

# **The Century of Humiliation: Understanding China's Ambition and CCP's Political Legitimation**

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## **Abstract**

The Century of Humiliation was the most tragic and dire time for all Chinese, and the nation is still haunted by it. The study of the Century of Humiliation as a national narrative aims to understand the motives of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) attempt to use the humiliation narrative to legitimise the one-party state ideology and ramp up support from Chinese citizens. The Century was also used to stabilise the CCP's regime, especially in the post-Mao era, which shifted from the Maoist victor narrative to the narrative of victimisation. What unfolded during the Century greatly impacted the Chinese national psyche, while also playing a very crucial role in building modern China's strategies and shaping China's perspective of the existing international system. Therefore, China established the People's Republic of China (PRC) with international elements that help its nation grow safely and enable it to pursue national interests within the existing international system. Throughout the 70 years of the PRC, the CCP has been encouraged to work collaboratively to rebuild and strengthen the nation domestically and play a more active role in the international arena. The CCP continues to adapt its historical narrative to suit its strategy objectives at different times, in order to dispel the bitterness from the humiliating defeats, reclaim its losses and achieve its dream of national rejuvenation, and eventually determine its destiny.

**Keywords** China's Foreign Policy, Century of Humiliation, Chinese Communist Party, Regime Legitimation

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## 1. Introduction

The ending of the Century of Humiliation was considered to be an aftermath of the Chinese civil war in 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1 of the same year. The Century – which actually lasted 109 years – has been a central part of modern China's founding narrative and mythology. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) vowed to seek restoration of greatness of the Chinese nation as comparable to other countries, and that China would not be taken advantage of as previously experienced. Despite the hardships faced by both internal management and external factors amid a rapidly changing international system, the Communist government is determined to lead modern China towards prosperity, so every strategy and policy must reflect national interests and develop national coherence. The CCP's ultimate goal is to redeem what the nation had lost previously, whether national dignity, territories, or international standing (Wang, 2013).

In order to understand the complexities of China's current foreign policy and global strategy, merely studying the present possibilities or reviewing information from a few years back is insufficient. History performs a pivotal function for enabling exploring aspirations and origins of the current actions, especially for China which is still expecting to correct the national mistakes of the past. The Century of Humiliation has always been a key component of the CCP's historical narrative. The party attempted to guide the society in alignment with the Party's principles. As the primary narrator, it has entrenched a sense of victimisation into the Chinese national identity (Suzuki, 2017, p. 31) while strengthening its role and legitimising the Party's governance. The CCP has two goals to accomplish in parallel: 1) correcting mistakes made in the past to become a developed country for the people's well-being as a whole, and 2) maintaining the legitimacy of the Party by receiving support from the people. Therefore, studying the Century will significantly help us to understand the true goals of China's global strategy.

This study is divided into three parts including, first, explorations of events behind the Century of Humiliation that have accumulated into a painful memory among the Chinese people. Second, detailed explanations on how has the CCP uses the Century as a tool to promote its legitimacy. On this account, this article will portray the timeline from the Maoists' victor to victim narratives, establishing a sense of togetherness from the collective historical memory as a tool to motivate nationalism. Such narratives encouraged listeners to willingly support the Party in order to lead the country and build a more stable international status. Thus, the CCP built legitimacy and received justifications for violent retaliations which foreigners see as blatant violations of sovereignty. Besides, scholars and observers discovered that the CCP sometimes intentionally ignored the narrative of humiliation in a discontinuity of narratives, which the CCP altered to serve foreign

policy objectives at a different period. The Chinese government's strategies and actions are considered the pursuit of "performance legitimacy". Zhu (2011, p. 124) explained that a government can gain or maintain legitimacy through achieving concrete goals, such as economic growth or social stability. As the Chinese economy under the Xi Jinping administration continues to maintain growth, they must seek new concrete goals to support the Party's legitimacy.

The third section will dig into the background of China's current aspirations and the impact of the Century on the mindset and perspective of the Chinese government and people, to understand the CCP's complex policy and behaviour in terms of international affairs. Throughout seven decades of the PRC, it has faced several challenges from various permutations of international affairs. China has realised that states cannot opt-out of interstate competitions at the international level, and national security is attached to competency in the international arena. Therefore, China learned from trial and error, as it was building a nation that has international components, to help its nation prosper safely and peacefully in the international system. In addition, this article explores China's global strategy and its foreign policy priorities. The strategy and foreign policy of the PRC are the results of a complex combination of domestic and international affairs. Domestically, China's previous experiences have been collective efforts of its leaders and people in seeking national development guidelines to achieve the national interest in each period, and to be able to maintain the CCP's legitimacy. Thus, the quickly changing international order during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, due to the changing of powers affected China's strategy and national policy so as to obtain its maximum range of national interest during each period, and maintain the CCP's legitimacy. China's national policies involve overcoming the challenges faced by the CCP in bringing the nation out from under the shadow of its bitter past to future prosperity.

## **2. The Century of Humiliation: The Bitter Path to Modernity**

The Century of Humiliation (百年国耻, bainian guozhi) (hereinafter referred to as the Century) lasted from 1839 to 1949, when Western powers and a key Eastern power, Japan, intervened and subjugated the Chinese Empire. During the period, China was plunged into domestic turmoil and foreign aggression. The defeat and enormous loss emphasised the weakness of the once known "great Chinese empire," which resulted in its people's growing bitterness throughout the hundred years of national humiliation.

China's defeat in the First Opium War ushered in an era known as the Century of Humiliation. The First Opium War was fought between China, during the reign of Emperor Daoguang of the Qing dynasty, and Great Britain from 1839 to 1842. The root of the war derived from a trade dispute; to solve the trade deficit, opium was illegally smuggled into China by British merchants and companies for

sale to Chinese people, resulting in a nationwide opium addiction (Cao & Sun, 2011, p. 177). Subsequently, the Chinese government rejected proposals to legalise and tax the opium, following which they confiscated and destroyed the drugs and opium owned by British merchants before issuing a complete ban on opium. The Chinese government halted the opium trade while the British still insisted on a free trade principle, leading to hostility between the two. China, which at that time was still naive to a battlefield with technologically superior ships and weapons, developed by the West, such as gunboats, lost in the resulting war. This defeat led to the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which the Chinese regarded as an 'unequal treaty'. China ceded its territory over Hong Kong to Britain and was forced to open ports for trading, therefore abolishing its monopoly on trade (Ku, 1994, p. 67).

The First Opium War marked the end of China's isolationism. The unfair treaty signed with Great Britain paved the way for other Western powers such as the United States, France, Germany, and also Russia to take advantage of China. China's efforts to alter this exploitation led to its defeat once again during the Second Opium War, which lasted from 1856 to 1860. Accordingly, the Summer Palace, the main imperial residence of the Emperors of the Qing dynasty, was ordered to be destroyed, marking China's loss of sovereignty over the Kowloon Peninsula. Moreover, in emphasising the winners' superior power, China was forced to sign the Convention of Peking in 1860, which primarily outlined various conditions to allow the winner to take advantage of China. (Asia Pacific Curriculum, 2021)

The loss of territories and national pride eroded the people's faith in the Qing dynasty. The Chinese Empire had been beset with accelerating political and social unrest, resulting in radical political and religious upheavals, such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864)<sup>2</sup> and the Boxer Rebellion (1899–

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<sup>2</sup> Taiping Rebellion (太平天国 Taiping Tianguo) (1850–1864) was a bloody civil war and massive rebellion in China during the nineteenth century, fought between the southern rebel group and the Qing government. The movement was led by Hong Xiuquan, a founder of gods worshipping creed called Bai Shangdi Jiao (拜上帝教). Hong induced people to respect his unique polytheistic Christianity in order to achieve his goals of overthrowing the Qing dynasty and changing the social order and the Chinese people's spirit. People who followed Hong mainly were Hans, who were dissatisfied with the ruling of the Qing dynasty for two key reasons; first, the Qing was a Manchu minority, and second, it was seen as incompetent in fighting against Great Britain during the First Opium War. Hong established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in Guangxi and set up the Taiping Heavenly Army to fight against the royal court. After his successful seizure of territories in southern China, the army then moved up north. In 1853, the rebel group could occupy Nanjing. On this account, its strength had greatly shaken the Qing dynasty's sovereignty and led to consecutive battles in several cities, resulting in the death of over ten million people. However, the Taiping Rebellion began to fail due to internal tussles.

1901).<sup>3</sup> A decade later, the domestic turmoil and foreign aggression ignited the great historic change of China through the Xinhai Revolution (1911–1912),<sup>4</sup> ending not only the Qing dynasty but also China's millennia-long imperial period, leading to the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912 by the Kuomintang (KMT) (Elleman & Paine, 2010, pp. 295-296).

However, it seemed that the period of humiliation did not end even when the Kuomintang party came to power. China's central government, or the Beiyang government, was a military authority that was busy cracking down on internal affairs rather than effectively responding to threats from foreign influences. Unfortunately, both internal political turmoil and external threats persisted while the Chinese quality of life stayed rather stagnant.

During the First World War, Japan continued to expand its influence over China's mainland by declaring the Twenty-one Demands (1915).<sup>5</sup> The demands

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Later, the Qing troops allied with Chinese soldiers led by European officers to fight against the rebellion in the southern provinces, and they were able to reclaim the majority of the rebelled areas. In 1862, the Qing troops sieged Nanjing, weakening the rebel group. A few years later, Hong Xiuquan died in June 1864 due to food poisoning, and in July, Nanjing was invaded and reoccupied by the Qing government. Finally, the Qing government could win over the Taiping Rebellion (Cranmer-Byng, 1968, pp. 114-117).

<sup>3</sup> The Boxer Rebellion (义和团起义, Yihetuan Yundong) was a movement against foreigners and Christians in China during 1899 – 1901. Due to the expansion of foreigners' influence in seeking advantages in China and privileges offered to Christianity, this caused dissatisfaction among the Chinese people, so the people voluntarily formed forces to resist and eliminate foreigners from Chinese territory, as well as support the Qing government. The movement began in Shandong before spreading to Beijing and Tianjin. Accordingly, foreigners were besieged and fled to their countries' embassies. Later, these foreigners, including those from the United States of America, Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia, united as the Eight-Nation Alliance and formed a troop to fight against the Boxer Rebellion. The Qing dynasty backed the Boxer Rebellion and declared war on the invading superpowers. The Boxer Rebellion was eventually defeated by the Alliance, resulting in the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901, which was regarded as one of the unequal treaties. After defeating this battle, China had to indemnify over 450 million Haikwan taels (the equivalent of \$330 million) (Warren, 2000, pp. 297-298).

<sup>4</sup> Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命, Xinhai geming) was a successful revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911, brought an end to the absolute monarchy that had ruled China for thousands of years, and led to the establishment of the Republic of China. As rulers, the Qing Dynasty had become progressively less effective, leading to several rebellions and uprisings supported by anti-Qing groups and revolutionaries in exile (Teon, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Twenty-one Demands (二十一条, Ershiye tiao) was a secret set of demands made by the Japanese government in 1915 calling for Japan's regional ascendancy over China. The demands were divided into five sections: 1) granting of special concessions to Japan in Shandong and Manchuria; 2) acceptance of Japan's superior influence in southern

greatly extended Japan's control over China, no matter how hard China resisted. Due to its inferiority, China was forced to accept all the conditions. Such enforcement triggered anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese (Warren, 2000, pp. 316-317), alongside losing faith in other superpowers for abandoning China in this unfair situation. Regardless of how bad China's situation was, things became worse when China, as a victor of World War I, was unable to reclaim Shandong territory from Germany which fell under Japanese control instead. China was then described as "the sick man of Asia" (Hevia, 2003, p. 318) with no bargaining powers; knowing that the resolution of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 was unfair, China's objection was too soft for other powers to pay attention to it. China emerged as the loser among the winners, underscoring the feeling of shame of being invaded by foreign nations for decades. The resolution sparked outrage amongst the Chinese people, leading to the infamous student-led protests at Tiananmen Square, or the so-called 'May Fourth Movement' against exploitative powers and the weak government (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

China's misfortunes continued as it was further traumatised by the expansion of Japanese influence in its territory. Japan invaded Manchuria (1931–1932) following the Mukden incident and killed many Chinese citizens. The conflict between China and Japan continued for decades, leading to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) (Tobe, 2011, pp. 95-97). Japan continued to attack many major cities of China, causing infinite pain and lasting traumas to the Chinese people; the Nanking Massacre, or the Rape of Nanking saw hundreds of thousands of disarmed civilians and Chinese soldiers be killed, physically and sexually assaulted, and looted by the Imperial Japanese Army (Hatano & Shoji, 2011, pp. 136-137).

The Century of Humiliation is a long painful period for the Chinese since their national pride, accumulated throughout their millennia-long history, was devastated. China's gloating and reckless nature is what led to its inevitable fall from grace. Historically, China was the centre of the tributary system amid neighbouring states, and its leaders had limited familiarity with nations outside of Asia as it was rather isolated from international affairs. Consequently, China not only underestimated the external powers but also failed to keep pace with the outside world (Cone, 2012, p. 64); China lagged behind the superior technologies

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Manchuria and eastern Mongolia; 3) for the Chinese government to facilitate necessary measures in protecting the interests of Japanese investors in China; 4) barring the Chinese government from giving or leasing any ports or bays to any superpower; and 5) allowing Japanese intervention in China's domestic affairs, including politics, finance, and governance. The then President, Yuan Shikai, of the Beiyang government could not resist Japan's influence, therefore, he inevitably had to sign this unfair contract (US-China Institute, n.d.).

of the West and lost its bargaining power. The defeat and the losses significantly emphasised China's military and diplomatic weakness during that period.

The Century was a real nightmare and an indelible turning point for China. In consequence, modern China is perceived as a result of the suffering and shame at the hands of foreign powers, which continue to afflict the Chinese psyche with fear (Kaufman, 2011, p. 1). On the other hand, such humiliation became an impetus for China to make its nation 'great again' (Graham, 2017) in order to redeem its honour and not be insulted again as a weakened nation or the sick man of Asia.

### **3. The Century of Humiliation as a Tool for the CCP's Political Legitimation**

#### ***3.1 From the Maoist Victor Narrative to the Narrative of Victimisation.***

During the Mao period, although the lingering bitterness from the humiliating defeat persisted, a victor narrative through China having won its national independence, and Maoist class struggle were central narratives to nation-building. However, since the 1980s, the Chinese government has refined a highly nationalistic historical narrative – a victim discourse was perpetuated instead of the victor narrative to eliminate an ideology vacuum and mobilise popular support. Since then, the victimisation narrative has been used to highlight China's suffering under a unjust past and the CCP's political legitimisation (Leslie, 2018, p. 106).

Initially, the CCP emphasised the terrible loss during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, which scholars have pointed was the narrative used to incite anti-Japanese sentiment (Tischler, 2020). In 1991, the CCP launched a political campaign called the 'Patriotic Education Campaign', which was an ideological re-education that aimed to increase the validity of the CCP in the face of the legitimacy crisis due to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre (Wang, 2008, p. 788). This campaign targeted mainly Chinese youth through education designed to create historical memories for nation-building such as advocating the study of China's humiliating history and emphasising the role of the CCP in maintaining independence and countering foreign influences on China. The student's history textbooks were altered to feature the victimisation narrative that focused heavily on blaming the West for invading China; thus, it completely superseded the official Maoist victor narrative. The decade was considered as a major shift in Chinese political identity, and it was a successful propaganda campaign that has been in effect to date.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping addressed his Chinese Dream (中国梦, Zhongguo meng) strategy. During the Century, the great nation was "reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society after the Opium War of 1840" (Xi, 2021, para. 3). Chinese people were ravaged by wars and suffered throughout the Century. So, a national rejuvenation has been a great dream for all Chinese (Nikkei, 2021). The CCP committed to redeeming the pride and dignity of the nation, to right the

injustices that China had to bear during the hundred years of national humiliation and to strengthen China's voice in the international arena: “enhance the international community's recognition of China's development and present to the world an authentic, multi-dimensional and comprehensive picture of China” (Fu, 2020, para. 3). With those words, Xi explained that redemption and recovery of national pride is the ultimate goal of China's domestic and foreign strategies and policies. Accordingly, national rejuvenation is the common finish line for all Chinese. Over the years, the CCP has acted as a propellant for China to rise from a loser to a real winner position, where all states recognise and treat China equally. This can enable the nation to finally be able to reclaim its past lost prestige and its rightful position in the international system (Carrai, 2021, pp. 7-8).

### ***3.2 The Collective Historical Memory***

The Chinese government is looking for ‘performance legitimacy’, which requires the achievement of concrete goals in order to maintain the legitimacy of the regime. Although this concept is rather abstract, it can sometimes refer to the rightfulness or suitability of a government's authority to govern a state. As many scholars have analysed, China's impressive economic growth and increasing role in the international system in the post-Mao era is the performance legitimacy of the CCP during that time (Zhu, 2011, pp. 126, 135). Therefore, an analysis of the national strategy and government actions and responses may provide us a way to interpret which performance is an attempt to achieve legitimacy for the government. The performance legitimacy under Xi's government may be contained within the Chinese dream strategy of correcting past mistakes and rejuvenating the nation, whereas the collective memory and the use of history in politics have been applied to incite people's support.

When the CCP gained its administrative power, it used historical memory, particularly the Century of Humiliation, as a key tool to maintain its legitimacy and serve as a driving force against imperialist foes. The Century of Humiliation is not only a historical record but is also regarded as a precursor to the awakening of Chinese nationalism, especially among the new generation who did not have a close experience of that period (Leslie, 2018, p. 105). That being the case, the CCP would reinforce the pains that the Chinese had experienced by constantly recounting Chinese history, placing China as the victim, which would always be heart-shattering. As a result, such storytelling would trigger strong willingness among the audience to cooperate and support the Party in order to lead the nation and build a stable international standing and ensure that national security is not invaded or exploited by any nation, with an underlying goal to overcome the wounds of the past.

The CCP has therefore been justified as well as obtained legitimacy for its harsh retaliation to foreigners' actions that are interpreted as a blatant violation of its sovereignty for either being a threat to territorial integrity or an insult to the



Chinese people. Over the past decade, the CCP has been actively investigating and retaliating against foreign agencies that have offended the Chinese with intimidation and public punishment (Metcalf, 2020, p. 46). In the past few years, a number of foreign companies have been banned in China for their rather unintentional actions. This circumstance resurfaced in 2021 after the United States and its allies imposed sanctions on products coming from China and other East Asia nations by expressing concerns over allegations of forced labour and human rights violations in the cotton production industry in Xinjiang. As a result, anger erupted among the Chinese social media communities, and many responded to these claims by calling for the cancellation of Western fashion retailers, while a Chinese state media issued a statement in response to the allegation of forced labour as being absurd and baseless (Zhao, 2021).

The CCP relies on the narrative of national humiliation to justify and legitimise the Party's actions. In particular, the CCP remains sensitive to allegations against foreign agencies for not respecting China's territorial integrity, sovereignty or development. In 2019, during a meeting marking the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, President Xi emphasised that China must adhere to the peace promotion strategy of the 'One-China principle, the One Country, Two Systems', and it must maintain Hong Kong and Macao's long-term stability, including the development of cross-strait relations (Xi, 2019). The Anti-Secession Law came into effect in 2005, where China made it clear that the declaration of separatism is prohibited and that it will do whatever it takes to resist it, even if it requires the maximum use of military forces. The CCP has always aimed at the reunification of the 'whole nation'.

Many companies, especially foreign ones, are often criticised and opposed by the Chinese as their incautious actions provoke painful historical memories. Several websites have been temporarily shut down due to providing separate menu options for China and Taiwan. Moreover, in 2018, 36 airlines were given a warning from China to update their online booking systems to include Taiwan as part of China (Myers & Horton, 2018). Of course, China will never allow the territory it has long considered its own province to be perceived as another state. Besides, the CCP is obliged to respond to misunderstandings and correct them; no matter how hard it is to respond to external criticism, the CCP must stand by this principle strictly.

The South China Sea dispute remains intractable and unsolved. China has been trying to reclaim the disputed areas by using historical evidences, but it was opposed by conflicting states who viewed China's claims as inconsistent with international law on Maritime Zones. A judgment by an international tribunal in Hague in 2016 was marked by Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, as an "...unilateral arbitration initiated by the former government of the Philippines, in an attempt to undermine China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea" (Wang, 2016, para. 2), and "...the Chinese Foreign

Ministry issued a statement, affirming China's staunch position of non-acceptance and non-recognition of the award" (Wang, 2016, para. 1). Undoubtedly, this action was later supported by Chinese nationalists.

### ***3.3 Discontinuity of Humiliation Narrative***

Nevertheless, the humiliation narrative is not performed all the time, as we may have understood. The CCP has been adapting its historical narrative to suit its foreign policy objectives at different times. Scholars and observers have discovered that the CCP sometimes intentionally ignores the humiliation narrative. For example, during Deng Xiaoping's tenure, efforts were made to restore China-Japan relations, although China previously recounted the atrocity of Japan during the Century. But with Deng's impulsion, the signing of a Peace and Friendship Treaty between the two nations was successfully concluded in 1978; Article 1 of the treaty clearly states that the two countries must work together to develop peace and friendship between each other based on the 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence' (Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China, 1978). The treaty represents great efforts of the two countries to work together, abandon the past discord, and move forward, which benefited China's open-door development policy during that time. Another example that recently happened in 2020 was when the Chinese media stopped broadcasting a TV series called 'Red Sorghum' that depicted Japanese atrocities during the Second Sino-Japanese War (Wang, 2020, p. 39); this was following Japan's private sector having donated face masks as well as monetary support of around \$6.3 million to China during the pandemic (Jozuka & Wang, 2020). These three examples demonstrate that when convenient or relevant, memories of humiliation are intentionally downplayed by the CCP.

## **4. The Driving Force behind China's Ambition**

### ***4.1 PRC and the Internationalist Challenges***

The Century of Humiliation shaped China's perception of the existing international system and world order. China has always claimed to be a peace-loving nation and avoided resolving conflicts with a military approach. However, it is undeniable that the experiences of the last century made China realise that states cannot opt-out of interstate competition in the international system (Kaufman, 2011, p. 5), and national security is tied to its capacity to compete in the international arena. China's defeat in the First Opium War led to the national self-questioning as to why the great Chinese empire was unable to compete with the Western countries and other modern states.

Before the emergence and during the hundred years of the Century, the international system and order was ruled by the Western world, which settled at the top or in the central of it. After the signing of the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815),

the Western world entered a period of relative peace between the Great Powers. With no interstate wars, the establishment of the new political and legal orders for European states were initiated. The British Empire emerged as a global hegemonic power during a period later known as Pax Britannica (1815–1914). Britain devoted its efforts to overseas expansion. With the navy superiority, it was able to easily pursue its self-interests. Britain gained control of all major trade routes while the Royal Navy served the nations, through exploitation from trade with foreign states, including the Chinese Empire.

China's trade and relations with Western nations gradually opened the door for the Qing dynasty government to familiarise itself with the unfamiliar Western-dominated international system. It is noteworthy that China's defeat during the Century of Humiliation stemmed from its weakness and narrow-mindedness. Before the Opium War broke out, the Chinese government had rejected Britain's requests to allow more trade, leading to rising tensions between the two nations. In contrast, Japan, an East Asian state to China has always considered itself superior, was far more accommodating to Western demands. During the 1990s, China struggled to modernise and industrialise while Japan did it with ease (Giulia, 2013).

The Qing government's diplomacy is influenced by traditional ideals, that is, a tribute system. The Western states were grouped as the mutual trading states even if they don't have to pay tributes, but Qing government treated them as its vassal states, and placed itself nation as superior to these mutual trading states (Zhang & Xu, 2007, pp. 415-416). China was much less interested in learning about or from the West than Japan was; hence, the Japanese government was better equipped to evaluate its position with regards to the Western powers.

However, the questions have now shifted to whether the international system established by the West at that time was a problem in itself. Because if its mechanisms were effective, China's voice at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 would be loud enough for other states to listen, and the Shandong Question probably would not have happened. Of course, from the Chinese perspective, this event was all about the great powers employing the international system's mechanisms to exploit the smaller states. Accordingly, the international system was characterised by widespread injustice.

Eventually, the devastating defeat and heavy exploitation in the past became a lesson for the CCP to lead in its rebuilding of a nation during a time of massive transformation of the international system. China became aware that it cannot avoid state modernisation and participation in the international system. Therefore, China learned by trial and error to build a nation with international elements that can help its nation to grow safely and peacefully in the international system. The selection of such elements was done with caution, especially during the Cold War. The bipolarity has had significant implications on the global order, requiring China to be vigilant in implementing its foreign policy.

Moreover, China has put in place mechanisms that prevent other states' invasion strategies. Throughout seven decades under the rule of the CCP, several reforms have occurred in the country such as Mao's Political and Cultural Revolution (1966-1967), the Economic Revolution (1978) by Deng, and the current demands for further revolutions to enhance China's role in world affairs, as directed by President Xi. In aligning the country with the international system and order in its reformations, China has grown rapidly, especially after its many economic reforms, and has become a rising power that has influence over today's global affairs.

The second question is whether China will try to change the system or will it take advantage of the existing system with the Western-dominated international liberal order? China's political elites and scholars have argued that the post-World War II international system to date has not changed significantly, since China's acquaintance with it (Kaufman, 2011, p. 5; Tang, 2018, p. 33). Besides, they perceive that the international arena is still an area for competition and power struggle between small and large, strong and weak states and disagree that China has enough power to change the current international system. Although, in the past two decades, scholars and strategists have agreed that China's rise is challenging the international system and order, but many have suggested that the CCP does not see the need to alter the system as China itself can still enjoy gaining benefits and seeking its national interests within the present framework. Nonetheless, they further suggest that China should build itself a better competitor for international competitions (Kaufman, 2010, p. 7).

Another lesson the Chinese have learned from past experiences is that isolationism cannot protect China from invasion. So, the nation should end its self-isolation policy and embrace the international system. On this account, since the 1990s, the CCP has continued to launch more active foreign policy agendas and acknowledged the existence of multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations (UN) (Chang, 2021, p. 1164). An obvious example of China's increasing commitment to world affairs is through its implementation of military operations. It is commonly known that conflict is inevitable in the international arena, but in order to eliminate, resolve, and prevent global conflicts, military operation is advisable; however, it should not be carried out on behalf of any state or groups of states, but by international organisations. China's involvement in international military missions has increased significantly as it has actively participated and contributed personnel to the UN peacekeeping missions. Currently, it is the second biggest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget (UN Secretary-General, 2018, p. 2) as well as engages in military operations other than war (MOOTW), which aim to deter war and promote international peace. In case of state domestic crises, China's role is supporting the civil authorities in resolving and responding to the incidents without territorial sanction due to its firm adherence to the non-interference principle.

#### ***4.2 The Aspirations of China's Global Strategy and Foreign Policy Priorities***

The PRC's foreign strategy and policy is the result of a complex interweaving between domestic and international affairs. At the domestic level, the result of China's prior experience has become the collective efforts of leaders, the government and of the general people in pursuit of national development. Simultaneously, the change in the international order during the Cold War and the post-Cold War era due to the shift in powers also required its foreign strategy and policy to be adjusted accordingly, in order to achieve the highest level of national interest.

A core principle that Mao held after the establishment of the PRC was that China would cooperate with any state that treated China equally, regardless of race, religion, and political ideology, and then form a universal coalition. Cooperating with developing countries has been the cornerstone of China's foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). Its experience with imperialism was used to promote China's relations with developing countries. Distinctive features of China's interactions with other nations include its ideology and military assistance toward anti-colonial movements, particularly in Africa and Asia.

The principles of China's foreign strategy and policy are reflected in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项, Heping gongchu wu xiang yuanze), which were first mentioned in the Agreement between the Republic of India and the PRC regarding Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India 1954, have become important principles to which China adheres. The principles include: 1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, 2) mutual non-aggression, 3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, 4) equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and 5) peaceful co-existence. The PRC seeks peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world and works hard to improve the external environment to make it suitable for the growth of developing countries (Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India, 1954).

The Bandung Conference or Asian-African Conference in 1955 was great evidence of China's global strategy, based on the Five Principles. Back then, when the world was facing tensions caused by rivalries of superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – during the Cold war, the meeting was held to express the intentions of the Third World countries against colonialism and to create a neutral zone for the states to maintain their non-aligned status. The Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, as China's representative, played a crucial role in pushing for the neutrality of the small and newly independent countries and promoted the South-South countries' cooperation. The meeting also supported the application of the Five Principles as the basis for regulating state-to-state relations (Wen, 2004).

In 1974, Mao proposed another important philosophical principle, the Three Worlds Theory (三个世界的理论, *San ge shijie de lilun*), illustrating China's conceptual view of the international system during the Cold War era. Mao also reformulated the geopolitics of international relations and established China as a Third World country with a commitment to help other Third World countries. China's diplomacy, therefore, emphasises the relationship between South-South countries, while cooperation is based on a win-win principle. For example, both China and its host countries share mutual benefits from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, whereby China is mainly committed to building continuous cooperation with developing countries.

At the end of the Cold War, Deng expressed his views on an international order that was slated to change in a post-Cold War era. In a talk with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India on the occasion of his visit to Beijing in December 1988, Deng suggested that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence should become the norms of a new international order. As the international situation was about to change, all nations were contemplating appropriate new policies to create a new international order. Deng suggested that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence should be the norm for international relations, beginning with the adjustment of relations with neighbours. He also stressed that unresolved development issues and North-South issues should be taken more seriously (Deng, 1988). This reflects the views and core of China's foreign policy that have been adopted by the subsequent generation of leaders – Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping's governments.

In 2002, China launched a New Security Concept, urging states to refrain from the traditional military approach. As perceived, forces were unable to fundamentally resolve disputes and conflicts, thus security concepts and regimes based on force could not lead interstate relations to achieving lasting peace.

China has been increasingly willing to expand its role and participation in the international system by emphasising cooperation through multilateral organisations, which reflect legitimate international consensus and are consistent with the CCP's New Security Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002). Under a new historical condition, the Post-Cold War era, the New Security Concept was built on the provision of mutual security, which is consistent with the common security principles of the UN Charter.

To achieve the Chinese dream, aiming for national rejuvenation and becoming a fully developed nation by 2049, China is required to accumulate a substantial amount of comprehensive national power. On this account, many of its strategies have been perceived as threats to other nations, such as the building of a regional powerful military to ensure national security.

Historically, China adhered to the hiding and biding doctrine, thus its military weakness in the face of external powers had taught China some good lessons. When Xi announced his big dream, the military's role became China's major policy (Ni, 2021). The CCP has built a regional and powerful military by

reforming the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into high-technology forces and moved from ground-centric forces to all-round military operations, which include the navy and air force. However, the accumulation of military power poses challenges to the balance of power at global and regional levels, leading to widespread concerns and many closed doors to lasting peace.

Thus, as a rising power, China has been asked by global communities to assume the role of a responsible stakeholder and participate in the current international setup. As China demonstrates its achievements to restore its position and demands for recognition and equality, it shows how China was able to overcome its inferior status. In addition, China's shouldering of international responsibilities helps to improve its image and reduce international concerns regarding it as a threat. At present, China tentatively recognises itself as a world superpower, but proudly admits a regional hegemon status and has formally denied that its strategy would lead the world into the Thucydides trap (China Daily, 2021). The CCP acknowledges that competition is a normal part of the international system. Both China and the US have been focused on acquiring and maintaining their national security. Despite that, even though there has been intense competition, China insists it does not stand in opposition to the US and is able to negotiate and cooperate in many areas.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Century of Humiliation was the most tragic and dire time for all of China and the nation is still haunted by its violent past. The study of the Century of Humiliation as a national narrative aims to understand the motives of the CCP's attempt to use the period to legitimise the one-party state ideology and ramp up support from Chinese citizens by creating a discourse that China, a peace-seeking country that has always avoided conflict and competition, was a victim of the West and Japan who were rapacious, cheaters and aggressive. However, the Century has also been used to stabilise the CCP's regime, especially in the post-Mao era. Therefore, the Party has tried to guide society to behave and think in accordance with its ideas.

During the first two decades of the PRC, the nation was overwhelmed with domestic conflicts and civil wars, such as the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Since Deng's economic reform and opening up of the country in 1979, China has embraced its interactions with the world and actively participated in the international system. This may represent the CCP's attempts to correct past national arrogant attitudes, which led the nation to calamity throughout the hundred years of humiliation.

What occurred during the Century greatly impacted the Chinese national psyche while also playing a very crucial role in shaping China's foreign policy. The rise of Chinese nationalism aims not only to celebrate the glories of the ancient

Chinese civilisation but also to commemorate China's past weakness as an example of never to be vulnerable to other states again (OpIndia Staff, 2020). Thus, the CPC has focused on restoring and building a prosperous nation to end the effects of the hundred years of humiliation. The concept of 'One China' implies there is only one sovereign state under the name China. So, only the CCP rules can protect China from chaos and disintegration (Bogusz & Jakóbowski, 2020) as well as from a recurrence of the Century of Humiliation. Besides, China has been trying to establish cooperation rather than conflicts through win-win policies. These have been the main tasks and goals of the CCP since 1949.

Throughout the 70 years of the PRC, the CCP has been encouraged to work collaboratively to rebuild and strengthen the nation from within and play a more active role in the international arena. China's dream of accomplishing a great national rejuvenation, in other words overcome China's historical humiliations, and to dispel the bitterness from the humiliating defeats by stabilising the nation's economy, military might, and international standing allow China to be independent and able to control its own destiny, unlike in the past.

Despite the CCP's efforts to overcome the injustices that China has formerly experienced, a challenge the Party's faces is the question of whether the approaches are against the current international system. President Xi is widely seen as a human rights abuser on the grounds of the Hong Kong protests, the Xinjiang internment camps, and government policies that restrict people's freedom of speech and access to any fundamental element of modern society via the system of 'social credit' as a means to control the people, seize territorial claims and more. The issue of Taiwan is also one of the legacies of the Century. For the CCP, a country cannot be considered a homogeneous country if 'One China' excludes Taiwan, so bringing Taiwan back under the rule of China's mainland is a sacred mission for all Chinese leaders to achieve (Callahan, 2004, p. 205). However, the mission is not easy when Taiwan strongly resists being a part of China and somewhat favours the US. How will China maintain its image of a peace-loving and peaceful rising nation when it is obviously keen on becoming a 'stronger nation with a strong military' (BBC News, 2013), and it employs military patrols in both the North and South China Sea to intimidate neighbouring countries, and upholds its rights and claims over disputed territories? Therefore, these issues often lead to discussing whether the CCP is bringing China to a new century of shame.

Simultaneously, these issues also pose a challenge to the CCP's political legitimisation. As Xi Jinping stated in the Party and the World Dialogue 2015, the CCP's legitimacy is derived from history and population support (Ruan, 2015). Therefore, aside from using historical narratives as a tool for legitimacy, maybe we should consider whether the policies and actions of the Chinese government are appropriate and deserve public support. The CCP's efforts to build performance legitimacy could lead to strongly highlighting the current legitimacy crisis. On the



contrary, from the Chinese perspective, this is not a crisis but a moment to praise and increase support for the CCP.

Amidst the current intense economic and technological competition, China's strategies and policies are formulated and implemented to fully pursue national interests. The CCP's mission is to lead the Chinese nation to keep pace with the outside world and enhance its standing in the international system. It is obvious that China plays an active role in the international arenas of politics, economy or technology, evidenced by the fact that China could initiate an intercontinental mega-project like the BRI to bring about a transformation of the transport networks and international cooperation centred on China in the future. In the face of a pandemic, the Chinese government was able to control the COVID-19 outbreak well. A survey by the Washington Post surveyed about 20,000 Chinese citizens who reported that the pandemic increased public trust in government. The way the Chinese government handled the pandemic, such as rapid vaccine procurement (regardless of vaccine efficacy), increased its credibility (Wu, 2021). For the economic sector, as of 2021, only China has reported economic growth. According to Bloomberg News, the consumer spending has resumed growing, although it remains subdued (Bloomberg News, 2021). These accomplishments are evident, and they may be considered as a part of performance legitimacy of Xi's government.

For the Chinese people, the government's decisions and actions are rational and aimed at safeguarding the national interest. Therefore, the Taiwan issue, the South China Sea dispute, or the expanding military forces are inevitable in order to protect national interests. All of this has shaped public perception, creating a common sense that supporting the CCP will help China escape its humiliating history and survive in an ever-changing international system, and ultimately help achieve China's collective dream of becoming a fully developed nation by about 2049.

The humiliation narrative will continue as a national narrative for explaining and justifying China's view of the world and as a means to legitimise the CCP. Overcoming its historical humiliation will be possible when China is able to regain its position and unconditional recognition from the international community. However, the way China has been holding onto the historical events is quite inappropriate since historical arguments cannot be judged as right or wrong, based on unilateral evidences or viewpoints. In this manner, this claim of attempting to regain its past amidst the changing international system is rather arbitrary. Thus, the CCP is at a crossroads of controversies between trying to overcome its past humiliating defeat and embracing the modern international order and system. All in all, China still has two decades left in its journey to transform into a fully developed nation, despite a number of challenges that the CCP has to overcome to be able to achieve its goals.

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