China’s security strategy is heavily conditioned by four fundamental features of its security environment.

- A long and in many places geographically vulnerable border,
- The presence of many potential threats, both nearby and distant,
- A domestic political system marked by high levels of elite internecine conflict at the apex and weak institutions or processes for mediating and resolving such conflict, and
- A great power self-image.

Even though the total geographic expanse of the areas under the control of the unified Chinese state has repeatedly expanded and contracted throughout China’s long history (as discussed in detail in the next chapter), its territorial borders or frontiers have extended, at a minimum, over many thousands of miles. For example, China’s present-day land borders extend for well over 10,000 miles.\(^1\) In comparison, the northern boundaries of the Roman Empire at the time of Augustus—from the northwestern tip of Spain in the west to Jerusalem in the east—measured roughly 5,500 miles. Much of the Chinese border crosses relatively open and flat grass and scrublands, deserts, and dry steppes. To the east and south, China’s ocean borders abut the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Such a long, open, and exposed border has presented a major

\(^1\)See Map 1.
challenge to every Chinese government’s efforts to maintain an adequate defense against external attack.

The presence, during various periods of Chinese history, of significant numbers of potentially threatening nearby tribes, kingdoms, and states further exacerbates the challenges to territorial defense posed by a long, vulnerable border. During the imperial era, the primary security threat to Chinese territory was posed by an array of nearby nomadic tribes located along China’s northern and northwestern continental borders. These peoples, skilled in the tactics...
and techniques of mounted warfare and desiring Chinese resources to enrich and strengthen their local political and social positions, constantly raided and harassed the Chinese state and frequently formed confederations that challenged and at times overthrew Chinese imperial regimes. A secondary but nonetheless significant threat to Chinese territory was posed, between the 7th and 9th centuries, by a large and expansionist, nonnomadic Tibetan kingdom located along China’s western border. Other political entities located in present-day Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia also at times posed security threats to imperial China. Moreover, during the first two-thirds of the modern period (i.e., between approximately 1850 and 1945), major threats or security concerns to China’s continental and maritime borders were posed by aggressive imperialist powers such as Russia, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, and France. Since the end of the Second World War, a variety of militarily strong or highly industrialized nation-states such as India, Russia, Japan, and the United States have posed a variety of security threats or concerns to Chinese leaders, including the threat of invasion.

Historically, the Chinese political system has been marked by a highly personalistic pattern of rule at the top in which ultimate authority derives primarily from the power and beliefs of individual leaders, not legal or organizational norms and processes. In such a political structure, senior leadership conflict and succession are resolved and critical policy issues are decided through a largely informal process of contention among complex patron-client alliance networks organized along familial, power, and policy lines and often reinforced by more formal bureaucratic structures. During

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2Tibetans captured the Tang Dynasty capital of Ch’ang-an in 763.
3The modern era overlaps slightly with the imperial era, which ended with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.
4This is not to say that the Chinese polity is not highly bureaucratized. Chinese regimes from imperial times to the modern era have invariably contained complex and intricate bureaucratic organizations and procedures, many of which served to facilitate, constrain, and generally channel a wide range of leadership interactions. However, at the apex of the Chinese political system, such structures and processes served more to support, rather than to define and determine, elite power relations and policy decisions. More important, they did not authoritatively mediate conflict or ensure peaceful leadership succession.
5Chapter Three discusses the major policy issues that have historically divided Chinese political leadership groups.
the imperial era, contending political leadership groups consisted of
the emperor; related members of the imperial household; imperial
retainers or servants such as eunuchs, concubines, and personal
advisors; military officers; and an array of Confucian scholar-officials
and bureaucrats. During the modern period, dominant party
leaders, subordinate contenders for party leadership, military
officers, advisors and secretaries, and bureaucratic officials have
formed the core of most personal political groupings.

Within such a highly personalized political system, policy content
and behavior, including external policy, often become a tool in the
domestic power struggle among the senior leadership. As a result,
basic shifts in the state’s policy content and direction can at times
derive from the power calculations of a particular leadership group
or may occur because of changes in the balance of power among
contending groups or because of the rise or fall of a particular leader.
Also, for such a system, periods of internal order and stability often
result from the victory of a leadership group or coalition led by a
single “strong man” or dominant clique in command of the main
coercive instruments of rule (i.e., the military and internal security
apparatus). Conversely, political and social disorder and, at times,
regime collapse and civil war, can result from prolonged elite strife,
corrupt and repressive leadership actions, and the arbitrary,
unchecked exercise of power.

Once in power, Chinese leaders have historically sought to retain
legitimacy, diffuse internal and external threats, maintain control,
and thereby reduce internecine political conflict by frequently invok-
ing widely accepted ethical or ideological norms, beliefs, and pro-
cesses formulated to justify the authority of the Chinese state and to
peacefully regulate state-society relations. Such concepts are con-
tained, to varying degrees, in the traditional corpus of thought asso-
ciated with Chinese state Confucianism and more recently in the
highly state-centric variants of nationalism and communism es-
poused by the modern Chinese regime.

Despite such stabilizing efforts, China’s personality-based pattern of
rule has remained highly prone to internecine political conflict, often
exacerbated by economic and political corruption, and to broader
challenges from both Chinese society and omnipresent foreign
threats. Because of these and other factors, the Chinese state has of-
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ten been plagued by internal political strife, extended periods of dis-
unity, and open internal warfare. Indeed, the Chinese state has been
united as a single entity under Chinese rule for only approximately
one-half of the period since the end of the Han Dynasty in 220 A.D.
During the other half of this period, China has been embroiled in
domestic conflict, divided between Chinese and non-Chinese
regimes, or entirely ruled by non-Han Chinese invaders. Moreover,
throughout Chinese history, periods of domestic weakness and disar-
ray have often been accompanied by instances of foreign invasion
and occupation. As a result, China’s vulnerable borders and history
of repeated foreign incursions have established a strong connection,
in the minds of most Chinese, between internal political and social
weakness and foreign aggression.

The combination of China’s long-standing geopolitical centrality in
Asia, its high level of economic self-sufficiency, and its past eco-
nomic, cultural, and political influence over the many smaller states,
tribes, and kingdoms along its periphery have produced a deep-
seated belief in China’s political, social, and cultural preeminence in
Asia. Indeed, throughout most of its long history, the Chinese state,
as an organized bureaucratic, political-military institution, con-
fronted no peer competitors. Although confederations of nomadic
and semi-nomadic tribes from Inner Asia and Manchuria at times
overthrew and displaced the Chinese state, these entities were inca-
pable, organizationally and conceptually, of providing an alternative
system of political and military control and social order. Almost
invariably during the imperial era, alien occupiers were compelled,
to differing degrees, to adopt Chinese administrative structures and
procedures to govern the much larger Han Chinese population.6

During late imperial times (i.e., since at least the Song Dynasty of
960–1279), the belief in Chinese preeminence among the states and
confederations of East Asia was greatly reinforced by the hierarchical
and universalistic political-ethical values of Song Neo-Confucianism.

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6This is not to deny that several classic features of the imperial Chinese state and soci-
ety emerged in part as a result of extensive contact with nomadic peoples. For exam-
ple, many of the more militant, totalitarian, and coercive aspects of imperial rule, most
clearly exemplified in the autocratic and at times despotic power of the emperor (in
contrast to the bureaucratic and ideological authority of Confucian civil administra-
This belief system asserted that peace and stability within societies and among states resulted from the maintenance of a set of superior-inferior relationships in which each individual or political entity clearly understood and performed its proper role relative to others. Within such a system, proper conduct ideally resulted from self-education in the Confucian classics or the emulation of a virtuous leader who commanded respect and authority through his moral, upright behavior in upholding correct, hierarchical, patterns of human relations. In society, this leadership figure was usually the father or patriarch of an extended lineage-based clan; within the political realm, it was the emperor.\(^7\)

Within the cosmology of imperial interstate relations, China stood at the top of the pecking order, providing an intellectual and bureaucratic model of proper governance for Chinese and non-Chinese alike. Other states or kingdoms beyond the realm of imperial China were normally expected to acknowledge, and thereby validate, the superior position of the emperor in this sinocentric world order. Deference to the authority of the Chinese ruler thus not only affirmed, conceptually, the proper ethical relations among states but also, in the Chinese view, ensured peace and tranquillity in the Chinese world order by removing any ideological challenges to the superior position of the Chinese state. However, the imperial Chinese belief in the virtues of a hierarchical world order does not imply that China’s political leaders always treated other political entities as inferiors. Chinese imperial rulers were often highly practical in their approach to statecraft. When confronted with relatively strong potential or actual foes, they at times adopted far less hierarchical practices.\(^8\) Yet the traditional preference was clearly for a sinocentric order.

On the material level, China’s great power self-image was also strengthened, throughout most of Chinese history, by the high level of economic self-sufficiency and abundance of resources enjoyed by the imperial state and the resulting significant level of economic influence China exerted over its smaller neighbors. Although many Chinese imperial regimes permitted extensive trade and commercial


\(^8\)This point is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.
contact with the outside, such activities were in most instances not essential to the maintenance of domestic order and well-being. In fact, an excessive dependence on foreign economic activities was often seen as a source of regime weakness and vulnerability to foreign manipulation and influence and hence was resisted by many Chinese rulers. Moreover, for most of its history, the Chinese state was far wealthier, and controlled far more resources, than any of the foreign states, kingdoms, or tribal groupings with which it interacted.

The above suggests that China’s self-image as a great power during the imperial era derived primarily from the dominant influence China exerted over the Asian region by virtue of the sheer size, longevity, cultural and bureaucratic influence, and economic wealth of the Chinese heartland and the Chinese state that ruled it. China’s military might also contributed to its great power self-image. Yet this factor was arguably of secondary importance in the minds of most Chinese. In other words, China’s sinocentric world view did not result primarily from nor rely upon an ability to exercise clear military dominance over its neighbors. Indeed, as discussed in the next chapter, strong imperial Chinese states did not always manage to dominate militarily neighboring political entities.

During the modern era, several events have injected a strong element of political equality into Chinese perceptions of interstate relations: Chinese contact with industrialized nation-states operating in a global political arena, the collapse of Neo-Confucianism as China’s conceptual framework for the international order, and its subsequent replacement by a state-centric form of nationalism. As a result, since at least the early 20th century, many educated Chinese have stressed the need for China to attain the status, respect, and influence of a major power contending with other major powers in the global arena. That is, they have stressed the need for China to attain equality with, and not necessarily superiority over, other major powers. At the same time, the notion that China should in some sense enjoy a preeminent place among neighboring Asian states remains relatively strong among both elites and ordinary Chinese citizens. This is true even though the form and basis of Chinese preeminence in the modern era have changed significantly. In particular, the loss of China’s cultural preeminence and economic self-sufficiency and the emergence of powerful industrialized nation-states along its borders have resulted in a stronger emphasis on the attainment of great
power status through external economic/technological influence and military might. However, it remains unclear as to whether and, if so, to what degree China’s aspirations for regional great power status consciously require military dominance over its periphery; it is even less clear whether China’s self-image as a great power requires the deliberate attainment of a superior military position on a global scale.9

Historically, the combination of extreme geographic vulnerability to attacks from the periphery, state-society volatility, and a deeply rooted great power mentality have produced two fundamental sets of security perceptions among most Chinese: On the one hand, an intense fear of social chaos and political fragmentation or collapse, usually seen as “just-around-the-corner” and often closely associated with aggression and intervention from the outside; on the other hand, a belief that such chaos can be avoided only through the establishment and maintenance of a strong, united, and “just” (i.e., relatively uncorrupt and un abusive) government. From the Chinese perspective, such governmental qualities ideally require the creation and maintenance of a monolithic political order with a single source of power and authority and, until recent decades, a high level of economic self-sufficiency. Moreover, these qualities of government are to be cultivated and protected by the moral rectitude of individual leaders—and in particular by a single, dominant, public-spirited leader—not by an internal structure of institutional checks and balances or the adherence to impartial legal procedures and rulings.10

For the Chinese, such a personalistic, concentrated pattern of political power is viewed as necessary to provide domestic order and well-being, deter potential nearby threats to Chinese territory, and gen-

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9This of course is not to deny that material factors associated with a perceived need to protect and advance China’s expanding economic and political interests could eventually compel Chinese rulers to seek such military dominance. The details of the evolution of China’s self-image as a great power and its implications for Chinese security behavior will be discussed in greater detail below.

10The strong belief in the need for a monolithic political order does not imply that Chinese regimes have invariably been led by a single, powerful figure. In many imperial regimes (e.g., during the Qing Dynasty), the power of the supreme leader was severely limited by the practical realities and complexities of elite politics. See, for example, Bartlett (1991); and Oxnam (1975). The authors are indebted to Lyman Miller for drawing our attention to these sources.
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erally maintain regional peace and tranquillity. Moreover, for most Chinese, the full attainment of these core security objectives requires not only strong military defenses and economic wealth but also the ability to greatly influence, if not dominate, events on China’s periphery, through both military and nonmilitary means. In the modern period, these requirements have also included a strongly felt need to deter aggression from and elicit the respect, if not deference, of more distant, major powers outside the periphery.

The twin security goals of preserving domestic order and well-being and deterring external threats to Chinese territory are closely interrelated, from the Chinese perspective. On the one hand, the maintenance of domestic order and well-being is viewed as the **sine qua non** for the defense of Chinese territory against outside threats. Specifically, a weak, divided and conflictual, or “unjust” (i.e., highly coercive and corrupt) leadership and an impoverished, disgruntled populace are viewed as the primary sources of domestic instability and conflict and invariably lead to a weakening of China’s defenses, which in turn invite foreign manipulation and aggression. On the other hand, maintaining a strong defense, eliciting political (and, during the premodern period, cultural) deference from the periphery, preserving the broader goal of Chinese regional centrality, and influencing the actions of more distant powers are seen as absolutely necessary not only to ensure regional order and deter or prevent foreign aggression and territorial dismemberment but also to avert internal social unrest. This is because a state that is unable to control its borders and command the respect of foreign powers is seen as weak and unable to rule its citizenry.

Overall, in the Chinese security calculus, the maintenance of domestic order and well-being usually takes precedence over the preservation of geopolitical centrality and the establishment of influence over the Chinese periphery, for two reasons. First, the latter two goals cannot be reached without the prior attainment of the former objective. Second, historically, domestic order and well-being have often proved to be extremely difficult to achieve and preserve over time, as indicated above, and thus usually require enormous efforts by the state. In contrast, although an inability to maintain adequate material capabilities and resources for internal order poses a direct threat to regime survival, weakened military capabilities vis-à-vis the outside could be compensated for, at least over the short to medium
term, through the doctrinal and ritualistic trappings of imperial preeminence or the maintenance of a large, defense-oriented standing army and, most recently, a small nuclear deterrent force.

The central problem arising from China’s core security goals and requirements thus was (and remains) how to maintain, first and foremost, the robust level of resources and control features needed to preserve or enhance an often precarious domestic order and well-being and at the same time ensure an adequate defense and external presence keyed primarily to the maintenance of control over or dominant influence along China’s periphery to support, ultimately, the attainment or preservation of geopolitical primacy.

Three sets of variables influence the interaction between these external and internal security demands and constraints and thus determine the type of security strategy adopted by the Chinese state at any particular point in time:

• The capability and outlook of the central government, as measured by the unity, integrity, and security priorities of its leadership and the extent of control it exercises over the government bureaucracy and military,

• The level and origin (external or internal) of resources available to the state for national defense versus internal security and social welfare, and

• The capabilities and dispositions of potential foes, particularly those located along China’s periphery, as well as more distant major powers.

As discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, throughout most of Chinese history, the largely self-sufficient, internally oriented, and instability-prone Chinese state has been more concerned, when providing for its external security, with controlling or neutralizing direct threats to an established geographic heartland originating from an extensive periphery than with acquiring territory or generally expanding Chinese power and influence far beyond China’s borders. During the imperial period, wealthy and powerful Chinese regimes often sought to ensure external security and affirm (or reaffirm) the superiority of the Chinese politico-cultural order by attaining a position of clear dominance over the nearby periphery, preferably
through the establishment of unambiguous suzerainty relations backed, when possible, by superior military force. This was particularly evident during the founding or early stages of a regime, when strong, charismatic military figures controlled events. But the ability of a strong regime to implement and sustain such dominance varied greatly, depending upon the capabilities and geostrategic disposition and posture of the foreign state, kingdom, or tribal confederation in question and, to a lesser extent, on the general attitudes and beliefs of later Chinese emperors toward the use of force and the level of civilian elites’ opposition to costly and politically disruptive, military-based, coercive security approaches. Often, when faced with both domestic opposition and leadership uncertainty and persistent external pressure, strong imperial Chinese states would discard coercive, offensive military strategies in favor of a variety of pragmatic, noncoercive, suboptimal external security strategies, all carried out under a guise of symbolic deference to “superior” Chinese authority.

In contrast, relatively weak or declining imperial Chinese regimes, usually faced with growing concerns over domestic order and well-being and often unable to elicit even symbolic deference from other states, would rely primarily on noncoercive strategies to stave off foreign attacks or maintain stability along the periphery. When such strategies proved unsuccessful, weak and internally divided regimes would in a few instances resort to desperate military means to defend their security, at times in response to the demands of dominant, conservative domestic leadership groups. Such resistance invariably met with little success, however, and a severely weakened regime, or the wholesale collapse of a regime, would result in major reductions in Chinese control over the periphery and sometimes also in the loss of Chinese territory to foreigners. Yet strong, unified Chinese regimes would eventually reemerge and seek to regain such losses. Hence, the dynamic interaction among changing foreign and domestic capabilities and domestic elite attitudes and behavior created a repetitive, cyclical pattern of expansion, consolidation, and contraction of Chinese control over the periphery that coincided with the rise, maintenance, and fall of imperial Chinese regimes.

During the modern period, China’s security problem and resulting strategy has continued to center on efforts to preserve a fragile degree of domestic order and well-being as a first priority, and to consolidate control over the periphery as a primary means of exter-
nal defense. However, these efforts have taken place largely within an environment of generally limited but increasing resources and capabilities. Moreover, as discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the modern era has precipitated some major shifts in China’s overall security environment and leadership outlook, leading to changes in threat perceptions, the definition of the periphery and requisites for periphery control, the internal and external requirements of domestic order and well-being, and hence the specific type of security strategies pursued by the Chinese state. The key question that China’s basic security problem presents for the future is the extent to which these changing requirements for domestic order and periphery control, combined with China’s increasing capabilities, will alter or reaffirm past historical patterns of strong state behavior, especially regarding the use of force rather than diplomacy. To answer this question, the historical record concerning China’s security behavior will first be examined more closely. Following that, the study examines the specific features of China’s present security strategy, assesses its longevity, and identifies what might replace it over the long term.