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Explanation of the Factors Influencing China's Foreign Policy toward the United States from a Geopsychological Perspective

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This study investigates China's foreign policy toward the United States through a geopsychological lens. Geopsychology examines how geographical, historical, and cultural factors shape the perceptions and behavior of political elites and the broader society. This article argues that historical memory, strategic culture, and the Middle Kingdom mentality significantly influence China's foreign policy decisions. Findings suggest that past humiliations by foreign powers, including Britain and Japan, have left a lasting imprint on China's collective psyche, fostering a persistent perception of Western powers as adversaries. Consequently, China's foreign policy is, at least theoretically, grounded in a deep-seated opposition to Western hegemony, especially that of the United States. Analysis of China's foreign policy and diplomacy within the theoretical framework of geopsychology refers to examining this country's foreign policy based on geopsychological patterns—namely, the behavioral and attitudinal patterns held by Chinese officials and the public toward other states. The concept of geopsychology is rooted in past experiences, historical processes, and cultural and social structures. Therefore, this article seeks to explore the key components shaping China's geopsychology and to explain their influence on Beijing's foreign-policy behavior. The hypothesis of this article is that geopsychological factors—such as historical background and geo-cultural concepts like the "Middle Kingdom" notion—have played a very significant role in shaping China's actions and reactions in its foreign policy toward other countries. Findings indicate that China's historical past, its "Middle Kingdom" mindset, and its strategic culture have shaped and articulated the country's views and approaches toward others. The memories of humiliations inflicted by foreign enemies—Britain and Japan—still remain alive in the Chinese consciousness, and this experience has led them to continue perceiving these powers as adversaries of China. Therefore, China's foreign policy, at least in theoretical terms, has come to rest upon opposition to the power politics and hegemonic policies of the West, particularly those of the United States.

Keywords: *Geopsychology, China, Middle Kingdom, Strategic Culture, Tianxia System*

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1. Introduction

As a major economic and military power, China has sought to reshape the international order and assert its influence globally. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), alongside military modernization efforts, reflect China's ambition to challenge U.S. dominance and establish its position as a central actor in global affairs (Alfred, 2017; Lams, 2018). This article explores how geopsychological factors—historical experiences,

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cultural values, and strategic perceptions—shape China's foreign policy, particularly in its approach to the United States.

China, as a major power in the economic and military spheres—along with a noticeable superiority in the field of high technology—has consistently sought over the past two decades to transform the trajectory of the international order and exert decisive influence on the global system. In this regard, several indicators demonstrate that China intends to compete with the United States for power and dominance as a central global actor (Ng, 2014; Zhao, 2013). A key reason supporting this claim at the regional level is China's effort to push the United States out of the Indo-Pacific region and challenge it on a global scale (Scobell, 2020). For example, under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has launched the highly ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and established new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank under its guidance—although formally under the BRICS umbrella. While these initiatives may appear non-hegemonic, they align with China's aspiration to achieve national rejuvenation (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Lams, 2018). Similarly, China is modernizing its "offensive" military systems so that by 2050 it can achieve a credible and global military posture comparable to its economic and technological standing vis-à-vis the United States (Mahnken, 2011). In this context, the Chinese newspaper *South China Morning Post* reported ten new military advancements, including modern information-warfare support systems, the proliferation of drones and anti-drone systems showcased at the Zhuhai Airshow, and the testing of an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

Realistically, history, culture, and domestic security concerns play a particularly significant role in shaping and expressing China's perception of the international order, which is characterized by "complex interdependence" (Kissinger, 2013; Wang, 2012). This article attempts to answer the question of how geopsychological factors influence China's foreign policy and diplomacy. The assumption is that behavioral and attitudinal variables, from a geographical perspective, exert substantial influence on China's foreign policy toward other countries, particularly the United States (Khodaverdi & Shahmohammadi, 2017; Miller, 2014). Geopsychology can be defined as a geographic-psychological lens through which the behavioral and attitudinal patterns of a society toward others are understood, rooted in past experiences, historical processes, and cultural and social structures (Callahan, 2008; Moore, 2025). Therefore, this article seeks to illuminate the key components that have shaped China's geopsychology over centuries and explain their influence on China's foreign-policy behavior.

First, the article briefly presents the theory of geopsychology and then explains its relationship to issues in international relations and foreign policy, linking it to China's approach toward major powers (Barabantseva, 2014; Miller, 2014). The significance and novelty of this article lie in its psychological and geopsychological perspective on the issue, moving away from repetitive international-relations theories and highlighting cultural and psychological factors.

2. Research Background

Given the limitations of existing studies on geopsychology and the conceptual-perceptual principles guiding China's foreign-policy leadership, research most closely related to this study has been examined as follows:

Shafiei and Moulai (2016) investigated the influence of perceptual-psychological factors on China's foreign policy. They argued that, beyond observable and material indicators, psychological and perceptual variables shaping decision-making among Chinese foreign-policy leaders must also be considered. Their study sought to explain the factors influencing perceptions—such as leadership traits, worldviews, research institutions, public opinion, and strategic culture—which are also central to this article (Ja'fari Valdani & Rahmati Pour, 2014; Mahnken, 2011).

Bahrami-Moqaddam (2018), in an article examining "the economic consequences of the perceptions and misperceptions of Chinese leaders," conducted a comparative analysis of the Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping eras. He argued that Mao and Deng's considerable influence over the People's Republic of China meant that their beliefs, interpretations, and perceptions of the international environment had profound effects on China's political behavior. Mao's perceptions led to communist economic policies, while Deng's led to reform and opening-up policies that

produced dramatically different economic outcomes (Kissinger, 2013; Snow, 1973).

Haji Yousefi and Habibi (2019), in an article titled "Deng Xiaoping's Developmental Perceptions and China's Normalization toward the United States," argued that the main reason for China's foreign-policy shift toward the outside world, especially the United States, during Deng's tenure was the transformation of his perceptions compared with Mao's. While Mao's policies—such as the Great Leap Forward, the Two-Legged Policy, and the Cultural Revolution—brought poverty, backwardness, and isolation, Deng's new outlook emphasized economic priorities over ideological ones, a peaceful interpretation of the world, and acceptance of the existing order. These shifts, grounded in perceptual change, significantly improved China-U.S. relations, at least economically (Alfred, 2017; Wang, 2012).

Hewan and Cai (2013), in an article titled "Xi Jinping's Operational Beliefs and China's Foreign Policy," contended that analyzing China's rising foreign-policy power and its consequences requires focusing on Xi Jinping's era. They argued that employing political psychology is essential for examining similarities and differences between Xi and his belief system. Although Hu Jintao and Xi share a common worldview, Xi displays a stronger inclination toward assertiveness in foreign policy. While he is considered a status-quo leader who remains optimistic about the international system, increased external pressure may lead him to adopt more assertive policies to achieve his strategic goals (Lams, 2018; Washington, 2017).

Overall, the existing literature contains diverse examinations of geopsychology and China's perceptual foundations of foreign policy, and in some cases overlaps with the present study. However, the current article distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on the contemporary era—namely the Xi Jinping period—and on geopsychology as a relatively novel analytical framework (Callahan, 2008; Tingyang, 2011).

3. Geopsychology Theory (GT)

For the first time, the German scholar Willy Hellpach employed the term "geopsyche" in his works. Primarily known as a physician and environmental psychologist, he examined the effects of natural objects—such as the earth, the moon, and the sun—on human beings and their social environment. However, he did not investigate geopsychology comprehensively or scientifically, nor did he apply it to international relations. Similarly, Ronald W. Scholtz, a mathematician and psychologist, studied how environmental conditions shape human perception. Hellpach and Scholtz explored how "colors and shapes of landscapes" influence human behavior, whereas in international politics, human actions transcend national borders and extend into political, economic, cultural, and social domains. In this context, geopsychology refers to the mental state and behavioral patterns of ruling elites, authoritarian regimes, and masses within a particular region or country (Khodaverdi & Shahmohammadi, 2017; Miller, 2014). In other words, geopsychology reflects shared perceptions, biases, nationalism, religion, ethnicity, and historical experiences.

Geopsychology is briefly defined as a set of perceptions, imaginations, and belief systems shaped by shared history, culture, nationalism, religion, and ethnicity, which influence the mindsets and behavioral patterns of both non-state and state actors and societies within a specific geographic region (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Moore, 2025). In practical terms, the human psyche is the product of human experience, and human experience is shaped by "cognitive abilities," which influence the perceptual processes and belief systems of national and regional actors. In other words, there exists a continuous interaction between cognition and perception, which plays a major role in foreign-policy decision-making. At the same time, cognition and perception are shaped by various factors such as geographical environments, collective memories, and local cultural traditions and values (Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2013).

In recent years, with the rise of non-military threats, the study of psychology in international relations has grown significantly. In this regard, Tickner and Weaver (2009) pointed to the role of "geoculture" in international relations, emphasizing the importance of historical and cultural features of a specific region—an approach closely aligned with geopsychology. It is noteworthy that Rebecca M. Miller, formerly affiliated with *The National Interest*, has argued that psychology should be incorporated as an essential component of the international-relations curriculum. She writes: "At a minimum, anyone engaging in serious negotiations with leaders of another country must be familiar with that

country's culture, including the nuances and patterns of psychological and sociological behavior prevalent there… Cultural studies, sociology, and psychology are not useless or trivial subjects. They are serious and underestimated fields that should play a more central role in international-relations studies" (Miller, 2014). Miller emphasizes that culture and psychology play substantial roles in foreign policy and diplomacy. She also notes that if senior officials continue to underestimate the role of culture and psychology in understanding human behavior, the public may conclude that they are not serious about facilitating honest, informed, and constructive dialogue with foreign officials.

In the same vein, Howard J. Wiarda warns about the dangers of ignoring "political culture," stressing that if the United States does not fully understand other countries—including their cultures—the persistent sense of American superiority ("we are better than you"), condescension, and paternalistic attitudes toward others will continue, producing disastrous consequences for U.S. foreign policy (Brown, 2017; Washington, 2017).

From an analytical standpoint, geopsychology serves as a compass or lighthouse in the navigation of foreign-policy behavior. This theory attempts to fill the "knowledge gap" in international-relations (IR) theories, which are predominantly Western-centric and often overlook how historical experiences, cultural and social values, and belief systems of Asian societies and regional actors shape their foreign-policy behavior. This is particularly relevant in South Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia (Barabantseva, 2014; Callahan, 2008). Miller argues that anyone involved in serious negotiations must understand the cultural and psychological dynamics of the counterpart country (Miller, 2014).

Geopsychology seeks to study, explain, and analyze the behavior of state and non-state actors capable of influencing global and regional order. This theory encompasses various categories—such as geography, history, nationalism, cultural values, religious orientations, faith, and belief systems—that shape the perceptions, attitudes, and approaches of ruling elites and non-state actors toward global and regional politics (Alfred, 2017; Tingyang, 2011). For example, historical narratives function as forms of "social memory," which are particularly important for understanding the psychology of national elites or authoritarian regimes. Likewise, psychological-cultural perceptions formed during nation-state building significantly influence the popular psychology within national borders. It is important to note that not only do cultural events shape collective memory, but wars become idealized, hostilities become institutionalized, and ideological and religious conflicts acquire legitimacy. Consequently, cultural-metaphysical anxieties gradually transform into "modern hatred," and historical rivalries emerge as crucial political categories necessary for surpassing competing nations (Wang, 2012).

Overall, geopsychology in international relations has remained a neglected field—partly due to the primacy of geopolitics during the Cold War, when scholars focused on alliances and their impact on the balance of power. They emphasized "the structural conditions under which states operate," such as domestic institutions, rather than the specific characteristics of individual countries. As Christine Reus-Smith argues in *Foreign Policy*, "In today's global politics, culture is everywhere. The rise of non-Western great powers, the return of ethnic nationalism, ideologically justified violent extremism, and what is termed white resistance all continue to shape world affairs. Yet international-relations scholars, who should offer the best explanations, often lack the ability to do so." She adds that IR's failure to incorporate contemporary cultural concepts is more than an academic curiosity—it has significant implications for understanding global politics (Scobell, 2020; Zhao, 2013).

Today, scholars of international relations specializing in ideological, military, and security studies bear a major responsibility to understand new threats posed by non-state actors capable of significantly influencing global and regional security architecture within the interconnected world order. Henry Kissinger, a leading figure in the realist school, argues that the traditional concept of the balance of power can no longer sufficiently define "risks" or "opportunities." He notes that old international patterns are collapsing, and old solutions are no longer viable due to the transformative influence of technology and communications, which increase public awareness of global events (Kissinger, 2013). Accordingly, geopsychology seeks to fill the gaps in international-relations theory by clarifying the distinct features of a region—its geography, history,

ethnicity, religion, culture, and the worldview of its national elites and influential actors (Moore, 2025; Tingyang, 2011).

4. Geopsychological Analysis and China's Foreign Relations

In examining geopsychology in the context of China's foreign relations, it must be acknowledged that the primary factors shaping the country's foreign-policy behavior and patterns are rooted in China's historical experiences—particularly its national humiliation at the hands of colonial and Western powers in the nineteenth century and up to the mid-twentieth century, when the People's Republic of China was founded in October 1949. This humiliation stemmed from the so-called "unequal treaties," through which Western powers, especially European states, victimized China and imposed their will on it (Snow, 1973; Wang, 2012).

The "century of humiliation," which began in the late Qing Dynasty when China's political power and territorial integrity were gravely threatened, marked the onset of a deep sense of inferiority. Foreign powers—particularly Great Britain, which saw highly profitable commercial opportunities in China—sent their warships up the Yangtze River during the First Opium War (1839–1842) to enforce the opium trade against the will of the Chinese emperor. After this war, China was forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain and open several ports to trade with Britain, France, Germany, Japan, the United States, and Russia. In this period, the principle of "extraterritoriality" granted foreigners immunity from Chinese imperial law. Nor did the suffering end there: massive domestic uprisings such as the Taiping Rebellion in the second half of the nineteenth century, which cost millions of lives, and the Boxer Rebellion, which arose from anti-foreign sentiments before turning against the Qing court itself, revealed that the Chinese state was rapidly losing its ability to manage unrest from both foreign powers and its own population (Kissinger, 2013; Snow, 1973).

China's growing sense of humiliation reached its peak when a country that had long regarded itself as the "elder brother" that exported its civilization to Japan—and historically viewed itself as superior—was defeated by Japan in the 1894–1895 war over control of Korea, leading to the cession of Taiwan to Japan. Japan's subsequent victory over Russia in 1905 over Manchurian territories, which China considered rightfully its own, was likewise deeply humiliating (Wang, 2012). Thus, being victimized by foreign powers from the Opium Wars (1839–1842) through the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) left a profound mark on the perceptions of Chinese leaders, who refer to this era as the "century of humiliation" and are determined never to return to it (Wang, 2012).

Following the rise of the Communist Party and its victory in the Chinese Civil War, the country's leaders have consistently perceived themselves as having been humiliated and harmed by foreign aggression and Western encroachments. As noted, the historical backdrop embedded in the minds of Chinese leaders is that they were repeatedly pressured—especially during the Opium Wars and the subsequent European interventions—by Western powers, which inflicted a deep perceptual and psychological wound. Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese Studies and director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London and associate fellow at Chatham House, argues that these events were so catastrophic that contemporary historiography calls them the "century of humiliation," and that these historical wounds and the perception of victimhood have had far-reaching effects on China's national psychology in the modern world, profoundly shaping contemporary Chinese nationalism (Brown, 2017).

Zheng Wang, a professor at the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University, likewise states that this national humiliation ignited a fire that would allow China, like a phoenix, to rise from the ashes, defeat the West, and strive for its own glory. This means that China's leadership deploys the narrative of humiliation as a historical story line to frame national resistance and ultimate victory as a shared source of pride (Wang, 2012). President Xi Jinping's speech at the ceremony marking the seventieth anniversary of victory in the war, delivered in September 2015, was a calculated strategy to keep alive the memory of the Chinese people's war of resistance against Japanese aggression. He declared that this victory, achieved after fourteen years of struggle, represented China's first complete triumph over foreign aggression in modern times and ended the country's era of humiliation, reintroducing China as a major power and restoring its dignity in the eyes of the world (Wang, 2012).

Xi's speech clearly reflects the leadership's perceptions, which are steeped in the historical layers of humiliation, resistance, and victory, and it has contributed to shaping China's geopsychology toward the outside world—especially toward former aggressors such as Japan, which Beijing still regards as a geopolitical rival in East and Southeast Asia (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Wang, 2012). At the societal level as well, anti-Japanese sentiment remains present in China. The country remains extremely sensitive to Japan's past aggression, and this historical baggage continues to generate tensions in Sino-Japanese relations.

On this basis, Xi Jinping is determined to promise "China's great-power status" to domestic audiences, thereby securing popular support to confront new geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, he has emphasized that no matter how strong China becomes, it will never seek hegemony or expansion and will never impose its past suffering on any other country. The Chinese people, he maintains, are committed to pursuing friendly relations with all other states, defending the outcomes of their resistance against Japanese aggression and the global anti-fascist war, and making greater contributions to human progress. This statement effectively conveys the perception that China can reconstruct itself as a great nation and help build a world free of hegemony (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Ng, 2014).

5. The Middle Kingdom Perception

Another core element of China's geopsychology is the concept of the Middle Kingdom. This perception is clearly reflected in the name China has chosen for itself: 中国 (*Zhongguo*), which literally means "Middle Kingdom." Since ancient times, the Chinese have regarded themselves as a superior people ruling others from the center of the world. Those who were not Chinese were either "barbarians" or, at best, tributary subjects who were expected to remain in perpetual service to China (Moore, 2025; Tingyang, 2011).

Although this belief has evolved in the modern era, Chinese society still exhibits a strong sense of national pride. From the traditional Chinese perspective, their country was the center of the universe, the seat of the Middle Kingdom, and other countries were defined and ranked only in relation to it. China stood at the apex of a hierarchy of lesser states that had each absorbed some elements of Chinese culture and paid tribute to its greatness and splendor. This arrangement was seen as the natural order of the world, and the boundary between China and surrounding peoples was defined more by cultural differences than by political or territorial demarcations (Kissinger, 2013).

In ancient times, Xi Jie (1005–1045) offered a strikingly ornate definition of the Middle Kingdom: "Heaven is above, earth is below, and what lies between heaven and earth is called China. Those who dwell on the margins are outsiders; outsiders belong to the outside, while China belongs to the inside. Heaven and earth make it possible to distinguish the outside from the inside." The roots of this worldview can be found in China's geography. As Samuel King and others have pointed out, China has been shielded to the west by vast deserts, to the southwest by the Himalayan ranges, and to the east by great oceans. Historically, the country suffered raids from "barbarian" peoples inhabiting the semi-arid plateaus of the north and west, while its contacts with other centers of civilization were limited by oceans, deserts, and mountains. These conditions encouraged the development of a unique self-understanding of China's position "under heaven" (Snow, 1973; Wang, 2012). For these reasons, it can be argued that even today, Chinese leaders' perceptions are strongly informed by the Middle Kingdom mentality.

Thus, although China is constrained by internal limitations in economic development even as it becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy, its world view remains fundamentally grounded in "Chinese characteristics." This outlook envisions China as destined to play a decisive role in shaping global architecture rather than accepting a secondary role vis-à-vis any other power (Barabantseva, 2014; Callahan, 2008). In this regard, Andrew Scobell, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, stated in September 2020 that Communist Party elites believe Beijing must "relentlessly fight to dominate international markets" in a zero-sum competition with other countries and foreign companies in order to control the world's limited natural resources (Scobell, 2020).

It must therefore be acknowledged that China's geopsychology—particularly its perception of its own impact on global politics—is profoundly shaped by this Middle Kingdom mentality, which has significantly

influenced the trajectory of Chinese thinking and behavioral patterns in its foreign relations. As a result, China's past remains extraordinarily important to its leaders, and the country seeks to redefine the global order by fusing traditional concepts such as the Middle Kingdom and *Tianxia* with the realities of modernity (Moore, 2025; Tingyang, 2011).

6. Tianxia

The core concept of *Tianxia* simultaneously carries three meanings: all the lands under heaven, all the people in the world, and the hearts and minds of the people. The first meaning, all the territories of the world, is roughly equivalent to "earth" in the basic triad of "heaven, earth, and humanity" in Chinese ontology. The second meaning, all the people of the world, is ontologically equivalent to "humanity" in "heaven, earth, and humanity," and, from a political and social perspective, corresponds to "the people." The hearts and minds of the people of the world constitute the spiritual dimension of *Tianxia*.

The third meaning refers to a world system, which is the most important theoretical dimension of the *Tianxia* concept. In this sense, world order denotes the mode of governance over the world or the conditions necessary for its survival and continuity.

If we wish to break down the components of *Tianxia*: the territory of *Tianxia* represents its material dimension; the hearts and minds of the people constitute its value dimension; and the *Tianxia* system determines its mode of existence (Tingyang, 2011).

The perception of *Tianxia* as a governing system is now employed to interpret contemporary Chinese views of the world. The Chinese scholar Zhao Tingyang argues that although *Tianxia* is a broader and more complex concept that includes natural, social, and political elements, the Western understanding of "the world" is essentially incomplete (Tingyang, 2011). The *Tianxia* system emphasizes order, hierarchy, and stability, and appears as an inward-looking system of values and governance rooted in Confucianism, in which the emperor represents the highest authority responsible for maintaining internal order (Barabantseva, 2014).

In other words, the *Tianxia* system underscores the importance of a coherent global governance framework in which the collective interests of the world take precedence, and enemies are transformed into friends. This understanding stands in contrast to the liberal international order (Callahan, 2008; Tingyang, 2011). On this basis, China's foreign policy toward the Global South and developing countries has been designed in such a way that initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative seek to promote collective interests and to present an alternative to the individualistic liberal system (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Lams, 2018).

The mythical and rigid aspects of *Tianxia*, which confer a "heaven-granted exclusive right to rule" on the emperor, have become detached from the realities of today's interdependent global order. No Western expert has yet provided a fully convincing explanation of why *Tianxia* should be so relevant in a complex and deeply interconnected international system. A key question is how the deeper principles and prescriptions of *Tianxia* can be reconciled with the fragile modern concept of state sovereignty. Although it is difficult to dispute the relative stability of China's internal political order, it seems clear that the real motivation of the Chinese leadership in reviving *Tianxia* and Confucianism is to legitimize one-party rule and thereby ensure political stability, public welfare, and social harmony (Tingyang, 2011; Zhao, 2013).

7. Nationalism

Chinese nationalism has functioned as a unifying force for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), helping it secure the legitimacy of its centralized party structure. This strong sense of nationalism has mobilized the Chinese people to resist imperialists and aggressors and has shaped foreign policy by making external decisions appear logical and justified in the public mind. For example, the Opium Wars played a key role in the rise of nationalism in China (Snow, 1973; Wang, 2012).

With Xi Jinping's notion of the "Chinese Dream," the CCP has, over the past decade, increasingly emphasized nationalist legitimacy for its rule. In Shanghai, for instance, a banner displays the phrase "Chinese Dream, My Dream" alongside the slogan "Wealth and Power"—a combination of a contemporary political catchphrase (Xi Jinping's core slogan) and a historical one that motivated the Qing Dynasty during the Self-Strengthening Movement between 1861 and 1895. The national goal of achieving "wealth and power" has been a powerful narrative running through modern Chinese history (Lams, 2018; Wang, 2012).

In contemporary China, the central focus of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" lies explicitly in its "Chinese" characteristics. The "Beijing Consensus" or "China model" is itself a nationalist concept: grounded in Confucian-style meritocracy, it frames "loving China" as a central political value, which often coexists with a negative portrayal of external "others." Self-glorification is frequently accompanied by the demonization of the threatening other. As Lams notes in a careful analysis of strategic communication under Xi Jinping, official discourse often constructs a "negative mirror of the self," in which external adversaries embody what China claims not to be (Barabantseva, 2014; Lams, 2018).

China today is a "rising economic and military power" that carries within it a long-standing record of grievances against European and Western states—grievances rooted in a "deep sense of humiliation" experienced in its historical encounters with foreign powers (Brown, 2017; Wang, 2012). Some analysts argue that China's foreign policy is strongly influenced by this national identity, which they describe as a form of hyper-nationalism with a hard-edged, realist orientation (Zhao, 2013). Others contend that China can be seen as a "hyper-nationalist state" in search of territorial grandeur and a "Greater China," further reinforcing the link between national identity and territorial ambitions (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011).

Consequently, Chinese nationalism is often interpreted as "reactive nationalism," shaped in response to international events or crises. The post–Cold War debate on China's "new nationalism" emerged precisely to understand how nationalism affects its foreign policy. There is little doubt that China has been one of the main beneficiaries of the collapse of the Soviet Union, emerging as a major actor in a U.S.-led unipolar world. At the same time, a strong "propensity toward conflict" embedded in Chinese nationalism—nourished by cultural nationalist doctrines—has encouraged China's leadership to pursue a more assertive and sometimes confrontational foreign policy and diplomacy (Callahan, 2008; Zhao, 2013). In this view, the United States is seen as a key rival that resists China's efforts to reshape the global order. Rather than seeking to overthrow the entire system, Chinese leaders appear primarily to demand recognition of China's power and its rightful status within the existing global system (Barabantseva, 2014; Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011).

Geopolitical nationalism—a subset of this broader nationalist perception—has driven China's firm stance and strong posture against the United States, its principal strategic competitor. The underlying idea is that China must actively prepare for confrontation and, if necessary, conflict with other states, especially in opposition to Western hegemony (Scobell, 2020).

Chinese nationalism is frequently instrumentalized by CCP leaders to highlight that Western powers do not accord China the respect it deserves. For example, if the United States fails to treat China as an equal, Beijing may respond in a more aggressive, xenophobic, and "nationalistic" fashion (Brown, 2017; Zhao, 2013). Many Chinese scholars also interpret Chinese nationalism as primarily "a reaction to external pressure," arguing that it reinforces national self-esteem abroad. The underlying logic is that China's collective dignity embodies respect for individual dignity. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in the psychology of the Chinese public, the leadership, academic institutions, and intellectuals. In this sense, Chinese foreign and security policies are formulated, shaped, and articulated in response to the outside world.

Chinese leaders have reacted swiftly to international incidents that they perceive as harming China—such as the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, China's failure to win the bid to host the 1992 Olympics, and U.S. interventions in the South China Sea. The response to the Belgrade embassy bombing is often cited as a classic example of Chinese nationalism: reports indicate that, in protest, Chinese cinemas banned American films and radio stations stopped broadcasting American music (Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2013). Although Beijing eventually compelled U.S. President Bill Clinton to apologize and to promise that China would be informed of the investigation's findings, few other countries would likely have pursued such an incident to its "logical conclusion" on nationalist grounds. This is precisely where the geopsychology of China's external demands becomes visible.

The bombing incident reinforced China's assertive nationalism and "demonstrated that, for China, the choice between nationalism and globalization is not a zero-sum game; neither should come at the expense of the other." Another illustrative case involves Chinese sensitivity regarding control over the South China Sea. Beijing is not only angered by U.S. involvement in the

South China Sea but also rejects the July 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. China's opposition is rooted in broad public nationalism that supports firm, uncompromising responses to U.S. and Western "adventurism" in the region (Ng, 2014; Scobell, 2020). The public, drawing on nationalist perceptions, demands that the government adopt a "strong" stance toward the United States and defend national identity.

In this context, American policymakers across the political spectrum have strong incentives to promote the "China as a global threat" narrative in the public arena in order to limit China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond (Budryk, 2019; Scobell, 2020; Washington, 2017). It is important to recall that constraining China and disrupting its rise was one of the core principles of U.S. policy during the Cold War. Although the language has changed, the underlying objective remains similar. Today, Washington seeks to keep China busy with global issues and to entangle it in the discourse of a rules-based international system, emphasizing concepts such as human rights and freedom to put pressure on Beijing (Brown, 2017; Zhao, 2013). U.S. officials are well aware that constraining China militarily and economically is increasingly difficult given its growing power. Nevertheless, they recognize that China possesses the psychological capacity to challenge U.S. primacy, as evident in Beijing's open and covert challenges to Washington over the South China Sea, which some observers believe brought the two sides close to direct confrontation (Budryk, 2019; Scobell, 2020).

From the perspective of geopolitical psychology, China's foreign-policy perceptions toward the West and the United States have hardened due to repeated strategic confrontations with Washington over time. This is evident in Beijing's reactions both to the Belgrade embassy bombing and to U.S. condemnation of the Tiananmen Square tragedy, where thousands of Chinese students demanding democracy were killed (Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2013). In this regard, Henry Kissinger has warned successive U.S. administrations that America must carefully balance its short-term pressures with the risk of provoking Chinese nationalism (Kissinger, 2013). He and other observers stress that after a century on the sidelines, China's leaders and people yearn for respect and recognition from the international community—especially from the United States (Brown, 2017; Wang, 2012).

8. Strategic Culture

Most Chinese elites believe that China possesses a strategic culture of pacifism. Of course, people in almost every country claim that they love peace; this appears to be a universal aspiration of humankind. What is distinctive in the Chinese case, however, is the strong and repeated emphasis that Chinese civilization has been uniquely peace-loving, which is said to distinguish it from the strategic traditions of other countries (Ja'fari Valdani & Rahmati Pour, 2014). As stated in China's 1998 Defense White Paper: "The defensive nature of China's national defense policy… derives from the country's historical and cultural traditions. China is a country with a 5,000-year civilization and a tradition of peace. Ancient Chinese thinkers placed great emphasis on good-neighborliness, demonstrating that throughout history the Chinese people have sought world peace and friendly relations with the peoples of other countries" (Mahnken, 2011).

In reality, however, the roots of the use of force and power can clearly be traced in Chinese history. Feng Zhang of the Australian National University challenges the "myth of Confucian pacifism" in the foreign policy behavior of imperial China, noting—citing numerous historians—that "Chinese history has in fact been at least as violent as European history," with a total of 3,131 wars from the first imperial dynasty to the last Qing emperor, averaging roughly 1.5 wars per year (Snow, 1973; Wang, 2012). Victoria Hui similarly argues that it was war, rather than Confucian ideals, that explains how China expanded from the Yellow River valley during the Warring States period into a continental empire under the Qing.

Zhang also contends that Confucius "never rejected the use of force as a legitimate instrument for waging 'just wars' in the form of punitive expeditions… In the *Analects*, Confucius himself endorsed the aggressive and militaristic foreign policy of Guan Zhong, because it had freed China from foreign domination" (Callahan, 2008; Mahnken, 2011).

Without doubt, the dual faces of China's strategic culture create complexity and confusion in identifying its true intentions. This is one reason why countries such as Japan—and especially the United States—remain skeptical of China's proclaimed peaceful intentions. On the surface, China's strategic culture is presented as

defensive and harmonious, yet at the same time it is embedded in doctrines that closely resemble "offensive realism," according to which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) must maintain a constant state of readiness and the capacity to launch strategic offensives against identifiable enemies (Mahnken, 2011; Scobell, 2020). The PLA also trains specifically to test the morale and endurance of potential adversaries (Mahnken, 2011).

India has already experienced this strategy firsthand. During President Xi Jinping's visit to India in September 2014, he was warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Gujarat, and the two leaders enjoyed a traditional boat ride along the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad. Yet, at precisely this moment, the PLA—under Xi's direct command and control—moved to cross the border into Indian territory and remained there for three weeks. The military confrontation might have escalated into a major conflict had Xi not intervened personally at the last moment. This episode raises serious questions: What did this incursion signify? Could such an operation have occurred without Xi's knowledge or approval?

In essence, China's consent to and orchestration of such actions reflect a strategic culture that operates as a geopsychological driver in Chinese foreign relations and has contributed directly to incidents of this sort (Mahnken, 2011; Scobell, 2020).

9. The Anti-Hegemony Program in China's Foreign Policy

The dominant discourse in China's foreign policy is built around opposition to hegemony. The notion of being "anti-hegemony" has been repeatedly invoked and reaffirmed in Chinese official rhetoric. A neutral analysis of China's external behavior suggests that its foreign policy is, in practice, designed against the global hegemon—the United States—and its major rivals. In many of Xi Jinping's speeches and mass public events, this theme is clearly emphasized. For instance, in June 2014 Xi declared: "Any attempt to monopolize international affairs is doomed to fail" (Ng, 2014). Likewise, in December 2018, as quoted by major news agencies, Xi stated: "No one is in a position to dictate to the Chinese people what should or should not be done… We will resolutely reform what can and must be reformed, and we will resolutely defend what cannot and must not be changed" (Washington, 2017).

On this basis, several developments can be seen as explicit indicators of China's anti-hegemonic posture. First, following the imposition of heavy tariffs on Chinese goods by President Donald Trump, Beijing responded with reciprocal tariffs on U.S. products and filed a complaint at the World Trade Organization (WTO), accusing the United States of violating trade rules. Chinese diplomacy framed this as an "eye-for-an-eye" approach, effectively a form of "cold war" with the United States that reveals the political psychology underlying China's foreign policy and its perception of U.S. behavior as coercive and ruthless (Budryk, 2019). This perspective was clearly articulated in a forthright article published on 16 June 2019 in *Qiushi*, the Communist Party's theoretical journal, which declared: "China fears no threats or pressure that the United States may exert to escalate economic and trade tensions. China has no choice, no way out, and must fight to the end… No one, no force, should underestimate the iron will of the Chinese people and their strength and endurance in struggle" (Budryk, 2019).

Beyond this, China's global initiatives and projects are often portrayed in the West as evidence of an emerging "global hegemon," while domestically they have fueled aspirations for dominance in trade and investment. A prominent example is the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which many observers see as a carefully designed imperial project aimed at establishing Chinese hegemony in Asia, particularly by weakening the U.S. dominance that has prevailed since the end of World War II in August 1945 (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Lams, 2018). The BRI seeks to create a web of "continental connectivity" linking China to the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Europe, and Africa, and has often been compared to the U.S. Marshall Plan for Europe, though with a broader strategic scope.

Another example is the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB), headquartered in Shanghai under Chinese leadership in 2014. The NDB has been widely interpreted as undermining the unchallenged leadership of the United States in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It operates as a dual-use instrument: on the one hand, it provides alternative financing mechanisms for poor and developing countries; on the other, it weakens the U.S.-led economic order by offering an institutional substitute (Alfred, 2017; Barabantseva, 2014). In this way, China's rise

sends a clear message that the United States will no longer remain an uncontested economic hegemon.

Third, within multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, the United States is steadily losing influence over its former allies and strategic partners, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. For instance, in the UN General Assembly vote on recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Washington suffered a significant diplomatic setback when Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—two of its traditional allies—joined 128 member states in supporting a resolution calling on countries to refrain from moving their embassies to Jerusalem. Only nine countries voted with the United States and Israel, and the other seven were small states heavily dependent on U.S. assistance. Similarly, at the WTO ministerial conference in Buenos Aires in December 2017, the United States found itself marginalized when it failed to place new issues such as e-commerce, trade facilitation, and gender equality on the agenda. At the insistence of developing countries, particularly India and China, no formal ministerial declaration was issued—a sign of the shifting balance of influence within global economic governance (Barabantseva, 2014; Callahan, 2008).

10. Conclusion

China's historical past, the Middle Kingdom mentality, and its strategic culture have shaped and articulated the leadership's perspectives and approaches toward international relations. The memories of humiliation inflicted by foreign powers—particularly Britain and Japan—remain alive in the Chinese consciousness and continue to shape how China perceives these states as adversaries. As a result, China's foreign policy, at least at a theoretical level, is grounded in opposition to power politics and hegemonic behavior. This helps explain why China occasionally defies elements of the rules-based international order, such as its exclusive claims in the South China Sea. Numerous other examples also reveal China's assertive posture in emphasizing its position as an uncontested regional hegemon, while its geopolitical psychology reflects a consistent rejection of extra-regional intervention in issues like the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

At the present time, the leadership under President Xi Jinping actively promotes anti-Japanese sentiment among the population, reinforcing this stance through events such as the 2017 national military parade. Thus, China–Japan relations could improve, but only if Japan demonstrates a willingness to address China's sensitivities through symbolic gestures such as issuing formal apologies. Without such gestures, anti-Japanese sentiment in China is likely to harden further.

Another dimension concerns China's political behavior, which is influenced by a form of national narcissism that views the world almost exclusively through its own political lens. This worldview is shaped by geopsychological factors and the country's self-generated perceptions, which determine how it interprets the existing structure of international power. Consequently, China is determined—driven by nationalist motivation and historical aspirations for singular prominence—to become a regional hegemon, regardless of U.S. attempts to contain it through balancing coalitions. Furthermore, China is committed to reshaping the rules of the game in a way that advances and consolidates its national interests.

Therefore, foreign-policy elites in other countries must remain aware of China's cultural and social values and respond to them with sensitivity. Rather than engaging in rigid and confrontational approaches in regional or global affairs, they should strengthen their capacity for constructive negotiation with China. In other words, unintended misunderstandings and miscalculations can be avoided by developing an accurate understanding of China's cultural, social, and civilizational characteristics. Ultimately, the geopsychology of East Asia is essential for understanding why regional actors resist and reject principles and values that do not align with their historical and cultural context.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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