also serve U.S. decision makers as a blueprint—a game plan—for U.S. response to China’s behavior.

Historical Analogy with the Three Kingdoms

The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* focuses on the time period after the fall of the Han dynasty in 220AD. The once united China fractures into a fierce contest amongst warlords, all bent on reuniting the country. Eventually, three kingdoms emerge as the main contenders: The Shu, Wu, and Wei.⁹ The first is the Shu Kingdom, which reflects humane authority.¹⁰ The Shu emperor Liu Bei personified the sage king. Liu Bei relied heavily on his reputation as a virtuous, benevolent man who strictly followed the law to establish himself as the humane authority. Every time his army took territory, Liu Bei made sure to win the local people’s trust by refraining from levying taxes and appointing locals to administer the area. As a leader, Liu Bei did not rely on his own ideas; he had a circle of faithful strategic advisors. In dealing with the two enemy states, Shu allied with Wu to fight against the stronger Wei. A country trying to act

⁸ Christopher Ford. *The Mind of Empire*. 15

⁹ Chen Shou. *Record of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi)*; Luo Guanzhong. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

¹⁰ Yan Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton University Press. 2011

like the Shu kingdom would want to demonstrate moral leadership in the international arena, help set peaceful standards that other states could emulate, and rely on forging alliances with other powers to reach shared goals.

On the contrary, the Wei Kingdom represents tyranny. The main villain of the Three Kingdoms is Cao Cao, a ruthless leader who used alliances to turn neighboring states into vassals, and routinely broke those alliances as soon as he saw an opening to strike. Cao Cao's famous quote in the story is "I would rather betray the whole world than have the world betray me." In 196AD, Cao Cao held the Han emperor Xian ransom at the city of Xuchang, and made all the feudal lords surrender to his command. Cao Cao connived and schemed his way into building up a powerful army, eventually powerful enough to defeat seemingly superior enemies; he defeated the mighty Yuan Shao at the battle of Guandu; tricked and defeated Lu Bu, one of the most famous warlords in that era; and established Wei as the most powerful of the three kingdoms. Several leaders, especially Liu Bei, accused Cao Cao of being a traitor to the emperor and lacking moral standing. But Cao Cao believed the world needed a harsh, strong leader to control it. Cao Cao's worldview was one in which a truly ambitious man could rule the whole world. Thus his ultimate goal was world domination. A state that mimics the Wei kingdom would engage in unequal agreements that only benefit itself, and look for ways to oppress its neighbors in order to become regionally and globally dominant.

Finally, the Wu Kingdom represents regional hegemony.¹¹ The Wu king Sun Quan had no grand ambitions like Liu Bei and the Shu kingdom to be the moral leader of the world. Nor was he a ruthless dictator like Cao Cao of the Wei kingdom. Sun Quan's ambitions were quite

¹¹ Hegemony in ancient Chinese culture is automatically assumed to be *regional*, not *global*. For more on the ancient Chinese philosophical distinction between Humane Authority, Tyranny, and Hegemony, see Yan Xuetong's *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 86-91

limited; he only wanted the Wu kingdom to keep the Riverlands and remain an important sea power. However, the Wu Kingdom fought tooth and nail to keep its independence and hegemony over its sovereign territory. When the Wei kingdom attacked the Riverlands at the Battle of Chibi, Wu joined forces with Shu to protect the homeland. When the Shu kingdom borrowed the land Jingzhou with no intention of giving it back, Sun Quan's military advisor Zhou Yu tried several times to retrieve Jingzhou, and his successor Lu Xun eventually succeeded. Finally, when Liu Bei of Shu led an attack against Wu as retaliation for the death of his brother Guan Yu, Wu commander Lu Xun defeated Liu Bei's army at the battle of Yiling. Therefore, a hegemon wants to be the sole leader of its region, but has no larger aspiration for global conquest. It also adopts its own independent interpretation of values and norms.

Three Kingdoms teaches valuable lessons about life and statecraft. The first is the seeming inevitability of order and chaos in China. The book begins with the adage: "a nation long united must divide, long divided must unite."¹² After the Han dynasty falls, China fractures into three territories, then becomes united once again under the Jin dynasty, proof of the perpetual dynastic cycle. Another lesson is the importance of fierce loyalty to one's kinsmen and country. Liu Bei is loyal to the Han dynasty and spends his whole life to restore it. The pact that Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu make at the peach tree signify their unshakeable bond. Zhao Yun, one of Liu Bei's generals, is depicted as the perfect soldier because of his unshakeable fidelity. Conversely, Cao Cao knows no loyalty; he takes the young emperor hostage and breaks alliances just as quickly as he makes them. For this reason, Cao Cao gains the pejorative name of "Cao Zei" (traitor Cao).

Leaders and scholars in Chinese history have also drawn lessons from the Three Kingdoms. Lai Sing Lam, argued that Mao Zedong's foreign policy towards the U.S. and the Soviet Union

¹² Luo Guanzhong, Moss Roberts (translator). *Three Kingdoms: Classic Novel in Four Volumes*. Foreign Languages Press. 1995.

from 1950-1975 was based on the *Three Kingdoms*.¹³ According to Lam, Mao's foreign policy was inspired by "Zhuge (Liang)'s international order of tripolarity, which entailed allying with the weaker power against the stronger one. In *Three Kingdoms*, the weaker Shu and Wu kingdoms joined forces to defeat the stronger Wei at the decisive Battle of Chibi (also known as Redcliff) in 208 AD. In Mao's case, this meant colluding with the Soviets against the U.S. from 1950-1969. But Mao realized that Shu's strategy of *always* allying with Wu against Wei did not give it the flexibility to switch sides when the old alliance outlived its usefulness. This mistake eventually led to Shu's demise. Mao avoided that mistake by being flexible with his alliance. After the Sino-Soviet war of 1969, Mao realized that he needed a new ally against the Soviets. This led to the rapprochement with the U.S. in 1971 and subsequent Sino-U.S. cooperation against the Soviets until his death in 1976. Such Three Kingdoms alliance analogies are prevalent even today in Chinese media. In a 2014 article published by the Chinese website Sohu, the author compared South Korea's "ally with China, resist Japan" (联中抗日) strategy with the Shu-Wu alliance against Wei.¹⁴ In 2013, NDTV, a New York-based Chinese news channel that criticizes the Chinese Communist Party, released an opinion article saying that deeper Chinese-Russian cooperation against Japan and the U.S. is a new Three Kingdoms tale.¹⁵

The new Three Kingdoms framework I introduce in this paper provides three distinct levels of analysis for Chinese strategy: 1) World order, 2) Diplomatic tools, and 3) Military stratagem. I will look at China's recent actions to examine how China behaves like each of the Three Kingdoms.

¹³ Lai Sing Lam, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Mao's Global Order of Tripolarity*. Peter Lang AG, 2011.

¹⁴ Xu Mingjie, 习近平访韩背后：中日韩“三国演义。” Sohu. July 7th, 2014.

¹⁵ “习近平安倍于普京合演新三国演义” NDTV. May 25, 2013.

Hegemony- The Wu Kingdom

The first strategy China can execute is the Wu strategy: become a major regional player, but have no grander ambitions past Asia. Wu's emperor, Sun Quan (182-252AD), viewed himself as the rightful heir of the Riverlands in Southeast China. His older brother Sun Ce and father Sun Jian had both ruled the Riverlands ever since Sun Quan could remember. He had a deep knowledge of the land his ancestors owned, and he consolidated power and earned the respect of other rulers in it. Therefore, Sun Quan's world view was limited; he wanted to continue his family's reign and fend off any attempts at influence or conquest from the Wei or Shu kingdoms. Likewise, China's aspirations may also be limited to Asia. China has always seen itself as the rightful ruler of Asia, and there are several reasons why it feels this way. The first reason is its geography. Robert Ross states, "geography determines whether a country has the prerequisites of great power status; it determines which states *can* be great powers."¹⁶ China has all the prerequisites to be the great power of Asia, including "natural resources to sustain economic development and strategic autonomy," privilege as a "major trading country," "extensive use of international markets and capital," and an "industrial base and infrastructure."¹⁷ None of China's contenders in the region have the geographic capabilities to control Asia. Japan's small size and external dependence for natural resources make it a second rank power, and Russia's presence in Northeast Asia has always been weak, due to the "inhospitable geography separating the Russian Far East from western Russia."¹⁸ Of all the countries of Asia, only China has the central location, natural resources, and healthy economy to be its hegemon.

¹⁶ Robert Ross. *The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the 21st Century*. International Security, 1999. 81

¹⁷ Ibid. 93

¹⁸ Ibid. 87

The second reason is China's history. For many millennia Asia was ordered based on a tributary system with China at its summit. For years it was the undisputed cultural, political and economic center of Asia. Representatives of China's vassal states in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and elsewhere traveled to pay their respects to the emperor, who ruled with benevolence and virtue. Christopher Ford calls this system "Sinic monism," which comes from "cultural baggage" handed down by the great Chinese philosopher Confucius himself. To Confucius, sinic monism is a "moral geography of imperium: a hierarchical or 'vertical' conception of political order."¹⁹ But this tributary system never expanded past Asia, which suggests that there is no historical justification for further Chinese global conquest. Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis observed that Chinese territorial ambitions were largely limited to its immediate periphery; while it established suzerainties with Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, China was "largely self-sufficient" and "internally-oriented," and stopped its expansion at the Asian littoral.²⁰ Henry Kissinger noted that, despite being technologically and economically superior to its neighbors, China had very little ambitions past Asia: "As early as the Song Dynasty (960-1279), China led the world in nautical technology; its fleets could have carried the empire into an era of conquest and exploration. Yet China acquired no overseas colonies and showed relatively little interest in the countries beyond its coast."²¹ During the Ming Dynasty, Admiral Zheng He and his Treasure Fleet—which dwarfed the Portuguese caravans at that time—sailed as far as East Africa, yet he did not bring conquest with commerce. While Chinese leaders want all countries in the *region* to

¹⁹ Christopher Ford. *The Mind of Empire*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 5

²⁰ Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis. *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future*. RAND Corporation, 2000. 18

²¹ Henry Kissinger. *On China*. Penguin Books. 2011. 8

acknowledge the overlordship of Beijing, history and culture prove that China's ambitions do not extend beyond Asia.²²

To secure hegemony over the Riverlands, Sun Quan formed alliances with weaker leaders and pushed out Wei and Shu influence in the smaller provinces surrounding it. Likewise, China seeks to demonstrate leadership in Asia in the political, security and economic spheres, and push Western influence out. Chinese president Xi Jinping has fiercely implemented an anticorruption campaign at home, and while some scholars believe that Xi is using this campaign as a way to purge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of his political opponents, he is also doing it in order to establish the CCP as a moral political authority that his people will accept, and his neighbors in Asia will emulate.²³ In terms of regional security, China has taken the lead by promoting new Asian security initiatives that exclude the U.S. China currently leads the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security organization that includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. China is one of the SCO's largest financiers, injecting billions of dollars of loans to member states through the SCO Business Council and Development Fund.²⁴ China does not want to stop there. President Xi wants to build a new Asia-Pacific security structure with only Asian countries.²⁵ At a security conference in May 2014, Xi declared that "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia."²⁶

On the economic front, China has strengthened economic relations with other Asian countries. It is South Korea's number one export market, and Vietnam and Japan's leading

²² Quoted in Christopher Ford. *The Mind of Empire*. 8

²³ Elizabeth Economy. *China's Imperial President*. Foreign Affairs. November/December 2014. 88

²⁴ Julie Boland. *Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Lost Decade? A Partner for the U.S.?* Brookings Institution. Washington, DC. June 20, 2011. 4

²⁵ Elizabeth Economy. *China's Imperial President*. 88

²⁶ *Ibid.* 88

source of imports.²⁷ But China's major move for regional economic influence is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). There are four goals for the AIIB. The AIIB's two main goals are to "foster sustainable economic development, create wealth and improve infrastructure connectivity in Asia"; and "promote regional cooperation and partnership in addressing development challenges by working in close collaboration with other multilateral and bilateral development institutions."²⁸ These challenges amount to a hefty sum; according to the Asian Development Bank, Asia needs \$8 trillion in infrastructure investment by 2020.²⁹ The AIIB hopes to work in tandem with existing international organizations, as well as private and public investors, to help Asia meet that target.

A third goal of the AIIB is to give itself and other emerging economies a greater say in setting international economic policy. From China's point of view, the current international financial institutions are dominated by wealthy, Western nations—mostly by the United States. As the second largest economy in the world, China only has a measly 4.82% of the voting share in the World Bank (up from 2.77% before 2010, but still relatively small)³⁰, 3.81% in the IMF, and 5.474% in the ADB.³¹ The U.S.: 16.10%, 16.74% and 12.747% in those same institutions.³² Seemingly more unfair is the pattern of leadership in these institutions: the World Bank is led by an American; the IMF, a European; and the ADB, a Japanese.³³ For these reasons, China hopes the AIIB will rectify this perceived unfairness and give voice to developing countries through the

²⁷ World Trade Organization. Country Profile: China, Korea, Japan-stat.wto.org

²⁸ Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's Articles of Agreement

²⁹ Mark Magnier and Cris Larano, *Seven Stragglers Leave AIIB Crowd at an Even 50*. Wall Street Journal. June 29, 2015.

³⁰ Lesley Wroughton. *China Gains Clout in World Bank Vote Shift*. Reuters. April 25, 2010.

³¹ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/BODINT/Resources/278027-1215524804501/IBRDCountryVotingTable.pdf>;
<https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/members.aspx>;
<http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/page/30786/oi-appendix1.pdf>

³² Ibid.

³³ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/critics-question-why-american-must-lead-world-bank/>;
<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/04/27/asian-development-bank-defies-g20/>

bank. Several countries have bought into China's offer; as of now, the bank has 57 members, most of them from developing Asian and Middle Eastern countries (with a few developed European powers sprinkled throughout). And unlike the ADB which limits its financial bids to only member states, the AIIB will open its bids up to all states, regardless of membership.³⁴ This means that American and Japanese companies can compete with AIIB contracts without actually joining the bank.³⁵ Another distinguishing feature of the AIIB is that it will not "interfere in the political affairs of any member."³⁶ This is in stark contrast to the World Bank and IMF's "Washington Consensus," which requires a state to reform and open up its political and economic structure according to neoliberal policies before it can receive World Bank or IMF funds.³⁷ Thus the AIIB represents yet another example of China's effort to move in as the undisputed leader of Asia and push foreign influence out.

Sun Quan was wary about alliances with either of the two other kingdoms because he feared that he would have to relinquish autonomy of the Riverlands. To safeguard against that possibility, Sun Quan's main advisor, Lu Su, offered the following advice: "If Wei is strong, ally with Shu. If Shu is strong, ally with Wei."³⁸ Sure enough, in 208 AD, Wu joined forces with Shu to defeat the stronger Wei at the decisive Battle of Chibi, also known as the Battle of Red Cliff. Together, Wu and Shu executed a successful naval campaign against Cao Cao and the Wei, setting fire to all of Wei's ships and scattering Wei soldiers. Later on, in 222AD, Wu reversed its alliance. Sun Quan agreed to become a vassal state of the Wei kingdom so that it could focus its forces against the invading Shu kingdom. That move eventually led to the Battle of Yiling,

³⁴ Mark Magnier. *How China Plans to Run the AIIB: Leaner, with Veto*. Wall Street Journal. June 8, 2015

³⁵ Jane Perlez. *China Creates a World Bank of Its Own, and the U.S. Balks*. New York Times. December 4, 2015

³⁶ AIIB Articles of Agreement. Article 31

³⁷ <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story094/en/>

³⁸ 三国电视剧. China Central Television Production. Episode 54. 2010

where Wu—again setting fire to the forest where Liu Bei’s troops were stationed—soundly defeated the Shu army. These two battles show the importance of allying with the secondary enemy in order to thwart your main enemy. As mentioned earlier, Mao used this same strategy to form his triangular diplomacy to collude with the Soviets against the U.S. from 1950-1969, then allied with the U.S. against the U.S.S.R. from 1971 onwards. Since the end of the Cold War, China has looked to the U.S. as an economic ally, receiving billions of dollars in foreign direct investment. But as China rises and its interests become more at odds with U.S. interests, China is finding other allies; its budding economic agreement with Russia, its new AIIB, and its efforts to strengthen the SCO all point to alliances to counteract Western influence in the form of US economic prowess, the World Bank and IMF, and NATO.

China is developing military capabilities to back up its political, security and economic strategy to ensure its dominance in Asia. China has created a military strategy tailor-made to keep out foreign—especially U.S.—military presence in the region. This strategy is largely defensive in nature, which has to do with China’s strategic culture. John King Fairbank observed that throughout its history, China has had the propensity to discourage offensive war. Scholars and government officials were lauded more than military heroes. In several dynasties the civilian bureaucracy transcended military officers. Even the ancient teachings of Mencius and Confucius stressed the “disesteem of warfare,” and Sunzi the notion of “not fighting and subduing the enemy.”³⁹ Fairbank’s observation sums up China’s inherent aversion to war: "To resort to *wu* (武, warfare) (is) an admission of bankruptcy in the pursuit of *wen* (文, civilized way)...Herein lies the pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition.”⁴⁰

³⁹ John K. Fairbank. *Chinese Ways of Warfare*. Harvard University Press, 1974. 5

⁴⁰ John K. Fairbank. *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations*. Knopf Publishing, 1975. 6-7

Despite its strategic culture that frowns upon war, China does recognize the need for self-defense. Yan Xuetong notes that the pre-Qin thinkers believed that “given that the international order and norms are not yet able to effectively prevent war breaking out,” China “should mainly rely on its own military construction to maintain its own peaceful environment.”⁴¹ Ye Zicheng also suggests that China should prepare against being attacked at sea. “China has been invaded from the sea more than a hundred times since 1842,” he writes, “bringing great harm to the country.”⁴² Therefore, China has prepared to never be invaded from sea again and to keep out Western invaders.

These historical and cultural principles are evident in China’s current strategy with regard to the use of force. According to People’s Liberation Army (PLA) generals Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, China’s overarching goal is to limit the amount of foreign influence coming into the country and the region in general to ensure its national security: “We have to be on high alert at any time to the outside attempts to dominate the direction of China’s development, to separate, Westernize and weaken China.”⁴³ They predict that China’s future war will be a high tech, local war located on its “borders and seacoasts.”⁴⁴ Colonel Xu Weidi also identified two possible zones of future conflict: the East Asian littoral and the Eurasian zone—both areas that fall under China’s sphere of influence.⁴⁵ Peng, Yao and Xu all recognize, however, that China may have to fight a technologically superior country like the United States in order to secure these spheres of influence. Despite China being technologically inferior, these PLA officers believe that China can still defeat the U.S. by relying on People’s War. Peng says that the “unity of the masses to

⁴¹ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. 63

⁴² Ye Zicheng, *Inside China’s Grand Strategy*. 67

⁴³ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi. *Science of Military Strategy*. Military Science Publishing House, 2005. 446

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 449

⁴⁵ Michael Pillsbury. *China Debates the Future Security Environment*. National Defense University Press, 2000. 2

support the war...(is) the decisive factor to gain victory.”⁴⁶ Hugh White echoes this notion that the Chinese people would fight much harder than any foreign invader to maintain supremacy in Asia. He argues that the U.S. is a global power with “interests and objectives in many parts of the world, while China is, and will remain for many decades at least, primarily an Asian Power.”⁴⁷ In other words, White asserts that China will risk a war of attrition in order to ensure its supremacy in Asia, and doubts the U.S. would do the same.

Another strategy China has developed to keep the U.S. out of Asia is the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy. China has methodically developed asymmetric weapons systems around the first and second island chains to counter U.S. naval ships. Examples of this include high speed Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles like the *Sunburn* and the *Sizzler* that can “bust” aircraft carriers; Anti-Satellite missiles and electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapons to disrupt U.S. communication and reconnaissance systems; and stealth submarines to sink U.S. naval ships and potentially frustrate U.S. supply lines for ammunition, fuel, and other resources necessary to wage war across the Pacific.⁴⁸ This strategy, called the *shashoujian* 杀手锏, or “Assassin’s Mace,”⁴⁹ will render U.S. advanced technology useless, and raise the stakes for the U.S. so high that it deters any future involvement in Asia.

In terms of leadership and diplomacy, the Wu kingdom consistently adhered to its own domestic policies without any influence from outside norms. Likewise, China has carved out its independent interpretation of international norms, such as intellectual property rights. William P. Alford believes that there is a fundamental historical, cultural, and philosophical difference in the

⁴⁶ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi. *Science of Military Strategy*. 451

⁴⁷ Hugh White. *The China Choice*. Oxford University Press, 2012. 66

⁴⁸ Aaron Friedberg. *Beyond Air-Sea Battle*. The International Institute of Strategic Studies. 31

⁴⁹ Michael Pillsbury. *Chapter 7: The Assassin’s Mace. The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt & Company, New York. 2015.

way intellectual property is viewed in the West and in China. As early as the Tang Dynasty, the government saw copyrights and patents as a way to limit publication of articles or books that were anti-establishment. In the West, however, the government used copyrights as a way to spur competition and grant monopolies. China's Confucian disdain for making profit remained a salient part of its culture, so intellectual property as a lucrative tool never took hold. After the Opium Wars, the British and Americans tried to force the Western idea of intellectual property on China, but met staunch resistance for almost a century.⁵⁰ Even nowadays, no matter how many times Western firms litigate Chinese firms, the Chinese and Western idea of intellectual property cannot be reconciled because of their historical and cultural differences. As long as intellectual property rights are defined through a Western lens, China will not conform to the international norm of intellectual property.

China's environmental policy shows independent, hegemonic tendencies. While the West, and particularly the U.S., want China to do more to curb its environmental pollution, China's view is very different. Since the rich countries have exploited more of the world's natural resources during early industrialization, then they should be responsible to comply with environmental protection policies. While China recognizes its own responsibility as well, it is also hesitant to compromise its meteoric economic growth for environmental protection. Chan notes that despite the fact that China already has a comprehensive body of environmental protection laws, they are rarely followed because of "competing interests, a low level of legal understanding, inconsistencies in some areas of law and the widespread practice of corruption at many levels of government."⁵¹ In 2003, for instance, despite the Chinese federal government's effort to close tens of thousands of small mines producing low-grade coal, local governments

⁵⁰ William P. Alford. *To Steal a Book is an Elegant Offense*. Stanford University Press. 1995, 49

⁵¹ Gerald Chan. *China's Compliance*. 156

were reluctant to comply for fear that shutting down those mines would create social unrest due to unemployment.⁵² In 2015, after the release of ‘Under the Dome,’ a TED Talk-style documentary that sheds light on China’s rampant environmental problems, Beijing took the video down from the internet. The film, produced and narrated by former China Central Television (CCTV) investigative reporter Chai Jing, spread the message that China should stop focusing on economic growth and more on environmental protection. Such thoughts were seen as inimical to the government’s overall economic strategy, and therefore were stifled by the Communist Party.⁵³

This does not mean that there has not been progress. China’s ratification of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol limiting greenhouse gas emissions was significant, and the proliferation of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China have kept the issue high on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) priority list. Even ‘Under the Dome’ pushed prominent Chinese leaders to be more vocal about environmental protection. The minister of environmental protection praised Chai Jing for “drawing the public’s attention to the environment from a unique public health perspective. Premier Li Keqiang said “environmental pollution is a blight on people’s quality of life and a trouble that weighs on their hearts.” Even President Xi Jinping declared that he would punish polluters “with an iron hand.”⁵⁴ Yet environmental damage still persists, and its prevalence is miring China’s image in its periphery and around the world.

Like the Wu Kingdom, China’s long term strategy may not be a plan to reinvent the whole world in the image of Confucius and Mao. Instead, China’s main goal is to reclaim its rightful place as the moral, economic, and military “Middle Kingdom” of Asia and Asia alone. It is

⁵² Keith Barsher. ‘China’s Boom Adds to Global Warming Problem.’ New York Times. October 22nd, 2003.

⁵³ Daniel K. Gardner. *China’s ‘Silent Spring’ Moment?* New York Times. March 18, 2015

⁵⁴ Ibid.

trying to achieve this goal by creating a grand strategy that firmly establishes Asia as China's sphere of influence, similar to the U.S.'s version of the Monroe Doctrine. To add teeth to its aspirations, China has developed a methodical A2/AD military strategy built on deterring U.S. involvement in Asia. However, Sun Quan's Wu Kingdom ends up becoming a victim of its limited aspirations. As the Wei and Shu kingdoms expanded, Wu's regional influence diminished. The Wu kingdom becomes the vassal state of—and is eventually absorbed by—the Wei kingdom. Therefore, the lesson for Chinese decision makers may be that simply aspiring to regional hegemony risks being dominated by a much larger power. The Chinese are deeply fearful of westernization and other outside ideologies that could transform China from within. The United States, then, can be seen as a dangerous nation that seeks to change others into its own image. In other words, the Wu Strategy might not be enough for China to ensure national survival.

Tyranny-The Wei Kingdom

Analyzing its actions another way, China may also be following the path of the Wei kingdom, practicing tyranny instead of hegemony. The Wei emperor, Cao Cao (155-220AD), supposedly used guile and deception and ruthlessly subjugated weaker rulers to expand his kingdom.⁵⁵ He essentially kidnapped the young Emperor Xian in order to gain legitimacy of the Han Dynasty, mercilessly defeated warlords such as Dong Zhuo, Lu Bu, and Yuan Shao, and cunningly deceived subordinates and allies. Likewise, China uses its economic influence to

⁵⁵ Luo Guanzhong's historical fiction *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* popularized the depiction of Cao Cao as a ruthless, evil emperor. However, scholars have argued that Cao Cao's actions were unfairly judged by Luo, and that he was not as bad as Luo described.

coerce weaker states into submission. According to Michael Pillsbury, China sees the world as a “giant *wei qi* game board,” referring to an ancient Chinese game where each player must use his pieces to surround his opponent’s pieces to deny them access to expand.⁵⁶ In China’s worldview, each country competes for ever dwindling natural resources such as copper, oil, and lithium. The ultimate goal, then, is to gain as many natural resources for yourself and deny your competitors access. This “peak oil” theory—that energy supplies will soon be exhausted and prices will consequently skyrocket--makes China paranoid and increasingly aggressive in ensuring energy security. “In their (the Chinese) thinking,” Pillsbury posits, “wars over natural resources are inevitable in the decades ahead, and therefore China must buy resources overseas and stockpile them at home, while denying scarce resources to others.”⁵⁷

Julia Bader’s recent analysis on China’s foreign relations suggests that China actively supports autocracies in other countries in order to more effectively extract natural resources. Two examples that she cites are Burma and Cambodia. In the case of Burma, China took advantage of an unstable region in that country in order to extract the resources it needed. Concerned about drug trafficking across the China-Burma border in 2003 and 2005, China pressured Burma to issue an opium ban. Consequently, many Burmese farmers lost a substantial amount of their income. China then encouraged its companies to invest in rubber, tea, or sugarcane plantations. But as Bader observed, “these projects did not significantly profit the population.”⁵⁸ Chinese businessmen also charged Burmese farmers for the road construction to the fields and forced them to sell their crops back. Some farmers even reported that they were “forced to work on

⁵⁶ Michael Pillsbury. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt & Company, New York, 2015. 161.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 160.

⁵⁸ Julia Bader. *China’s Foreign Relations and the Survival of Autocracies*. Routledge Publishing, 2015. 61-62

plantations or to grow specific crops on their land without clear agreements on payment, let alone contracts.”⁵⁹

In return for increased economic relations with China, Burma supported issues of importance to China, like the ‘One China’ policy, recognizing that Taiwan is a province of China and the Dalai Lama is a persona non grata. Now for every bit of ruthless foreign policy there is also a soft side of power. The Chinese government persuaded their businesses in Burma to build schools near oil pipelines in the area. The Chinese embassy in Burma also stressed an increased people-to-people effort to cultivate a ‘Deep Fraternal Friendship,’ funding such activities as free eye surgeries, donations for school equipment, donations to the Myanmar Red Cross Society, and increased youth exchange programs.⁶⁰ These could be seen in two ways. First, China may genuinely want Burma to develop, or it funds these programs as a public relations ploy so that it can continue to exploit Burma’s resources unencumbered.

China also exploits its legal relationship with Cambodia. Bader discusses the common practice between Cambodian and Chinese business elites. Cambodian businessmen facilitate investment opportunities on the behalf of Chinese firms, and in return, these Chinese firms reward them handsomely with private goods. Sino-Cambodian joint ventures funded largely by Chinese companies are often criticized by Cambodian civil society organizations for illegal actions within the countries. The Sino-Cambodian enterprise Wuzhishan L.S. Group Co. Ltd, for example, was accused of exceeding the total land concessions way beyond the legal maximum of 10,000 hectares. It was also accused of forced land evictions and forest clearance operations.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid. 62

⁶⁰ Ibid. 63

⁶¹ Ibid. 79

Cambodia, like Burma, also supports the ‘One China’ policy, in order to continue enjoying the benefits of Chinese investment.

China bullying its neighbors is not always successful; Mongolia is a case in point. Despite receiving billions of dollars in Chinese aid and close business relations between Chinese firms and Mongolian oligarchs, Mongolia has only been partially compliant with the ‘One China’ policy. It still enjoys an active economic partnership with Taiwan, and the Dalai Lama has visited Mongolia several times to China’s dismay.⁶² This is in large part due to the makeup of Mongolia’s electorate and political system. Bader observed that while Burma and Cambodia have a small-coalition government and a small electorate, it is easier for China to coerce the government to support its political and economic interests. Mongolia, however, is a representative parliament with a large electorate. This blunts Chinese coercive influence over Mongolia’s internal affairs, and causes more equitable economic legal agreements. For instance, Mongolia has resisted awarding Chinese companies massive mining contracts for fear that its natural resources will be severely depleted. Even though China sometimes acts as a tyrant in terms of its economic legal agreements with other countries, its reach and depth can be limited depending on the construct of the target country’s domestic political makeup.

Cao Cao used economic carrots as well as military might to force rebellious states in his region into submission. China also has a tendency to punish countries that do not comply with China’s foreign policy. Bonnie Glaser is the senior advisor for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Glaser noted that for more than a decade, China has used “economic carrots” such as Free Trade Agreements, Foreign Direct Investment, and foreign assistance, to “encourage countries to consider Beijing’s interests when formulating policies and eschewing

⁶² Ibid. 105

actions that China would view as objectionable.”⁶³ In 2012, China pressured Cambodia, then the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to take out any mention of the South China Sea dispute in the ASEAN joint communiqué that year. Since Beijing provides billions in aid to Phnom Penh, Cambodia had no choice but to comply.

China has used force to pressure Southeast Asian countries over disputed islands in the South China Sea. According to China, the Paracel and Spratly Islands have been under its sovereign territory since the Qing dynasty, long before the other claimants were founded, and China has not hesitated in using force to assert its claim. In 1974, the PRC navy expelled Vietnamese troops from their posts in the Paracel Islands (*xisha* 西沙), and Chinese forces ousted Vietnamese forces from part of the Spratly Islands (*nansha* 南沙) after a naval battle in 1988.⁶⁴ In April 2012, China used its economic leverage to punish the Philippines for claiming to own the Scarborough Shoal, blocking hundreds of container vans filled with Philippine bananas from entering Chinese ports. Chinese mainland tourist agencies also stopped sending tour groups to the Philippines. Over the past two years, China has turned to island building to physically assert its claim in the South China Sea. China has reclaimed over 2,000 acres of land—equivalent to 1,500 football fields—in a massive dredging operation, turning tiny sandbars into large islands equipped with airfields, ports and lighthouses.⁶⁵ Building artificial islands is legal under the UN Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but China claims the territorial sea around them, which is illegal under Article 60 of UNCLOS.⁶⁶ Its neighbors also fear that China can one day use these islands to launch aircrafts during a military operation. Fiery Cross Reef, a strip of land owned by China,

⁶³ Bonnie Glaser. *China's Coercive Economic Diplomacy*. The Diplomat. July 15, 2012

⁶⁴ Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross. *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*. W.W. Norton & Company. 1997. 116

⁶⁵ Katie Hunt and Kevin Wang. *China defends test flight in South China Sea after Vietnam objects*. CNN. January 4, 2016.

⁶⁶ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Article 60, Paragraph 8

stretches 3,000 meters and has the capacity to hold a bomber. None of the other claimants can hold bombers on their islands, which increases their perception of China as a threat.⁶⁷ In January 2016 China conducted a test flight from the airstrip in the Fiery Cross Reef; Vietnam denounced the action as a “serious infringement” of its sovereignty.⁶⁸ China has also traded barbs with the United States over the South China Sea. In September 2015 a U.S. warship sailed within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-claimed reefs, prompting Beijing to submit a demarche to U.S. ambassador Max Baucus. In February, China upped the ante, putting HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island in the disputed Parcels, to the chagrin of Taiwan, Vietnam, and the U.S.⁶⁹

This behavior even extends beyond the Asia-Pacific. In recent years China has ramped up its investments in developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. All of China’s state-owned enterprises (SOE) serve the state’s objectives, and the Communist Party actively directs SOE investments overseas. Pillsbury noted that “if a Chinese mining company is directed to exploit a mine in Afghanistan or Angola to expand China’s political footprint, it will do so, even if it must do so at a loss.”⁷⁰ From 2005 to 2013, China’s foreign investments grew nearly tenfold, and it became the largest investor in five of the ten riskiest countries in the world.⁷¹ It makes up 79% of foreign investments in Afghanistan, 82% in Zimbabwe, 70% in Sierra Leone, 38% in Iraq, and 57% in Ecuador, to name a few.⁷² But China often demands that, in exchange for loans, developing countries must pay steep interest rates and relinquish their

⁶⁷ Malaysia’s Swallow Reef is only 1,368m long, and can hold only cargo planes, fighter jets, and surveillance planes. See Katie Hunt and Kevin Wang. *China defends test flight in South China Sea after Vietnam objects*. CNN. January 4, 2016.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Michael Auslin. *Asian Escalation: Why China Picked Woody Island for its First South China Sea Missiles*. Forbes Magazine. February 18th, 2016.

⁷⁰ Michael Pillsbury. *The Hundred-Year Marathon*. 165.

⁷¹ Gregor Aisch, Josh Keller, and K.K. Rebecca Lai. *The World According to China*. The New York Times.

⁷² Ibid.

natural resources to China for years. Ecuador has received over \$11 billion in Chinese loans to build roads, highways, bridges, hospitals, surveillance cameras, and a dam, but it had to give up 90 percent of its oil exports to China to pay for them.⁷³ China's state-owned oil companies PetroChina and Sinopec pump 25 percent of the 560,000 barrels a day Ecuador produces, and Chinese companies collect \$25 to \$50 in fees from Ecuador for each barrel they pump.⁷⁴ Ecuadorean workers decry poor working conditions at Chinese-run projects; at a hydroelectric plant in the San Rafael falls, workers receive low wages, little health care, and poor food.⁷⁵ Chinese-run projects are also lax in environmental and governance standards. Such trends prompted Ecuador's then-energy minister Alberto Acosta to say that his country was "trying to replace American imperialism with Chinese imperialism," and this suspicion on the part of the Ecuadoreans have stalled another potential Chinese-financed project, an oil refinery in the coastal city of Manta.⁷⁶

Nigeria is a case in point in China's tyrannical behavior in Africa. China is Nigeria's top lender, funneling billions to help the African country build roads, rail lines, airport terminals, power plants, and other much-needed infrastructure. In return, Nigeria is flooded with cheap, often subpar Chinese products.⁷⁷ Poorly made electrical wiring, outlets, and power strips from China are connected with dozens of fires a year in offices and homes in Lagos. China's cheap textiles are decimating Nigeria's garment industry, causing massive unemployment. According to one Nigerian garment worker, the Chinese "are learning our arts and taking them to their

⁷³ Clifford Krauss and Keth Bradsher. *China's Global Ambitions, Cash and Strings Attached*. The New York Times. July 24, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Keith Bradsher and Adam Nossiter. *In Nigeria, Chinese Investment Comes with a Downside*. The New York Times. December 5, 2015

country and doing them similarly to us, and bringing the goods back to Nigeria and selling them to our people.”⁷⁸ Local Nigerian construction companies like Dorman-Long Engineering cannot compete with Chinese construction companies like North China Construction, which offer steel girders, piping, and other industrial material at extremely low prices.⁷⁹ This exacerbates the unequal relationship between China and many African countries.

Chinese coercion has even worked in Europe. In 2010, when the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize, China subsequently froze FTA negotiations with Norway, and slapped onerous veterinary inspections on Norwegian salmon, which caused a precipitous drop of Norwegian salmon imports to China by 60 percent. As Glaser summarizes, these examples reflect China’s “growing willingness to employ economic leverage to coerce countries to modify their policies in accordance to Beijing’s wishes.”⁸⁰

In terms of military strategy, China has used coercion in order to extract what it wants in specific events. In the Korean War, Mao Zedong deployed over 260,000 soldiers to cross the Yalu River, catching U.S. General Douglas MacArthur completely off guard. According to Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky, China administered a “psychological shock” to MacArthur and his troops, making them think that China would fight to the death for its territory.⁸¹ The second was the 1969 Sino-Soviet border war. During that time, Leonid Brezhnev issued the Brezhnev doctrine, which stated that the U.S.S.R. had the right to intervene in the affairs of all Communist states. Mao interpreted this as a Soviet attempt to meddle in Chinese affairs. To deter the Soviets, Mao launched a massive war and even exploded nuclear bombs in Xinjiang to send a strong message that China would risk everything—even nuclear war—to keep its sovereignty. The third

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bonnie Glaser. *China’s Coercive Economic Diplomacy*. The Diplomat. July 15, 2012.

⁸¹ Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky. *Patterns in China’s Use of Force*. RAND, 2000. 6-7

was the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, when China used “coercive diplomacy” towards Taiwan, risking a large scale war with the U.S. Both Robert Ross and Allen Whiting think China did this to show the “imbalance of will” between the U.S. and China over Taiwan.⁸² China to this day is banking on the fact that the U.S. will not risk such high number of casualties against a territory that is peripheral to its core interests.⁸³ This is also called the “noose strategy,” developed by Mao to test U.S. commitment to Taiwan. It can be argued that China is using the noose strategy again in modern times with regards to China’s territorial disputes with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, with Vietnam over the Spratly Islands, and with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal.

China may even harbor ambitions to replace the United States as the global leader by force. In his 2015 book, Pillsbury warns that China is currently running a “Hundred-Year Marathon;” since 1949, the Chinese have patiently developed their economic and military capacity and have tricked the West into sharing sophisticated technology and weaponry, with the ultimate goal to replace the U.S. as the global superpower by 2049. By that time, China’s economy may be three times the size of the U.S. and it will be able to outspend the U.S. militarily. The Chinese government may use its newfound global reach to export its oppressive behavior abroad. It might censor the internet by blocking articles that paint the regime in a bad light and punish dissenters at home and overseas who disagree with its policies. China may even feel more emboldened to support America’s adversaries to further destabilize the old hegemon. To date, China has sold missile technology to rogue states, including Iran, Libya, and Syria.⁸⁴ In December 2001, the Pentagon discovered that China had supplied arms to al-Qaeda after the September 11 attacks;

⁸² Robert Ross. *The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and Use of Force*; Allen Whiting. *China’s Use of Force 1950-96, and Taiwan*

⁸³ Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky. *Patterns in China’s Use of Force*. 9

⁸⁴ Michael Pillsbury. *The Hundred-Year Marathon*. 183

that same year, two major Chinese telecommunications companies helped the Taliban build a major telephone system in Kabul.⁸⁵ Like Cao Cao, whose famous maxim was “I would rather betray others than be betrayed,” China may continue to chip away at U.S. hegemony until it can rise to number one.

These examples demonstrate China’s tyrannical behavior towards its neighbors and beyond. China consistently supports autocratic regimes in order to serve its own economic and political interests, and imposes coercive economic pressures to persuade countries to comply with its foreign interests. In other words, China is a modern day Cao Cao, ruthlessly strong arming states to do as it pleases. In the Three Kingdoms story, through brute strength, guile and deception, Cao Cao’s Wei kingdom becomes the dominant power in China. Years later, after Cao Cao’s death, his erstwhile chief adviser, Sima Yi, a cunning, conniving strategist in his own right, stages a coup and destroys the Cao family, and puts himself on the throne as the new emperor. He then defeats the Wu and Shu kingdoms, and reunites China under the Jin Dynasty in 265AD. The overall lesson for Chinese leaders is simple: use all means necessary to become the strongest power in the world.

Humane Authority- The Shu Kingdom

The most ambitious of the Three Kingdoms strategy is that of the Shu Kingdom. Liu Bei (161-223AD), Shu’s leader, was the uncle of the young Emperor Xiandi, who was held captive by Cao Cao. As the “Imperial Uncle,” Liu Bei vowed to vanquish Cao Cao, rescue his nephew, and reestablish the Han Dynasty to its former glory. To that end, Liu Bei surrounded himself

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

with an impressive cadre of able advisors and generals: the famous strategist Zhuge Liang, the ‘Sleeping Dragon;’ the uncanny strategist Pang Tong, the ‘Fledgling Phoenix;’ and military commanders called the ‘Five Tigers:’ Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Huang Zhong, and Ma Chao. Liu Bei, as the story goes, ruled with benevolence and justice, and sought to spread those values throughout China and the world.

Liu Bei’s philosophy of benevolent ruler is rooted in Chinese ancient thought. China’s global governance philosophy stems from its ancient thought of Tianxia, or ‘All Under Heaven.’ According to Zhao Tingyang, the Tianxia System is one in which the whole world is ruled by a benevolent leader who is adeptly attuned to the “hearts of the people” and rules with virtuosity. But Tianxia is also a new structure, “a world institution, or a universal system for the world, a utopia of the world-as-one-family.”⁸⁶ Some commenters of Zhao’s theory extrapolate from his message the idea that China should be at the helm of this Tianxia system. For example, Tong Shijun noted that “if the Tianxia system is applied to China’s situation, China’s rise is indeed a new type of rise. This country is neither a power only for its own interests, nor a power which is self-reclusive. This country is pleased to shoulder the responsibility of the world.”⁸⁷ Zhao does little to envisage what that alternative system would look like other than the existing UN structure, but Xu Bijun suggests that China can simply inject the Tianxia ideology into the normative structure of the current international system. “Might not Zhao’s Tianxia System provide fresh ideas and new philosophical foundations for the further development of our current international law?” Xu asks.⁸⁸ Therefore, the Tianxia paradigm suggests that China has plans to

⁸⁶ Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia Tixi de Yige Jianyao Biaoshu [An Introduction to the All-Under-Heaven System]*. 30-31

⁸⁷ See Francesco Sisci, *Tong Yipian Tiankong Xia, Zhongguo de Xin Shijieguan [China’s New View of the World under the Same Sky]*, in Zhao, *The Tianxia System*, p. 159

⁸⁸ Xu Bijun, *Is Zhao’s Tianxia System Misunderstood?* *Tsinghua China Law Review* 2013-14. P. 107

be a Humane Authority in the international system. The recent joint declaration with the United States to limit greenhouse gas emissions is a clear example of China taking a leadership role. President Xi Jinping announced that China will cut its CO₂ emissions by 2030 and increase the non-fossil fuel share of all energy to around 20 percent by 2030; ambitious goals for one of the world's top emitters.⁸⁹

Such grand ambitions are also coming from members of China's military establishment. In 2015, Retired PLA Colonel Liu Mingfu fleshed out his vision of The China Dream, when China takes its rightful place as the "champion nation" in the world.⁹⁰ China's rise will usher in an "age of global prosperity" welcomed by other countries. Liu lists three reasons why China is qualified to be the next world leader. First, it has "no original sin" of slavery, colonialism, or imperialism, and therefore is more trustworthy than the West. Second, China possesses "most excellent cultural genes" because its ancient history and culture has always celebrated tolerance, diversity, and openness.⁹¹ Third, with such a long history and developed culture, China has the "resume and experience to lead the world."⁹² The U.S., Liu says, has a contradictory "One Country, Two Systems" illusion; it practices democracy at home, but imposes hegemony abroad, forcing its will on others.⁹³ China, on the other hand, will lead a "democratic, multipolar world...without tyrant nations."⁹⁴ Chinese leaders have also been more and more vocal about their country's intentions to take more of a leadership role in the international arena. Former president Hu Jintao announced at the APEC Boao forum in 2005 the idea of the "Harmonious World;" where

⁸⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/fact-sheet-us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change-and-clean-energy-c>

⁹⁰ Liu Mingfu. *The China Dream. Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*. CN Times Books. New York. 2015. 63.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 67.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.* 191.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

China's rise will spur further cooperation in the globe, not confrontation. In the late 1990s, China implemented the 'go out' policy, a public diplomacy effort to improve its reputation with its neighbors.

China is positioning itself as an economic Humane Authority. With its *zouchuqu* 走出去 (going out) strategy, the Chinese government encourages its companies to do business around the world. The International Monetary Fund just made the Chinese renminbi an official international currency, which increases Chinese global economic influence even more.⁹⁵ China also wants to diversify the paths by which energy arrives in China, deepen its ties with Eurasian states, and find new markets for Chinese commodities around the world. There are also domestic pressures behind China's desire to go global. Around 27-30% of China's population lives in poverty, which is \$2 a day. About 40% of China's poor live in the seven autonomous regions in central and western China.⁹⁶ The focus is largely on Xinjiang and Tibet, two regions that are most prone to civil unrest. The main project that embodies this is the One Belt One Road (OBOR). More than two thousand years ago, the Han dynasty created the Silk Road, which linked South and Central Asia with the Middle East and Europe. The plan, announced in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is composed of two projects: The Silk Road Economic Belt which will link Western China to Central Asia all the way to Europe, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which will link Western China to Pakistan all the way to Africa. The plan outlines six "economic corridors," which include the China-Pakistan corridor and the China-Mongolia-Russia link. OBOR will enhance energy security by building pipelines, railways, and grid interconnections. The projects aim to connect nearly fifty countries spanning Eurasia and Africa to strengthen

⁹⁵ Keith Bradsher. *China's Renminbi is Approved by I.M.F. as a Main World Currency*. The New York Times. November 30, 2015.

⁹⁶ *On China Slowdown*. Business Recorder. August 26, 2015.

regional connectivity. Some projects include constructing cross-border power transmission routes, upgrading the region's power grid, securing oil and gas pipelines, increasing internet connectivity, and fostering cultural exchanges.

The Silk Road Fund is valued at \$40 Billion USD.⁹⁷ So far China has concluded deals Kazakhstan (\$30 billion), Uzbekistan (\$15 billion), Kyrgyzstan (\$3 billion), and port renovation for Colombo, Sri Lanka (\$1.4 billion). The Maritime Silk Road is estimated at \$25 billion.⁹⁸ China may also use some of the \$100 billion raised for the AIIB to help finance some of the OBOR projects. OBOR is comprised of six economic corridors: 1) China-Russia/ Europe, 2) China-Mongolia, 3) China-Central Asia, 4) China-Southeast Asia, 5) China-Pakistan, 6) China-South Asia. Here is a list of some of the OBOR plans to date:

- **Russia-** Russia announced at the 2015 Boao Forum in Hainan that it would combine the Eurasian Economic Union with the OBOR. In June 2015, China's Railway Group and Russia's JSC signed a contract to begin construction of a 480-mile high speed railroad between Moscow and Kazan, which is supposed to be completed by 2018.⁹⁹
- **Europe-** China has signed economic agreements with Hungary, bought the port of Piraeus in Athens and will build a high speed train from Beijing to Berlin.¹⁰⁰
- **Mongolia-** At the Ufa summit in July 2015, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Mongolian president Nursultan Elbergdorj signed a memorandum of understanding to compile guidelines for building the China-Russia-Mongolia Economic Corridor.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Peter Van Duyn. Having Australia ports in foreign hands could harm our long-term security. The Conversation. August 25, 2015

⁹⁸ David Shambaugh. China's Soft Power Push. Foreign Affairs. July/August 2015

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.economist.com/node/17046693>

¹⁰¹ Xinhua News. *China, Russia, Mongolia hold Trilateral Summit*. July 9, 2015.

- **The Middle East-** At the Ningxia Expo in September 2015, Chinese companies and their Arab counterparts from 22 countries discussed OBOR projects on industry and commerce summit, internet connectivity, technology transfer and innovation, agriculture, health cooperation, and tourism.¹⁰² A new railway between Zhejiang province and Tehran, Iran, was also just completed.¹⁰³
- **Pakistan-** The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a \$46 billion investment plan that will link Kashgar in Xinjiang, Western China, to Gwadar port in Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ It would incorporate roads, railways, fiber optic cables, and oil and gas pipelines.
- **Southeast Asia-** China wants to connect its southern hydro-electrical grid with Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. To date, China has built 94 dams in the five countries in mainland Southeast Asia.
- **Central Asia-** China would like to construct a pipeline linking Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, allowing gas to flow both east and west. Turkmenistan is currently China's largest source of imported gas via pipeline and accounts for nearly half of China's imported gas.¹⁰⁵ Kazakhstan has been the largest benefactor of China's Silk Road investment plans. The two countries have signed deals worth \$23 billion.

All of these projects depict China's global ambitions to be an economic humane authority.

A Shu Kingdom military strategy would entail allying with like-minded powers to thwart the enemy. Despite having territorial disputes, Liu Bei and Sun Quan were united in their opposition

¹⁰² PR Newswire. China-Arab States Expo Helps to Accelerate China's "One Belt, One Road" Strategy. August 28, 2015.

¹⁰³ <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/first-direct-train-from-china-arrives-in-iran/>

¹⁰⁴ James Mcbride. Building a New Silk Road. Council on Foreign Relations. May 25, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ This information was provided by a State Department colleague who works at U.S. embassy Beijing. This colleague asked to remain anonymous.

to Cao Cao's aggression. For this reason, they formed an alliance and defeated the Wei at the Battle of Chibi. China has also done the same throughout its history. As mentioned earlier, Mao allied with the Soviet Union when the U.S. was its largest threat from 1949 to 1971, then allied with the U.S. against the Soviet Union after 1971. Nowadays, with increased Sino-Russian economic cooperation and China's increased participation in the SCO, it seems as if China shifted back to the old alliance. The Shu Kingdom's grand ambitions ultimately led to its demise. Liu Bei's obsession with revenge made him rigid, single-minded, and susceptible to overstretch. His army was eventually destroyed by Wu soldiers in the Battle of Yiling because he was so blinded by revenge that he overlooked a key strategic mistake: setting up camp in the woods where his enemy could easily set it on fire. This may be a cautionary lesson for China not to overextend its influence, which may cause it to overlook problems closer to home.

The Three Kingdoms Framework

	Wu 吴	Wei 魏	Shu 蜀
World Order	Hegemony	Tyranny	Humane Authority
Diplomatic Tools	Join weaker allies against larger threat	Coerce others to pledge allegiance	Persuade like-minded countries
Military Strategy	Keep enemy out of the region	Overwhelming force	Coalitions

Combining Three Kingdom Strategies

China does not have to adopt just one of the Three Kingdom strategies. It could combine two or all three, or use one and adopt others later. For instance, it can start off with achieving its

objectives under the Wu strategy, securing hegemony in Asia, then move on and adopt either the Shu or Wei strategy. The Shu and Wei strategies are the most ambitious; both see a world with China at its center. Wei's Cao Cao told Shu's Liu Bei that they were both "heroes" with "lofty designs in their bosoms," and that the "whole world is at their mercy."¹⁰⁶ Yan Xuetong, the dean of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, suggests that China should practice humane authority by first fostering *regional* stability and cooperation. He compares China's relationship with Asia to Great Britain and France's administration of their colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. "Great Britain's colonial policy was gentler than France's," Yan argues, and for that reason "violent opposition movements were less frequent in British than in French colonies." This proves that "the moral level of the leading state has an influence on regional stability and the durability of regional cooperation."¹⁰⁷ This suggests that China should forge amicable relations with its neighbors *before* it seeks to influence the world. Only after China has solved domestic and regional problems can China focus on global leadership.

Another possibility is that China could essentially lie about using the Shu strategy up to a certain point to make strategic competitors like the U.S. think that it only has benign intentions, then switch to the ruthless Wei strategy once China reaches a superior strategic position. All of China's ancient military works, from *Thirty-Six Stratagems* to Sun Zi's *Art of War* to lessons from the Warring States period, stress using guile and deception to mask one's true strategic intentions. The deceptive Wei Kingdom under the leadership of Sima Yi eventually defeated the other two and establishes the Jin Dynasty. The Chinese may draw from that lesson and use it against the U.S. at the most opportune time. The Chinese are infatuated with *shi*: finding the

¹⁰⁶ Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, chapter 21: "In a Plum Garden, Cao Cao Discusses Heroes," trans. C.H. Brewitt-Taylor. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1995.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 65

right time to take action in battle. Some ancient Chinese maxims depict the idea of *shi: taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦(bide your time, and build your capabilities), and *wai ru, nei fa* 外儒内发(on the outside, be benevolent; on the inside, be ruthless.)¹⁰⁸

Early 20th century scholar Li Zongyu articulated this same idea using a *Three Kingdoms* analogy. He called it the *Thick-Black Theory* on the ways of leadership. According to Li, Liu Bei had a “thick face,” which meant that he intentionally concealed his true feelings from others in order to fulfill his objectives. Throughout *Three Kingdoms* Liu Bei cries several times in front of leaders and subordinates in order to win their support; he did this against Cao Cao, Sun Quan, and others to feign weakness to fulfill strategic goals for Shu in the future. In fact, the Chinese have a saying about Liu Bei’s “thick face” sycophantic strategy: “Liu Bei’s Jiangshan (kingdom) was gained from his crying.”¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, Cao Cao had a “black heart;” he ruthlessly killed, cheated, and double-crossed others to gain power. The warlords Dong Zhuo, Lu Bu, and Yuan Shao all fell victim to Cao Cao’s treachery. Other characters in *Three Kingdoms* such as Sun Quan and Sima Yi used the “thick-black” strategy in varying degrees. China’s twin economic projects, the AIIB and OBOR, are possible modern-day examples of thick-black theory: they may start off as a Wu or Shu strategy charm offensive for China to win support from its Asian neighbors and beyond, but they may also become Wei strategy of coercion later on once these projects become more established. China may use OBOR projects or AIIB funding as economic carrots to make countries kowtow to certain policies it wants. Therefore, China can

¹⁰⁸ Michael Pillsbury. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt and Company. 2015, 38.

¹⁰⁹ Li Zongyu. *Thick Black Theory*. Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House. 1911, p. 39. This sentence was a translation from the original: “刘备的江山，是哭出来的”

bide its time, starting off with the Wu strategy, then building its capabilities to eventually execute the Shu and/or Wei strategies in the future.

China may decide which strategy to implement based on its competitors' behavior. That main competitor at the moment is the United States. Susan Shirk, who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs from 1997 to 2000, warned that America's approach to China's rise "can either reinforce its responsible personality or inflame its emotional one."¹¹⁰ In some instances the U.S. has encouraged China to play a larger role in the international arena. The U.S. government supported China's entry into the WTO, and U.S. companies have provided billions in foreign direct investment into China's economy. At the most recent 2015 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the two sides agreed to cooperate on several international initiatives, such as humanitarian assistance in South Sudan and other African countries, fighting Ebola, environmental protection, wildlife trafficking, denuclearization of North Korea and Iran, and development in Afghanistan.¹¹¹ This elevates China's mission to become a Humane Authority alongside the U.S. on the international stage. However, when China feels like the U.S. is restraining its actions in the South China Sea or diminishing its power in international institutions like World Bank, IMF, and ADB, then China will act more like Wei or Wu.

Finally, China may also be pursuing all three strategies at once. For a power as large and complex as China, different domestic policymakers may prefer one strategy over another. The second generation of Chinese communist party leaders, the *hongerdai* 红二代, may be

¹¹⁰ Susan Shirk. *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail its Peaceful Rise*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2007. 5

¹¹¹ The author helped organized the 2015 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Washington, D.C. Outcomes of Strategic Track. June 24, 2015. Access at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/06/244205.htm>

ideologically opposed to the Western-dominated international system and advocate for aggressively replacing it with tyranny or humane authority. The second generation of rich Chinese businessmen, the *fuerdai* 富二代, might be content with the current international financial system that produced their wealth, so they will choose the Wu strategy in order to keep the status quo. Alternatively, the *fuerdai* may want to expand their financial influence to every corner of the world, either peacefully or ruthlessly, in which case they would support the Shu or Wei strategies. Likewise, the PLA generals may be more inclined to support a Wei strategy once they have the capabilities to do so, as opposed to civilian leaders who would rely more on diplomacy with other countries. Countries and people possess mixed motives; it is perhaps surprise if China exhibits features of all Three Kingdom strategies.

U.S., Japan, and Russia in the Three Kingdoms Framework

As mentioned earlier, China may wait to see how its competitors behave before choosing a Three Kingdoms strategy. One way to analyze how China perceives its competitors' behavior is by looking at it through the Three Kingdoms lens. Indeed, Chinese news outlets have compared recent Chinese-Russian cooperation against Japan and the U.S. to the Shu-Wu alliance against Wei.¹¹² Conceptualizing how the United States, Japan, and Russia fit into the Three Kingdoms framework may shed some light on which Three Kingdoms strategy China will most prefer.

Since the U.S. has global interests, it is not a Wu regional hegemon. Whether it is seen as a Shu or Wei Kingdom is in the eye of the beholder. On one hand, the U.S. played the role as

¹¹² “习近平安倍于普京合演新三国演义” NDTV. May 25, 2013.

moral authority after World War II. U.S.-backed multinational institutions like the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, and NATO all helped extend U.S. influence around the world. The principles these multinational institutions espouse—a free market economy, human rights, collective security—are American principles. Liu Bei and the Shu kingdom would have looked favorably on the U.S.

But the U.S. has come under criticism for not having a coherent foreign policy ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2014, former senator of Virginia Jim Webb lamented that the U.S. “ha(s) not had a clear articulation of what American foreign policy is basically since the end of the Cold War.”¹¹³ Ian Bremmer believed that, since 1990, U.S. foreign policy has shifted from quixotic optimism to cautious pessimism. Former President George H.W. Bush wanted to form a “New World Order” of freedom. Bill Clinton wanted to “enlarge” democratic areas around the world. But U.S. unilateral actions in Afghanistan and Iraq under former President George W. Bush hurt U.S. international legitimacy. And President Obama’s “strategic engagement” strategy, Bremmer argues, has been frenetic at best, incoherent at worst: “President Obama refused to commit to any foreign policy framework to help him make difficult decisions. His priorities have shifted with changing headlines, he has drawn red lines to no effect, and the few commitments he has made have encouraged others to set tests of American will that the White House had no intention of passing.”¹¹⁴

The U.S. has also been criticized for flouting the very international principles it helped shape. The U.S. is one of the best countries that uphold human rights domestically and actively promotes them abroad in the form of intervention, sanctions, and foreign aid. Yet it does not sign onto multilateral human rights laws, because the US frequently practices exemptionalism, non-

¹¹³ Ian Bremmer. *Superpower: Three Choices for America’s Role in the World*. Penguin Publishing Corp. 2015. 27.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 44

compliance, non-ratification, and double standards.¹¹⁵ On issues like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, human rights, civil liberties, environmental disasters, and commerce, the United States has generated both confusion and anger abroad.¹¹⁶ The international community has criticized the U.S. for being unilateral, practicing selective multilateralism or ‘multilateralism a la carte.’¹¹⁷ The U.S. has also refused to ratify three human rights treaties: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights (ICESCR).¹¹⁸ If China views itself as a Wu hegemon, then it views the U.S. as a Shu kingdom that is losing its moral authority. If China sees itself as a Wei tyrant, then U.S. decline is the perfect opportunity to increase aggression in other areas around the globe.

Japan is most likely a Wu kingdom because it does not have any grander ambitions or capabilities to be anything other than a regional power. But just as Sun Quan allied with Shu in order to throw off the much stronger Wei, Japan is allied with the U.S. to resist Chinese influence in the region. One such example is the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japan claims that it has had administrative authority over the Diaoyu since it won the islands in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895; China maintains that the islands have always been a part of its sovereign territory and was returned to Chinese custody after World War II. After Japan nationalized parts of the disputed islands in 2012, China unilaterally imposed an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea in 2013 and blocked shipments of rare earth minerals to Japan. This dispute depicts China and Japan’s struggle for Wu hegemony in Asia,

¹¹⁵ Andrew Moravcsik. *Paradox of U.S. Human Rights Policy*. In *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*. Princeton University Press. 2005. 148

¹¹⁶ Antonia Chayes. *How American Treaty Behavior Threatens National Security*, in *International Security*, 2008. 46

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 47

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 49

and this conflict will keep being a point of contention between China and Japan for the foreseeable future.

Russia can be seen as either a Wu or Wei kingdom. During the Cold War, Soviet Russia was a Wei kingdom, using its military to subjugate other countries in its periphery and beyond to further its interests: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in Eastern Europe; Iran, Angola, and Afghanistan abroad. But since the end of the Cold War, Russia has acted like a Wu kingdom. Russia's current actions in Ukraine is a Wu strategy, asserting dominance in a country that was historically under direct Soviet rule. More than seven million ethnic Russians still live in Ukraine. Latvia and Estonia both have ethnic Russian minorities that make up more than a quarter of the population. It is no surprise, then, that Russia feels that NATO's expansion into those two countries is meddling into Russia's sphere of influence. But Russia's support of the Assad regime in Syria is an example of resurgent Wei behavior. If China views itself as a Shu-humane authority, then it must view Russia as a Wu kingdom with which it can ally to resist U.S. Wei-tyranny.

The Achilles' Heel to China's Humane Authority

China will most likely use a mixture of the Three Kingdoms strategy to achieve its objectives. However, certain strategies may be limited due to the norms established by the international community. As mentioned earlier, using the Wei strategy of tyranny will be unacceptable to the international community and will cause other countries to check China's ambitions. China's cut-throat economics with parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and disputes in the East and South China Seas may be provocative, but bullying is hardly a threat to the overall international system. Those actions do not constitute strong Wei symptoms. The

China of tomorrow may become more tyrannical as it grows more powerful, but the China of today is nothing like Cao Cao. The Wu strategy may help China in the short term, but may come up short as China grows more powerful and wants to secure long term political and economic security. And as mentioned earlier, a limited Wu strategy might actually make China susceptible to unwanted influence—or even absorption by—stronger powers. China can take advantage of the U.S.’s relative decline in global moral leadership to establish itself as the true humane authority.

Despite these efforts at showing itself in a more positive light, China still needs to overcome its terrible human rights image before it can be a leader in the international order. Ann Kent observed that while China consistently submits human rights reports to UN treaty bodies, it selectively invites special rapporteurs to visit the country, and its substantive compliance is questionable at best. In 2003, the International Labor Organization Committee on the Freedom of Association advised the Chinese Communist Party to allow workers to form unions and protest peacefully. The government then “complied” by sending reports claiming the improvement of worker rights, just as Chinese courts sentenced Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yunliang, leaders of the labor protest in Liaoyang City, to seven and three years in prison respectively on the charge of “subverting state power.”¹¹⁹ Similar behavior was evident with regard to China’s compliance (or lack thereof) with the UN Committee against Torture. While China usually complies *procedurally* with human rights laws, it does not do so substantially.¹²⁰

More recently, China under Xi Jinping has been more brazen in its violation of human rights laws and norms. One such arena is internet freedom. Since 2013, the government has issued a

¹¹⁹ Ann Kent. *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations and Global Security*. Stanford University Press, 2007. 201

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 202

raft of internet regulations, and one law threatens imprisonment of up to three years for posting anything the authorities deem as “rumor,” if the post is read by more than 5,000 people or if it is forwarded over 500 times.¹²¹ The government also deletes or sanctions social media accounts like Weibo and instant-messaging platforms like WeChat. From March of 2012 to December 2013, there was a 70 percent drop in Weibo posts due to government restrictions. This is why the U.S.-based nonprofit Freedom House ranked China 58 out of 60 countries in a 2013 ranking of Internet freedom around the world.¹²²

An additional area is the repression of nonviolent civil resistance movements within the country. U.S.-based Chinese Human Rights Defenders reported that in 2014 alone, there were nearly 1,000 cases of detention and torture of Chinese rights defenders, including high profile rights defenders such as Xu Zhiyong, Liu Ping, and Ilham Tohti.¹²³ Michael Caster points out that the Chinese government often justifies these harsh actions through “legalist repression,” manipulating Chinese criminal law to allow “persecution through prosecution.” “The vaguely worded crimes like ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ or ‘disturbing public order,’... have become a canvas applied to virtually anything the state finds discomfoting,” Caster writes.¹²⁴ As long as the world continues to see human rights violations in China persist, it will be hard for China to reinvent itself as a model global citizen.

In addition to human rights, China’s national security will also get in the way of its ambition to establish humane authority. Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross wrote that China has used the Shu kingdom’s most famous military strategy—the “empty fortress strategy”—in the past to

¹²¹ Elizabeth Economy. *China’s Imperial President*. Foreign Affairs Magazine, November/December 2014

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Michael Caster. *Matching Resistance to Repression in China*. Open Democracy.net, April 8, 2015. Accessed May 3, 2015 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/civilresistance/michael-caster/matching-resistance-to-repression-in-china>)

¹²⁴ Ibid.

appear strong when it was really weak. In the *Three Kingdoms*, the Shu army, led by wise military strategist Zhuge Liang, is defeated and routed by his arch nemesis Sima Yi and his Wei troops. Zhuge's army hid in an empty city and the Wei army surrounded it. Panicked, the Shu soldiers thought they were done for. But Zhuge ordered his men to take off their armor, open all the gates, and pretend to sweep the city. Zhuge sat at the top of the fortress where the Wei army could easily spot him, and calmly played the zither. Upon seeing the Shu army acting so calm in the midst of danger, Sima Yi suspected an ambush and decided not to attack the city, and the Shu army exited the city alive. Thus the key strategy of the "empty fortress" is this: display outward calm and strength, even though you are weak inside.¹²⁵

China may very well be using Zhuge Liang's "empty fortress" strategy now. It is surrounded by other countries that challenge its interests on several fronts. Japan and South Korea compete with China economically and present democratic counterweights to China's communist regime in Northeast Asia. The Philippines and Vietnam continue to dispute China's island building in the South China Sea. ASEAN countries are at once attracted to China's large market, but repelled by encroaching Chinese exploitative economic and political influence. India poses a potential threat to China's internal security, serving as a safe haven for the Dalai Lama and the independence movement in Tibet and engaging in territorial disputes with China over Arunachal Pradesh.¹²⁶ Russia may still resist China's economic expansion across Central Asia as One Belt One Road is unfurled. Such challenges will force China to focus its energy on its periphery instead of trying to reshape the world in its image.

¹²⁵ Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross. *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*. W.W. Norton & Company. 1997. 25.

¹²⁶ Aakriti Bachhawat. *China's Arunachal Pradesh Fixation*. The Diplomat. December 13, 2015.

Domestically, China is vulnerable. David Shambaugh believes that Xi Jinping's aggressive anti-corruption campaign, while setting China up to be a moral leader globally, is making the Chinese Communist Party more fragile.¹²⁷ The country's richest and brightest are leaving the country en masse, parking their wealth in other countries and sending their children to study abroad. The central government frantically cracks down on descent by passing draconian laws. Once staunch regime loyalists and everyday citizens have seemingly lost their enthusiasm for government propaganda, glibly reciting slogans and dismissing Xi Jinping's pamphlet on party doctrine. President Xi's "princeling" class—children of China's first-generation revolutionary elites—clash with the old red guard loyal to former president Jiang Zemin. And Xi's ambitious economic reforms to increase consumer spending and reduce red tape pose a direct challenge to state-owned enterprises and local party cadres. All of these factors, Shambaugh says, show a China that is *waiying neiruan*—strong on the outside, weak on the inside. Such domestic troubles will also force China to focus on keeping its own house in order instead of engaging in a moral campaign abroad.

U.S. Response to China's Three Kingdoms Strategies

Each of the Three Kingdom strategies affect U.S. interests in one way or another. Having a response ready for each of them will help the U.S. protect its global interests. Wei-Tyranny is the most threatening to U.S. interests because China would displace the U.S. as the dominant power in the international system and bully U.S. allies in Asia and beyond. In response to Chinese tyrannical behavior, the U.S. must openly criticize Chinese actions and support countries around China's periphery to resist unequal economic agreements with China. This could be done by

¹²⁷ David Shambaugh. *The Coming Chinese Crack Up*. The Wall Street Journal. March 6, 2015.

increasing economic aid to Cambodia, Burma, and Mongolia, while strengthening ASEAN to serve as a strong counterweight to China. The U.S. already has a mutual security treaty with Japan; it should seriously consider doing the same with the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries looking to resist China's aggressive expansion. In a recent interview, President Obama said that "we (the U.S.) have to be firm where China's actions are undermining international interests, and if you look at how we've operated in the South China Sea, we have been able to mobilize most of Asia to isolate China in ways that have surprised China, frankly, and have very much served our interest in strengthening our alliances."¹²⁸ If China were to become blatantly aggressive in the South China Sea, the U.S. can also implement a distant blockade, whereby U.S. ships secure the Strait of Malacca, effectively cutting China off from 80% of the oil it needs from the Middle East and Africa.¹²⁹ This strategy does have its downsides; it would take months or even years for China to feel the "bite" from a blockade, some countries may continue to send oil to China surreptitiously, it may be interpreted by the international community as an act of war, and U.S. allies such as Taiwan or Japan would not be immediately protected from Chinese aggression. But the very fact that Chinese anti-ship missiles cannot reach the Malacca Strait means that China could do little to stop the distant blockade.

Wu-Hegemony is also problematic because China could seek to limit U.S. interests in Asia. In this case, the U.S. should encourage China to play a constructive role as a regional leader by supporting such initiatives as the AIIB. It also needs to step up its surveillance to know whether China changes its strategy to be a tyrant or humane authority. This means that the U.S. diplomatic corps and intelligence community must be on the lookout for Chinese officials who advocate for humane authority or tyranny, and whether those officials have the ear of Xi Jinping

¹²⁸ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

¹²⁹ Ibid. 106-107

and other high-level decision makers. If China strategy changes, then the U.S. should change its own strategy accordingly. To thwart China's regional A2/AD strategy, The U.S should continue to demand freedom of the seas and develop its own way to counter China's attempt to push it out of Asia. One such strategy is Aaron Friedberg's "maritime denial;" that is, forming a quarantine around the East Asian first island chain.¹³⁰ This would have more of an immediate economic impact on China, and it would provide protection for America's Asian allies. Because China lacks sophisticated anti-submarine warfare technology, and it would have no legal or moral justification to launch an offensive, maritime denial would put China's A2/AD strategy in a check-mate.

If China chooses the Shu-Humane Authority strategy, that decision may benefit or challenge U.S. interests. On the one hand, China could share similar values as the U.S. and thus will not be an ideological competitor on the world stage. Xi Jinping has consistently stated that the U.S. and China must forge a "new type of great power relationship," one that is a "win-win" partnership, not a zero sum rivalry.¹³¹ President Obama put it another way: "I've been very explicit in saying that we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China."¹³² If this is true, then the U.S. should encourage China to be a humane authority and work with the U.S. to maintain and improve the current international system.

On the other hand, if China offers an alternative vision for world order, then this could be as threatening as tyranny from the U.S. perspective. Yan Xuetong believes that China's quest for humane authority *is* a "zero-sum game" and a "battle for people's hearts and minds" around the world.¹³³ If China continues to try and establish itself as a humane authority, the U.S. must also

¹³⁰ Ibid. 119

¹³¹ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0519/c385474-27021248.html>

¹³² <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

¹³³ Yan Xuetong. *How China can Defeat the U.S.* The New York Times. November 21, 2011.

regain its moral authority in the international stage. That would include finally ratifying such treaties as CEDAW and UNCLOS to demonstrate moral leadership. Doing so will show the U.S. support for multilateralism and help check Chinese unilateral action in the South China Sea. The U.S. should also continue to point out the hypocrisy in China's new moral narrative, highlighting its continued human rights abuses, domestic corruption, harsh treatment of dissenters, cyber theft and spying, and blatant media censorship. U.S. diplomats already bring these concerns to Chinese diplomats, but these conversations are usually behind closed doors. Instead, U.S. officials should condemn Chinese actions more publically. This means that Congress should increase financial support for human rights organizations operating in China. The U.S. should also shame China's actions through international institutions such as the UN, WTO, and IMF, and through economic and human rights NGOs as well. It means encouraging U.S. newspapers to put Chinese human rights abuses on front pages at least as often as articles about China's economy. At the moment, U.S. journalists and officials tend to prioritize bilateral economic relations over a "name, blame, and shame" campaign against China, but the latter tactic proves more beneficial to maintain U.S. leadership and shape China towards a freer, more democratic society in the future. These actions would help steer international public opinion to support U.S. legitimacy and credibility in the international arena and diminish China's claim to humane authority.

Summary of U.S. Response to China's Three Kingdoms Strategies

China's Strategy	U.S. Response
Wei-Tyranny	Support allies to resist Chinese aggression
Wu-Hegemony	Support China's regional role, but keep access to Asia
Shu-Humane Authority	Accommodate / "Name, Blame, and Shame"

Conclusion

Scholars will debate the reasons behind China's behavior for years to come. The Three Kingdoms framework serves as an additional lens to examine, explain and perhaps predict China's international behavior. Throughout its modern history, China has displayed the characteristics of each of the Three Kingdoms. Its increased international engagement such as One Belt One Road, and its new concept of the "China Dream" suggest that China wants to be like Liu Bei of Shu, a wise sage king that hopes to be the humane authority of the world. But the often coercive economic policies towards Burma, Cambodia, Latin America, and Africa imply that China is acting more like the tyrant Cao Cao of Wei, who ruthlessly oppresses his neighbors to gain power and influence. And China's attempts to exert regional leadership through the AIIB and the SCO are aligned with Sun Quan of Wu, who only wants to be a regional hegemon.

The Three Kingdoms paradigm does have its shortcomings. For instance, it does not explain cyber hacking, an issue has come to the forefront in U.S.-China relations. In 2014, the U.S. charged five PLA military officers for cyber espionage against U.S. companies.¹³⁴ The Chinese pushed back, accusing the U.S. and other countries from doing the same. On September 25th 2015, Presidents Obama and Xi agreed to put an end to cyber espionage. But just one day later, Chinese cyberattacks against the U.S. continued.¹³⁵ Cyber hacking does not fit in either the Shu or Wu strategies; secretly stealing another countries information does not appeal to humane authority, and stealing data from a country an ocean away to achieve commercial advantages is not the kind of behavior for a country with just regional ambitions. Then, should cyber hacking be considered a part of the Wei strategy, using guile and deception to achieve a dominant

¹³⁴ Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs. Press Release. U.S. Charges Five Chinese Military Hackers for Cyber Espionage Against U.S. Corporations and a Labor Organization for Commercial Advantage. May 19, 2014. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-charges-five-chinese-military-hackers-cyber-espionage-against-us-corporations-and-labor>

¹³⁵ Associated Press. Chinese Cyberattacks on U.S. Companies Continues, Report Says. NBC News. October 19, 2015.

position? Cao Cao was infamous for sending spies to the other two kingdoms to ascertain information about their troop movement, number of soldiers, and morale. It could be conceivable that China is slowly stealing trade and military secrets from the U.S. with the intention of using that same information to surpass the U.S. in the future. But nowadays, several other countries spy and steal data from friends and foes alike; the Wikileaks report that U.S. spying on German Chancellor Angela Merkel is a stark example. Cyber hacking, then, may simply be a new international norm that cannot be thoroughly explained using the Three Kingdoms framework.

No policymaker knows for sure what China's true aspirations are—perhaps not even the powers that be in Beijing. But U.S. officials, scholars, and journalists can use the Three Kingdoms analogy to frame China's actions in China's own culture and history. Chinese leaders can use the Three Kingdoms as an allegory from their own history to gauge how their actions may be perceived by its neighbors, allies, and strategic competitors. Analyzing how China draws from ancient texts like the Three Kingdoms can help paint a clearer picture about China's future behavior and aspirations for the world.

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