



## Territorial Contradictions of the Rise of China: Geopolitics, Nationalism and Hegemony in Comparative-Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*There is debate in the literature regarding whether China can become a new world hegemonic power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most existing analyses focus on economic aspects of world hegemony-building processes and ignore its macro-political dimensions. This article starts with the premise that reshaping the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system is an important part of world hegemony-building processes. One of the ways in which previous and current world hegemonic powers established their world hegemonies was through the inclusion of new nations by co-opting, supporting or sometimes selectively leading a section of nationalist movements into independence. Our comparative analysis shows that, as of now, contemporary China has not been following this historical pattern. Compared to Mao-era China, which was perceived as a champion of national liberation—at least when colonial and semi-colonial areas were at stake—today's People's Republic of China (PRC) is emerging as a champion of the global geo-political status quo. The current Chinese government is not actively pursuing the transformation of the inter-state system or seeking to create instabilities at different levels. This is because, unlike previous and current world hegemonic powers, during its rise to global preeminence, Chinese territorial integrity has been challenged due to rapid escalation of nationalist/secessionist movements within its own state boundaries. Hence, the PRC's foreign policy has consistently been concerned with creating and preserving macro-political stability at national and international levels.*

**Keywords:** China, world hegemony, world-systems, nationalism, secessionism



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There is a major debate in the literature regarding whether China can become a new world hegemonic power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we provide a critical assessment of China's possible rise to global political-economic preeminence with a focus on macro-political dimensions of world hegemony building processes. Although there is a flourishing literature, which discusses limits and prospects of China's possible ascendancy (Ciccantell and Bunker 2004; Arrighi 2007; Jacques 2009; Lachmann 2010:202-206; Gulick 2011; Hung 2015), most existing analyses focus on economic aspects alone and ignore macro-political dimensions of world hegemony building processes.

Our analysis stems from two premises: (1) Until now, efforts to reshape the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system have been an important part of world hegemony-building processes. (2) *One* of the ways in which previous and current hegemonic powers—the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and the United States—transformed the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system was through the inclusion of new nations by supporting, co-opting, and sometimes leading selected nationalist movements into independence. We argue that by leading a select group of subject nations to independence, rising great powers enhanced their hegemony-building capacities by (1) gaining the “intellectual and moral leadership” (Gramsci [1971] 2003) of these new states, (2) weakening their rival great powers (e.g., formal empires or colonial/imperial powers) that previously controlled these subject nations, (3) containing rival and radical anti-systemic ideologies (e.g. republicanism in the late 18th and early 19th century; communism in the late 19th and the 20th century) which were spreading among these oppressed nations, (4) presenting their own political systems and state-society relationships as ideal-type political models that can be exported to these “new” nations, and (5) representing themselves as the pioneers of a new and a more “progressive” world order who helped dissolve the earlier “despotic” and “reactionary” inter-state systems.

So far, however, contemporary China does not seem to be following this historical trend. Although China during the Mao era was perceived as a champion of national liberation (Van Ness 1970: 77-94)—at least when colonial and semi-colonial areas were at stake—today's People's Republic of China (PRC) is emerging as a champion for the preservation of the global geo-political status quo. Put differently, in contrast to previous and current world hegemonic powers, the contemporary Chinese government is not interested in transforming the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system and creating instabilities at different levels. The PRC's foreign policy has consistently been concerned with preserving the inter-state system created by the declining world

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<sup>1</sup> Authors would like to thank Benedict Anderson, Gene Anderson, Joel Andreas, Robert Barnett, Gardner Bovington, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Melvyn Goldstein, Ho-fung Hung, Stephen Sanderson, Beverly Silver and anonymous reviewers of JWSR for their valuable comments and feedback.

hegemonic power. Even if China maintains its economic strength and gains the economic leadership of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by providing a temporary solution to the contemporary crisis of capitalist world-economy, it will not lead a *new* inter-state system. Instead, it will lead the existing inter-state system established by the United States.

In the current literature, it is possible to find arguments explaining China's policy of preserving stability in terms of unique ideological and historically specific aspects of Chinese culture. In this paper, however, we offer another explanation that arises from our comparative-historical analysis. Our explanation focuses on a particular political problem surrounding China during its ascendancy that had not existed, at least on this scale, for previous rising hegemonic powers. We maintain that during its economic ascendancy, Chinese territorial integrity was challenged through a rapid escalation of nationalist/secessionist movements (such as the long standing Taiwanese problem, the Tibet movement, the East Turkestan/Uyghur movement in the Xinjiang region, and to a lesser extent the Inner Mongolia problem and growing dissent in newly integrated Hong Kong). While none of these problems are new, a complex set of factors that are also related to the rise of China—including multifaceted domestic transformations during the reform period (e.g., liberalization and “opening up” policies; and its growing energy needs) and complex international transformations of the U.S.-centered world hegemonic order (e.g. decline of U.S. hegemony, intensification of inter-state rivalries, and growing social and political instability in the world)—made China more and more vulnerable to these internal threats and challenges.

We argue that escalation of nationalist/secessionist movements during China's ascendancy have been pushing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to utilize a two-dimensional strategy that is closely related to China's growing political-economic strength. The first dimension is the heavy reliance on development and welfare policies to contain nationalist problems at home and abroad. The second dimension, made possible by China's growing bargaining power in bilateral and multilateral relations, is the skillful use of international diplomacy against forces of secessionist nationalism. Both dimensions of this strategy require and favor global stability. Consequently, contrary to previous hegemonic powers, China has emerged as a global power, which does not attempt to alter the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system but one, which attempts to preserve the status quo.

In pursuit of discussing various implications of this “anomalous” development in a comparative-historical perspective, this paper is organized as follows. The first section explains the comparative-historical rationale behind our premises by discussing trajectories of the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and the United States with a focus on the macro-political aspects of world hegemony building processes. The second section examines the historical trajectory of nationalist movements in China before and after the reform period to describe the historically-

specific context the PRC finds itself in the early 21st century. The third section discusses the two-dimensional strategy the PRC utilized to contain nationalism in the reform period and explains how and why China has emerged as a champion of the global status quo. The fourth section concludes by comparing the trajectory we observe in China today with the trajectories of the previous rising hegemonic powers in world history.

### **Macro-Political Aspects of World Hegemony Building Processes**

The concept of “world hegemony” refers to “the power of a state to exercise functions of leadership and governance over a system of sovereign states” (Arrighi 1994: 27). In this Gramscian reconceptualization, power is associated not only with dominance but also with the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership. At the world-systemic level, as Arrighi explains, a particular state exercises this hegemonic function when it leads a *system* of states in pursuit of a perceived *general interest*. Although terms like *general interest* are extremely ambiguous because of their ideological nature, historically, claims of this kind tend to increase their credibility under conditions of “systemic chaos,” where rising hegemonic powers, and their rivals, contend to be the leaders in resolving a multiplicity of crises whose devastating economic, social and political consequences are faced by many actors in the inter-state system (Arrighi and Silver 1999).

Among these crises, we can count catastrophic economic and social upheavals which signal that existing regimes of capitalist accumulation are no longer sustainable, escalation of inter-great power (and inter-imperialist) warfare which quickly turns into a negative-sum game for all of its participants and intensification of massive social conflicts, revolts and revolutions (Arrighi & Silver 1999; Silver & Slater 1999; Boswell & Chase-Dunn 2000; Amin *et al* 1982; Arrighi *et al* 1989). In this chaotic atmosphere, rising hegemonic powers attempt to resolve these crises by offering new configurations for historical capitalism, state-society relationships and inter-state systems (Arrighi 1994; Arrighi & Silver 1999; Silver & Slater 1999). These reconfigurations and transformations help rising hegemonic powers not only climb the ladders of global political and economic preeminence but also assert and advance their “intellectual and moral leadership” capacities.

One of the important—yet relatively much less studied—aspects of these transformations is related to the integration of new nations into the inter-state system. Historically, the rise of social and political movements demanding independent statehood, recognition and integration into the inter-state system have been an integral part of the systemic chaos which had marked each hegemonic transition period (Karataşlı 2013; Silver & Slater 1999). Using the opportunity structures created by economic, social and political crisis conditions of the hegemonic transition periods, state-seeking movements challenge their rulers in a much stronger way (Karataşlı 2013). Historically, climbing the ladders of global-economic preeminence, rising hegemonic powers have

led a particular section of these movements to independence by supporting them either directly or indirectly. This helped these great powers increase their consent-making capacities, gain the leadership of a new system of states and constitute themselves as hegemonic powers.

### **The Rise of the United Provinces to World Hegemony**

For instance, the rise of the United Provinces to global political-economic preeminence—which occurred between the mid-16th and the mid-17th centuries (Arrighi 1994)—coincided with the emergence of various state-seeking movements within Europe and the partial dissolution of the Spanish-Habsburg Empire (Elliott 1970; Elliott 1997; Elliott 2002; Kamen 2005; Karataşlı 2013). The seventeen provinces of the Low Countries—which later became the Dutch Republic—were the pioneers of these state-seeking movements when they started a revolt against the Spanish-Habsburg Empire which is currently known as the Dutch War of Independence. The eighty-year long struggle of the Dutch against the Spanish-Habsburg Empire and the establishment of the United Provinces as a *de facto* independent state in the course of this struggle became an admired model for various regions of the Spanish-Habsburg Empire (Silver & Slater 1999; Elliott 1970). By 1640 different forms of social revolts aiming at establishing independent political units took place in Catalonia, newly incorporated Portugal, Andalusia, Sicily and Naples, and Eastern Europe (Elliott 1970; Boswell & Chase-Dunn 2000; Tilly 1994). Within the social and political turmoil of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, many Protestant revolts also turned into state-seeking movements (Karataşlı 2013).

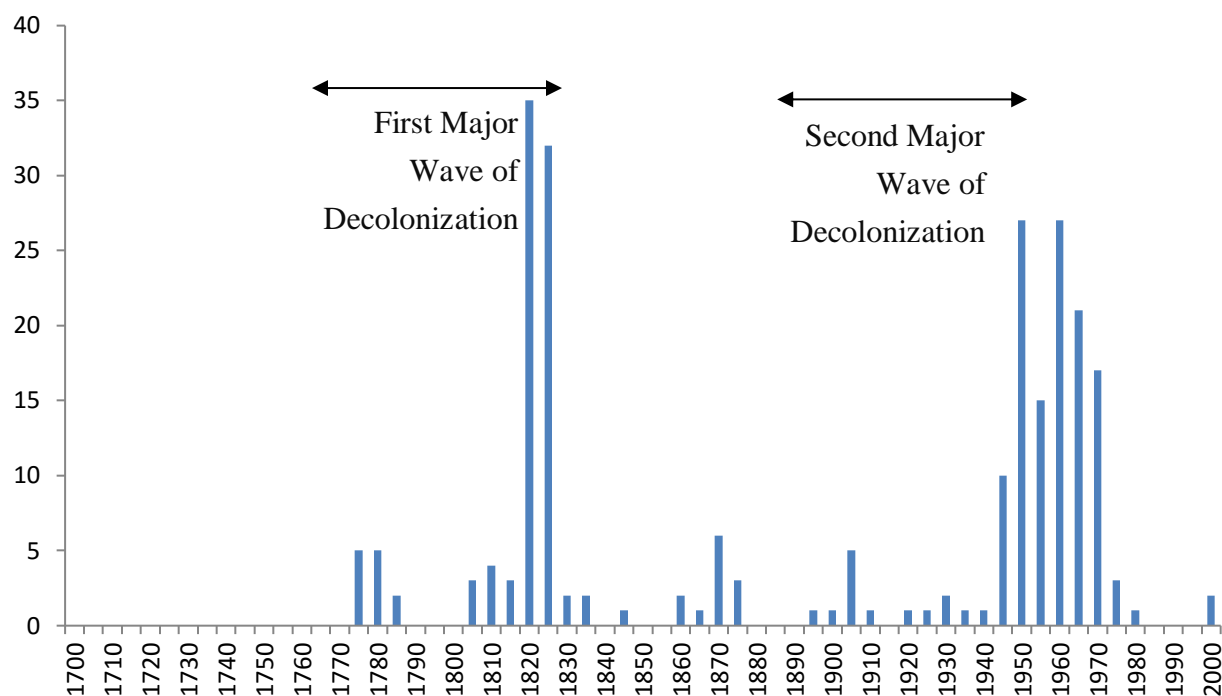
In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Dutch provinces contributed to the existing systemic instabilities by actively leading the revolts against the Spanish-Habsburg Empire, riding the tiger of Calvinism, and financing the Protestant popular revolts all over Europe (Parker & Smith 1978: 18; Parker 1978: 65; Lachmann 2000: 161-162; Arrighi 1994: 47). The Dutch statesmen quickly realized that in order to gain their independence and to advance their political-economic power they needed to polarize international politics by leading a large coalition of dynastic states against the Spanish-Habsburg empire and towards the liquidation of the medieval system of rule (Parker 1978; Arrighi 1994: 43). Furthermore, in the course of their struggle for independence, the Dutch made their best effort to sap Iberian power in Asia. For example, after the establishment of the V.O.C. (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) in 1602, the Dutch made agreements with Spanish/Portuguese occupation forces (i.e. King of Kandy, Coromandel coast of India, Indonesia, etc.) in order to expel the Iberian forces from Asia (Parker 1978: 71). The Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which marked the end of both the Eighty Years' War and the Thirty Years' War, not only created the inter-state system of the modern world but also forced the defeated great powers to recognize new states—such as the United Provinces and Switzerland—as independent units of this system.

This strategy helped the United Provinces in a number of ways. For one thing, it contributed to the partial dissolution of the Spanish-Habsburg Empire and weakened the Holy Roman Empire, which were among the primary rival great powers for the United Provinces. While weakening its rivals, the same process had integrative effects on the Seventeen Provinces. Previously the “Seventeen Provinces” were nothing more than a loosely coordinated, heterogeneous collection of autonomous city-states. Thanks to its long struggle against the Habsburgs and the extremely high level of capital it started to accumulate, “the United Provinces” became a hybrid kind of organization. It incorporated characteristics of both a collection of city-states (which it was much more than) and that of a centralized nation state (which it was still less than) (Arrighi 1994: 36-47). Moreover, in the course of its struggle against the Spanish-Habsburg Empire, the United Provinces advanced its leadership capacities over a large number of states—especially the Protestant ones—in Europe. Bringing together new sovereign states of Europe under the Westphalian system and dissolving medieval system of rule in Europe helped the United Provinces to become the hegemonic power in the 17th century.

### **The Rise of the United Kingdom to World Hegemony**

The transition from Dutch to British hegemony, which took place between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, coincided with the development of another wave of state-seeking movements in the modern world-system. This time, state-seeking movements were concentrated especially in the settler colonies of the Americas (Karataşlı 2013:228-241). Thirteen colonies in North America revolted against the British Empire and gained their independence in 1776. The American War of Independence was a major event signaling the upcoming crises in the geopolitical and macroeconomic sphere (Silver and Slater 1999:159-160). From 1780 onwards, *creole* settlers and native Indians in Central and South America also started to revolt against their Spanish and Portuguese imperial rulers. With the slave revolt of 1791 led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, the black population in Saint-Domingue started a struggle against the French Empire, and in 1804 they successfully established a state of their own. Furthermore, during this hegemonic consolidation period, utilizing the opportunities created by the Napoleonic wars, all settler colonies in the Americas accelerated their fight against the Spanish Empire, gained their independence and established contemporary states such as Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela. As a whole, the period from the 1770s to the 1820s marked the first major wave of decolonization in modern world history (see Figure 1, below). In that era, the rise of nationalist movements was not confined to settler colonies. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the Serbian, Greek and Romanian populations of the Ottoman Empire and the Irish in the British Empire also started their wars of national liberation.



**Figure 1.** Major Waves of Decolonization

**Source:** Data from Henige (1970). See Bergesen and Schoenberg (1980) for the original study on long waves of colonialism and decolonization using Henige's (1970) data. Five year aggregates for successful decolonization activities are shown. Post-1970 instances of decolonization are updated at <http://www.irows.ucr.edu/cd/appendices/socchange/data/colanddecol.xls>, last retrieved August 31, 2015

Compared to the United Provinces, which had to gain its independence and move toward further integration during the crisis of the late 16th and early 17th century, the British Empire was more concerned with protecting its territorial/imperial integrity against forces of nationalism in the midst of the crisis of the late 18th century. It was more hesitant than its counterpart to support national liberation movements that could trigger instability in the world, a tactic that could have backfired, and harmed the Empire. In its rise to world hegemony, the British Empire had already lost an important part of its American colonies and was struggling to suppress the revolt by the United Irishmen. Hence, in Europe, the British statesmen quickly realized the benefits of a conservative coalition with the Holy Alliance in suppressing the nationalist, patriotic revolts that started to accelerate after the French Revolution.

Still, in its rise to global-economic preeminence, this new hegemonic power played a significant role in leading a section of nationalist movements to independence. Many British naval and military officers, sailors and soldiers took part in the independence movements of the settler

colonies in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> The Austrian and Russian monarchies were extremely concerned about these state-seeking movements in the Americas and wanted to restore monarchical order in Spain by quelling these rebellions. But their plans for “intervention and restoration in Spanish America [were] effectively barred by Great Britain—and the United States” (Hayes 1959:631). As Arrighi put it “what later became the Monroe doctrine—the idea that Europe should not intervene in American affairs—was initially a British policy” (Arrighi 2007: 242). The British government was the first to recognize these new nations as independent political units, in spite of the opposition they received from Spain, Russia and Austria. In doing so, they not only weakened these powers (especially the Spanish) but also established strong commercial relationships with the new American nations, which were hitherto under the monopoly of Castile. All these nations, in exchange, welcomed British leadership and acted in accordance with British commercial interests. Incorporation of these new nations into its sphere of influence was an important step for the establishment of British hegemony.

Likewise, despite the reactionary and conservative coalition it established with the Holy Alliance in Europe to protect the integrity of its empire and to smash existing nationalist movements (Polanyi [1944] 2001: 7), the British Empire also strategically supported liberal national independence movements such as the Greek uprising of 1821 and Belgian Revolution of 1830 during its hegemony. This policy helped British statesmen in three respects. First this strategy contributed to “the slow eating away of the Holy Alliance by embarrassing it where its principles were most shaky” (Wallerstein 2011: 55). Furthermore, this policy helped British statesmen to advance their indirect rule over these new nations of Europe. After all, the majority of monarchs of these new nations of the nineteenth century were chosen, suggested, or directly appointed by the British government itself (Anderson 2012).<sup>3</sup> Finally, by exporting its own political regime—constitutional monarchy—to these newly independent nations of Europe, the British statesmen also countered the “disruptive” effects of the revolutionary threat posed by the French Revolution.

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<sup>2</sup> British policy regarding the independence of colonies was extremely pragmatic. The British government was by no means a defender of colonial independence. On the contrary, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British did not set Cape Colony or Ceylon free. They took these colonies from the Dutch Empire and made them their own possessions (Rapport 2005:100). When the Boers—former Dutch settlers—established the Republic of Natalia in 1839 in South Africa, as another example, the British did not hesitate to annex them either. Thus if the British supported independence movements of the South American colonies, it was because they were liquidating massive colonial possessions of the Iberian powers. It is not surprising that “by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, it appeared as if European overseas imperialism was waning rather than waxing, with only the British overseas empire actually experiencing any growth” (Rapport 2005:101).

<sup>3</sup> In 1815, for instance, British statesmen installed William I to the newly established Dutch throne. After the Greek War of independence in 1833, the Convention of London chose a Bavarian prince -Prince Otto—as a monarch. When Belgium revolted against the Kingdom of Holland and gained its independence in 1830, Leopold I was chosen as the monarch. This new king of Belgium, who was initially married to the heiress of the British throne and later married to Louis Phillip's daughter in law, was a key figure in further intensifying the British-Belgium relationship in the 1830s.



Hence this was a strategy of “co-optation.” These examples may suffice to show some of the relationships surrounding the “liberation” of nations and the strengthening of British hegemonic power in the early 19th century.

### **The Rise of the United States to World Hegemony**

A similar process took place during the rise of the United States to world hegemony as well. The period from 1870 to 1918/45—the transition period from British to US hegemony—marked the height of state-seeking nationalist movements in world history (Karataşlı 2013:293-304; Hobsbawm 1992: 101-130). In this hegemonic transition period, forces of nationalism proved to be an extremely strong force that neither communists nor liberals were able to ignore. Suddenly, in the first half of the 20th century, the United States became the champion of national liberation and decolonization (Karataşlı 2013:312-342). In its rise to world hegemony, the United States became actively involved in the restructuring of the world political-economic space.

Pragmatic involvement with the liberation of subject nations helped the United States advance its leadership capacities in a number of different ways. First of all, it was a strategy to contain the danger of communism. Within the systemic chaos of the early 20th century, the Bolsheviks incorporated the idea of national-liberation into their revolutionary strategy, which became one of the most important factors in the success of the communist revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks saw the liberation of all subject nations and oppressed colonial peoples as an important asset for world revolution as well (Hobsbawm 1992: 148). The right of nations to self-determination was a main theme of the East People's Congress in Baku (1920) and this soon became a principle of “the (Third) International” (Blunden 1977 [2013]).

Containment of the Bolshevik threat was an integral part of the United States' attempt to support national liberation movements in Europe. Wilson's principle of self-determination was a card that the Allies played against the Bolsheviks (Hobsbawm 1992:131). Wilson promised to give oppressed nationalities—currently living under the Ottoman, Austria-Hungarian and Russian empires—independence and security. And it was this principle that dominated the peace negotiations after World War I. After these treaties, the number of states in Europe rose to twenty-seven, and the number of states in the world rose to sixty-five. Between 1914 and 1945, thirty-three new states joined the modern inter-state system. Furthermore, in the course of the Second World War, “the United States was able to pose itself as the natural ally of the emergent nationalism in the colonial empires, and as the guarantor of the promises of self-determination and national independence through which the colonial peoples were mobilized against the Axis powers” (Arrighi 1978:94).

The United States' support for national liberation movements after the First World War helped liquidate remaining formal territorial empires such as Ottoman Empire and Austrian-Hungarian

Empire. Likewise, its support for decolonization movements after 1945 helped liquidate colonial possessions of the British Empire and French Empire. In addition to liquidating territorial/colonial possessions of formal and colonial empires, through this strategy, like previous hegemonic powers before them, the United States was able to present its political system as a model for the new world. “Immediately after the war, the model of the 'Revolution of 1776' was not merely American propaganda for use in the colonial world, but also a spontaneous source of inspiration for the colonial peoples themselves. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, for instance, modeled its 1946 Declaration of Independence on the American document of 1776. In reality, U.S. support, or at least neutrality, in the struggles of the national liberation movements did accelerate the tendency toward decolonization in certain areas of particular economic and strategic importance (the Middle-East, India, Indonesia)” (Arrighi 1978: 94).

The United States’ decolonization policy was also related to containing the forces of communism. During the U.S. world hegemony, both the USSR and the United States competed with each other in order to penetrate their sphere of influence into the colonial world and apply their notion of self-determination to the colonial nations. Gradually, “national liberation” turned into a synonym for anti-colonialism. From 1945 onwards, the world saw the second wave of decolonization in modern world history (see Figure 1). Because the United States was not a major colonial power itself, it did not have much to lose in defending the decolonization of former imperial powers. On the contrary, this was an integral part of U.S. hegemonic consolidation. In addition, through admitting the newly independent nations into the freshly established "United Nations," and promising them economic growth and development, the United States not only increased its intellectual and moral leadership within the non-Western world, but also created a favorable environment for capitalist development. The period from 1945 to 1970 became a period of material expansion, whose two main pillars were decolonization and the development project (Silver & Slater 1999: 209; McMichael 2012; Harvey 2003:58).

### **Trajectory of State-Seeking Nationalist Movements In China During The Long Twentieth Century**

Unlike the rise of the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and the United States, however, China’s ascendancy does not coincide with attempts to restructure the existing configuration of the inter-state system. On the contrary, as of now China has been preoccupied with providing stability and preserving the global status quo. Of course, this trend is not yet complete and, thus, there is no guarantee that China’s policies will not change in the near future.<sup>4</sup> Although large

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<sup>4</sup> A number of U.S. policy makers, including Robert Kaplan (2005), believe that rise of China cannot be and will not be a peaceful one. Likewise, in the Chinese Communist Party too “there are people who feel that speaking of a peaceful

generalizations and deductions out of a yet-unfolding process would not be wise, there are also reasons to believe that a combination of structural macro-political dynamics have been pushing China to preserve the status quo in the world. These dynamics are complex and multifaceted. Within the limits of this paper and following the framework we introduce below, we will mainly focus on one of these aspects: increasing vulnerability of Chinese territorial unity due to the rise of state-seeking nationalist movements—within China and around the world—during the reform era.

The nature of this vulnerability cannot be properly conceived without understanding the nature of the “unfinished businesses” of national problems in China (Kumral 2013). As discussed above, transition from British to U.S. hegemony witnessed an upsurge of state-seeking nationalist movements, which liquidated almost all large continental empires. The Qing Dynasty was not immune to this global upheaval. It witnessed two revolutions and a civil war. In this process, various state-seeking movements managed to secede from China and establish new political units. After the Revolution of 1911 and the fall of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the Dalai Lama declared Tibet (Schai 2011:189-191) and Bogd Khaan declared Mongolia independent from China.<sup>5</sup> Xinjiang was also dismembered in 1911 (Gladney 2003:4). Furthermore, in the tumultuous period from 1911 to 1949, two independent East Turkestan Republics were established in the region: An Islamic Republic centered in the city of Kashgar in 1933 and a Soviet-backed Turkic People's Republic in 1944. After the invasion of Manchuria, the Japanese declared inner Manchuria an independent state and established “Manchukuo” as a puppet state.

Yet while the Imperial system was shattered in this period (Skocpol 1979:80), the territorial unity of China was re-established to a great extent by the 1950s. The Kuomintang (KMT) started the process of re-expansion; later, control over minority regions which had enjoyed full or partial independence (Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet) was re-gained by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1947, 1949 and in 1950, respectively. The trend of territorial contraction was reversed and territorial re-unification was by and large completed with the 1949 revolution (see Figure 2). In short, China entered the period of U.S. hegemony as a unitary (yet multinational) republic.<sup>6</sup>

The contradictions of governing a multi-national republic while introducing socialist transformation reforms continuously unfolded throughout the CCP's rule. The contradictions manifested themselves as sporadic eruptions of nationalist unrest in minority regions and successive policy changes by the CCP to contain these forces of separatist nationalism (Kumral

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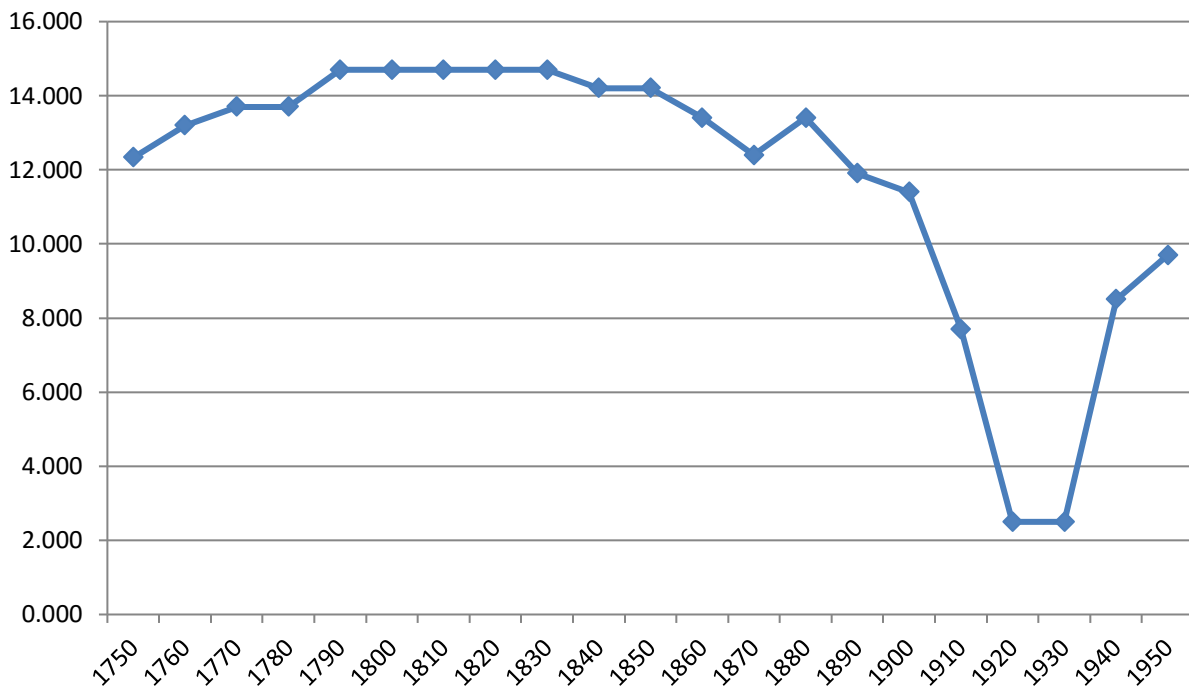
rise gives the message to the United States and Taiwan that they can impudently push China around” (Arrighi 2007:292).

<sup>5</sup> Tibet became a de facto independent state from 1913 to 1951 but its sovereignty was never internationally recognized (Nathan & Scobell 2012:199).

<sup>6</sup> This was unlike the USSR (United Soviet Socialist Republics), which was a federal republic that (at least theoretically and ideologically) depended upon the “voluntary” union of “independent soviet republics.”

2013). Right after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the principle of the right of nations to self-determination—which had been defended by the CCP against the KMT in its revolutionary struggle in the course of the 1940s—was abandoned in favor of a system of Regional Autonomy of Minority Nationality Regions in a Unified China (Connor 1984; also see Xingwu 1988:136-7; Bockman 1992:186-7).

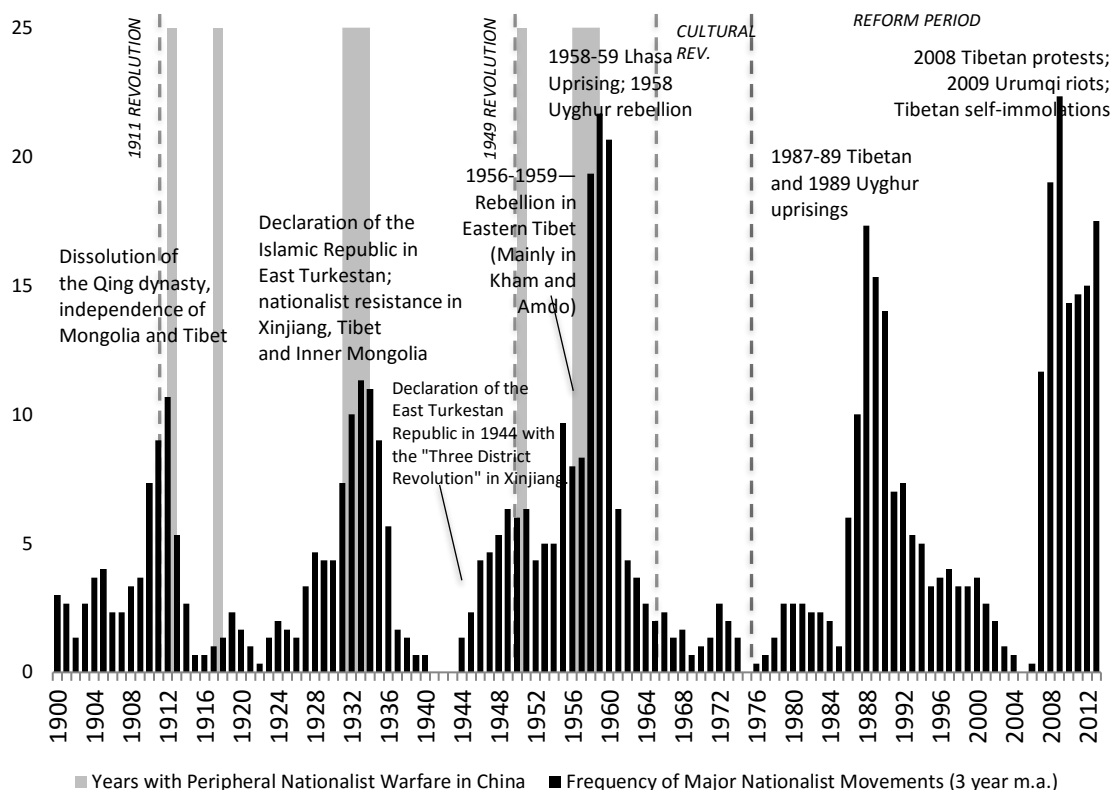
**Figure 2.** Territorial Expansion, Contraction and Re-expansion of China, 1750-1950, thousand km<sup>2</sup>



**Source:** Taagepera (1997: 492-553).

In this period the CCP offered a wide range of socio-economic, political and administrative privileges to the autonomous regions. It was careful not to impose a one-size-fits-all system which ignored regional differences and “sensitivities” in the implementation of the socialist transformation (Moseley and Chang 1966). However, partially because of the disputes regarding the exact boundaries of the autonomous areas<sup>7</sup> and partially because of the CCP's desire to start implementing socialist reforms in these areas, in the course of the 1950s, revolts by resident minority groups erupted sporadically.

<sup>7</sup> For Tibetans, as an example, Tibetan boundaries are not confined to Tibet Autonomous Area (TAR) but it encompasses the entire Tibetan-populated area Cholka-Sum, which includes Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces as well (Nathan and Scobell 2012:198-199; Lafitte 2013).

**Figure 3.** Patterning of Nationalist Movements in China, 1900-2013<sup>8</sup>

The radical transformations of the Great Leap Forward era brought existing grievances among the minorities to a very high point, and a series of major rebellions occurred in Xinjiang and Tibet starting from 1958. The strongest and the most well-known among them was the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa on March 1959, when Tibetans not only rebelled but also went on to establish a provisional government<sup>9</sup> (see Figure 3).

<sup>8</sup> Note: 'Years with Peripheral Nationalist Warfare in China' is from Wimmer and Min (2006). Years in which there was a nationalist secessionist warfare in China is shown with light grey shades. 'Frequency of Major Nationalist Movements' is from State-Seeking Nationalist Movements (SSNM) database by Karataşlı (2013). Karataşlı (2013) uses the Guardian and the New York Times newspaper archives to estimate the peaks and troughs nationalist mobilization. Hence, while interpreting the frequency of major nationalist movements indicator, the attention must be paid to relative peaks and troughs rather than their absolute levels. Three year moving average is used in the frequency of major nationalist movements. The information provided for the waves are examples of important events that take place during these periods. Taiwan is not included in the figure.

<sup>9</sup> In 1959, more than 30,000 Tibetans—including the members of the Tibetan army, Lhasa's monks, and members of the general public—took the streets upon a rumor that the Dalai Lama would be kidnapped during a secret meeting that he would hold with the Chinese authorities (Norbu 1979). The uprising was suppressed after 13 days and the

This rising tide of nationalist unrest was countered with the launch of the Cultural Revolution (Bockman 1992:190). In Tibet, the Lama monasteries—which also served as the organizational centers for the national movements—were destroyed and religious activities were proscribed (Donnet 1994; Nathan & Scobell 2012:200). Likewise, in Xinjiang, thousands of mosques, shrines and Koranic schools were closed, public prayer was banned, and religious and cultural leaders were removed from their positions (Minahan 2002:1962).

### **Nationalist Unrest in China During the Reform Era**

Launch of the Cultural Revolution heralded a period of decline in nationalist movements in China's minority regions but it did not end nationalist aspirations in these contentious regions for good. On the contrary, while impeding nationalist-secessionist movements, the Cultural Revolution also had a long-term impact of creating memories of repression, which has been important in the organization of the post-1980 wave of nationalist movements in China.

For this reason, when the Chinese government abandoned the policies of the Cultural Revolution and launched reforms in 1978, two opposite developments took place. On the one hand, China started to move rapidly as a global-economic power, and on the other hand, nationalist movements in minority regions started to strike back. Tibetan uprisings between 1987 and 1989 and re-escalation of the Uyghur secessionist movements after the collapse of the USSR in 1989 (Bovingdon 2004) marked the first revival of secessionist movements in China. In the course of the 1990s, these protests continued in both Tibet and the Xinjiang region, using different strategies for gaining independence. These events, however, were merely predecessors of an upcoming riot that coincided with the 2008 Olympics Games (Barnett 2009). In March 2008, annual pro-Tibet demonstrations turned into a series of riots where thousands of Chinese (Han) shops and offices were burned, and hundreds of vehicles were set on fire. The scale of the March 2008 anti-Chinese demonstrations and riots was the highest since the 1989 protests (Smith 2010:2). Since then, Tibetan protests have started to take the form of self-immolations. From March of 2009, more than hundred and fifty Tibetans have set themselves on fire to protest Chinese rule. The self-immolations continue in Tibet today. Between 2008 and 2009, Uyghur's state-seeking activities took the form of ethnic riots and state-seeking nationalist unrest is still highly active in the region.

Rising state-seeking nationalist movements in China today are not simply confined to the Tibetan and Xinjiang regions either. Arguably, Beijing's greatest problem today is Taiwan. In contrast to other national problems, "Taiwan is more than just a problem of territorial integrity: it is the site of a rival Chinese government" (Nathan & Scobell 2012:212). While existing tensions

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Dalai Lama had to flee to India. After the suppression of the revolt, local government was dissolved and martial law was declared in Tibet.



between China and Taiwan have temporarily been contained under the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) administration of President Ma Ying-jeou since 2008, these problems have not been permanently solved (Cabestan 2011:484). Given the January 2016 victory of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—which has a strong stand for *de jure* Taiwanese Independence from Mainland China—we might see a return to hostilities of the former era. Furthermore, China is also extremely unhappy about the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, including arms sales to Taiwan by the United States.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there is “Inner Mongolia,” which is a relatively less problematic region compared to Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. State-seeking separatist movements in Inner Mongolia declined dramatically since the early 20th century. This is mostly related to the massive resettlement policy China pursued over the last 200 years. Today the ratio of the Han population to ethnic Mongolians in Inner Mongolia is around 6:1 (Kristof 1992). However, this does not ensure that the Inner Mongolian problem has been resolved for good. There are still political and military organizations in the region that struggle for independence, and Chinese authorities are doing their best to stop these organizations from mobilizing the society. Similar to the mobilizations in the Xinjiang region, the rise of nationalist movements in the USSR in the early 1990s also triggered the Inner Mongolian pro-independence organizations, upon which Chinese authorities immediately cracked down (WuDunn 1991; Husmann 1994:149-150). Various sorts of protests and ethnic problems continue in the region.

Finally, the recently incorporated Hong Kong is emerging as another source of unrest for China. Initially the PRC did not think that the return of Hong Kong to China would be a source of tension. Beijing “expected the Hong Kong people to be as pragmatic and apolitical as they had always been” (Nathan & Scobell 2012:210). But the 1989 Tiananmen protests sparked the development of a bourgeois-democratic movement in Hong Kong, which was supported, for the first time, by the British government. Hence, Beijing started to see the transfer of Hong Kong to China as a Trojan horse nicely packaged by the British government. Although the Chinese “one country, two system” approach tied Hong Kong to the mainland with relatively few problems initially, grievances against the Beijing government since 1997 have been rapidly increasing. After 2014-2015 Hong Kong electoral reform, a new independence movement has emerged in Hong

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<sup>10</sup> Not without reason, China is worried about closer U.S.-Taiwan relationships that could emerge under Donald Trump's administration. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised that he was going to take a tougher stand against China, and signaled that he was going to support Taiwan to gain leverage against China. In December 2016, Trump's surprising phone call with Taiwan's president Tsai became a matter of controversy. While Beijing managed to convince Trump to back down on his promise to review Taiwan's status, tensions have not been solved for good. After all, Trump's support for arms sales to Taiwan is not new. As early as 2011, Trump criticized the Obama administration in his tweet: "Why is @BarackObama delaying the sale of F-16 aircraft to Taiwan? Wrong message to send to China. #TimeToGetTough."

Kong. Especially the failure of the 79 days long occupation protest—known as the “Umbrella Revolution of 2014”—strengthened the pro-independence and self-determination movement among the youth.

### **Understanding China’s Strategy of Containing Nationalism**

“Even as China's global influence increases,” Nathan and Scobell observe, “it is bedeviled to an unusual degree for a major power by what political scientists call 'problems of stateness’” (2012: 195). These problems are further aggravated by the geo-political-economic significance of and variation within these nationalist movements. Claimed territories by Tibet and Xinjiang alone, account for almost one-third of the PRC's total area. With a GDP per capita level of \$4,200, Tibet is among the poorest provinces in China. Xinjiang's GDP per capita level (\$6,000) is slightly below mainland China's average per capita income (\$6,700).<sup>11</sup> Although these regions are not among the better off regions, they contain important mines and energy sources that China increasingly needs (Dreyer 2003:412; Becquelin 2004:365). For China, losing Tibet and Xinjiang means losing access to major gold, copper, coal and oil reserves as well as gas reserves and major potential for hydroelectric energy (Lafitte 2013; Nathan & Scobell 2012:199). In contrast to Tibet and Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong function as the cash-boxes of the 21st century. With GDP per capita levels of \$21,000 and \$38,000 respectively, these two major trading partners have huge economic and strategic importance for China.

Vulnerability of China to nationalist unrest is further complicated by the fact that these contentious regions are also influenced by an unparalleled number of foreign actors. With twenty neighbors, no country in the world—except for Russia—has as many contiguous neighbors as China. Furthermore, some of China's neighbors—such as India, Pakistan, Russia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar/Burma—have a very high number of militant and organized state-seeking nationalist movements (Karataşlı *et al* 2012). Put differently, the region surrounding China is extremely vulnerable to state-seeking nationalist upheavals. These upheavals are likely to affect movements within China as well. With the dissolution of the USSR in 1989/91, a number of Turkic republics had already emerged in Central Asia, which deeply affected the Xinjiang movements. Although current nationalist-secessionist movements in China and a number of territorial disputes with neighboring countries—first and foremost with India—are among the “unfinished businesses” of the 1911-1949 period and the “Cultural Revolution,” the unfolding of these events in the recent decades is not totally independent from global developments.

Because of these complexities, the Chinese government’s strategy to contain these rising nationalist forces in the post-Mao reform period radically differs from its earlier policies. This is

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<sup>11</sup> All values are Nominal US dollars and they belong to the year 2013.

a two-dimensional strategy, which is closely related to China's rising economic strength in the last decades. The first dimension is related to the heavy reliance on development and welfare policies to solve these nationalist problems. Especially in its peripheral regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, China has been trying to gain the consent of rebellious ethnic minorities through its "Go West policy." This includes the introduction of development projects, construction of roads, highways, airports and the promotion of policies friendly to businesses and foreign investors, along with the provision of various services, gifts, and privileges (Goldstein 2004; Latiffe 2013:40; Wang 2002:152; Mingxu 1998: 372; Yeh 2013; Smith 2008; Working 2001; Nathan and Skobell 2012; Becquelin 2004:360; BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific 2007; Kumral and Karataşlı 2013). The second dimension is related to the establishment of an inter-state coalition—which is also a South-South relation in the political sphere—and the skillful use of international diplomacy against forces of secessionist nationalism. In 2001, China pioneered the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—to foster cooperation and combat terrorism (including secessionism) in the region (Rosenthal 2002:12; Nathan and Skobell 2012:164-168; Stern 2008:10). In addition, Beijing started to apply pressure to countries that are sympathetic to the Tibetan movement (like the United States and India) or to the Uyghur movement (like Turkey) in bilateral trade agreements. And since the 2008 global economic crisis, China has been gaining leverage in these areas due to its key position in the global political economy and the concessions and promises it makes to other semi-peripheral and peripheral states in pursuit of containing secessionist movements in their own territories (Calmes 2011:8; Nathan and Skobell 2012:204-207; Sharma 2009:169; Van Schaik 2011:238-265; Shichor 2006; Shichor 2009; Gargan 1991).

### **Preserving the Global Status Quo?**

Of course, China is not the first country to use international diplomacy and bilateral trade relations to promote stability at home. All states are pragmatic actors that engage in various sorts of coalitions and agreements to prevent international support of nationalist secessionist movements, any kind of revolutionary activities, anti-governmental movements or terrorism directed at themselves. Yet in most cases, the same pragmatic interests and consequences of bilateral negotiations also push states not only to condemn these sorts of movements but also to support some of them in different places. As we discussed in the first section of the article, this was true in the case of rising hegemonic powers.

This is why the case of the PRC is interesting. China's efforts to build a coalition of anti-secessionist movements have consequences that transcend its territorial boundaries. This is due to the complex set of relationships between the political-economic transformation in China, the rise of secessionist nationalist movements in Chinese territories, and the global macro-political context.

These structural conditions seem to push China to preserve the global status quo in a very consistent manner.

When Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in February 2008, for instance, more than 90 countries including the United States and most members of the European Union went ahead and recognized Kosovo, while China—together with Serbia, Russia, Georgia and Spain—did not (Freund 2012; Richter & Baum 2008). China not only denounced the independence of Kosovo but also made one of the strongest criticisms, stating in the international arena that sovereign states have the right to protect their integrity and prevent unilateral secessions. China's position against Kosovo cannot be understood merely in the light of pragmatic Chinese-Russian relationships. During the Olympic games in Beijing in 2008, for instance, Georgia attacked Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which seceded from Georgia in the early 1990s, creating an international crisis. And this time Russia recognized the independence of these two countries and brought the issue to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia demanded that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization support the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, China, together with other members, declined to back Russia on this issue.

Similarly, issues surrounding South Sudan were another interesting test for Chinese international policy regarding secessionist movements. Originally, Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA; South Sudan SPLA as of 2011) was supported by the USSR and other communist countries, such as Cuba. But after 1989, when an Islamic fundamentalist government—represented by Omar Hassan Al Bashir—came to power with a *coup d'etat* (Kock 2011:506) and the USSR and the communist bloc collapsed, this support has changed in profound ways. In the same time period, the South Sudanese rebels managed to gain most of the territories with oil supplies. The U.S. oil giant, Chevron, first discovered oil in Sudan in 1979. Since then, possession of and/or control over oil reserves have been a major impetus of war in both the Southern capital, Juba, and Khartoum (Kock 2011:506). From 1989 onwards, the U.S. government has placed Sudan on its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The Sudanese government sided with Iraq during the Gulf War and became a close ally of Libya (Njoku 2010:354). In 1998, the U.S. government bombed *Al-Shifa* pharmaceutical factory in North Khartoum, assuming that the place was used for chemical weapons and connected to Al Qaeda.

In the midst of all these tensions, another element was becoming critical. Sudan was becoming a key location for Chinese economic growth. China obtained 10% of its oil from Sudan and owned multi-billion dollar investments, which were concentrated mainly in the oil sector. As in the case of Iran, Chinese energy needs and deals were creating further tensions with the United States (Harvey 2003:139). As the South Sudanese secession movement was becoming more powerful, China became increasingly nervous about the separation of Sudan. Since 2001, the secession of South Sudan was on the global agenda (Kock 2011:506). Parallel to these

developments, the atrocities in Sudan were becoming a global human rights problem with "Save Darfur" campaigns and strong Western coalition support of the South Sudanese right to self-determination. The UN Security Council planned to organize a military intervention to Sudan but China thwarted these plans, using its veto power against these operations (Njoku, 2010:354). From the beginning to the end, China attempted to preserve the unity of Sudan. In 2011, during the height of the conflicts, China first tried to play the role of the mediator. After the 2011 referendum when South Sudan seceded from Sudan, China tried to do its best to establish trade relationships with South Sudan as well.

As also confirmed by the most recent Crimean crisis, contemporary China is not willing to support any secessionist or irredentist activity that would create further instabilities. It is unclear whether China will continue to pursue this policy. As of now, however, the CCP appears to see little merit in supporting nationalist movements and encouraging a re-configuration of the inter-state system. Its rising economic power already provides China an important degree of bargaining power *vis-a-vis* other great powers.

This tendency is the diametrical opposite of the tendency of the United States since the 1990s. Paradoxically, in the most recent hegemonic crisis period, it is not the rising economic power but the declining hegemon that has been trying hard to alter the political geography of the inter-state system in order to regain its hegemonic position. Since the collapse of the USSR, the United States has been using all opportunities to demonstrate that it is still the greatest military power in the world (Harvey 2003; Arrighi 2007). That is probably why, starting with the First Gulf War, the U.S. government led a number of "humanitarian missions" and interventions around the world (Arrighi 2007:178-180). From then until 9/11, U.S. forces enthusiastically took part in the First Gulf War of 1990-91, the "Humanitarian Crisis" in Somalia 1992, the "Humanitarian Operation" in Bosnia (1992-95), the Kosovo War (1998-99) and many others. After 9/11, the U.S.-led "War on Terror" led to the war in Afghanistan (2001-present) and the invasion of Iraq (2003-Present). As a part of the "War on Terror," since 2000 the U.S. government has conducted a series of military operations in Pakistan, Yemen, Kashmir, Northern Mali, and in the Horn of Africa. Although the United States was not at the forefront, we can also add the Libya intervention of 2011 to this long list. For our purposes it is important to underline that without exception in all of these territories, we can find strong nationalist or autonomist movements. Some of these movements managed to gain their independence (e.g. Kosovo), *de facto* autonomy, or control over federal governments (e.g. Kurds in Northern Iraq) after the U.S.-led military operations, and they established closer relationships with the U.S. government afterwards.

Not surprisingly, in most of these cases, the United States also found its interests in direct conflict with those of China.<sup>12</sup> Hence, China's support for the global status quo can also be seen as direct resistance against U.S. interests as well. As Arrighi (2007) pointed out, the imperialist ambitions of the United States—such as the “War on Terror”—have already provided a space for China not only to advance its economic power but also to increase its consent-production capacities. It can be argued that the ability to counterbalance U.S. imperial ambitions and to provide international macro-political stability would itself be evidence of China’s increasing intellectual and moral leadership (hence “hegemonic”) capacities. In his “Rising Star: China’s New Security Concept,” for instance, Bates Gill (2007) argued that

through a combination of pragmatic security policies, growing economic clout, and increasingly deft diplomacy, China has established productive and increasingly solid relationships throughout Asia and around the globe, to include new partnerships in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe, Africa and South America. While these developments predate September 11, 2001, they have unfolded at a time of strategic preoccupation on the part of the United States, both in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and in the global counter-terrorism campaign. This last, in turn, has opened strategic space for China to expand its influence at both regional and global levels (Gill 2007:1).

This can be seen as an example for how China advances its intellectual and moral leadership capacities through protection of the global status quo.

### **Conclusion**

It was Mao who once said “the world is in chaos, the situation is excellent.” Today, the world seems to be in a period of chaos once again, but the contemporary CCP's evaluation of the situation is quite the opposite. This is more evident when we consider the escalation of nationalist movements in recent decades. Similar to previous hegemonic transition periods, during the decline of the U.S. hegemony, the world experienced rapid intensification of state-seeking nationalist movements (Karataşlı 2013). However, China considers these movements neither as a potential for revolution nor as a tool to gain global supremacy.

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<sup>12</sup> A similar tendency—to alter the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system in order to gain power vis-a-vis its rivals—is also clear in the case of contemporary Russia, which has been supporting independence movements in many post-Soviet states, including Georgia (e.g. South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Ukraine (e.g. Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk) in order to incorporate them or to expand Russia’s influence over these regions. Indeed, annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 became the first instance of annexation by a European power since the end of World War II.



In the literature, one can find a wide spectrum of explanations for China's desire to protect the status quo ranging from existence of ancient philosophical traditions, to the dissolution of communist ideology; from a conscious strategy of a “peaceful ascent” (*heping jueqi*), to the memories of its historic humiliation during the Opium Wars. In this paper, however, we offered an alternative perspective by examining the complex set of relationships surrounding the revival of nationalist movements in China and the PRC's attempts to contain them nationally and internationally. We argued that if China is slowly emerging as a protector of the integrity of the existing sovereign states of the current inter-state system, this is because China's own domestic problems and vulnerabilities—combined with its global trade networks and economic growth strategy—have been pushing it to play this role globally. After all, global political-economic stability is a key both for sustaining China's economic growth and its territorial stability.<sup>13</sup>

In this concluding section, we discuss the possible implications of this trajectory for hegemony-building processes. As we argued in the first section, in their rise to world hegemony all previous hegemonic powers—the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and the United States—aimed to reconfigure the world by leading a particular section of these movements to independence by supporting them directly and indirectly for very pragmatic purposes. These strategies helped them increase their leadership capacities on the one hand and present themselves as champions of a “more progressive” inter-state system reconfiguration on the other hand. If China is rising as a great power that attempts to preserve the status quo in a highly consistent manner, what does this trend mean in terms of the prospects and limits of China's ascendancy? First, we must note that none of the previous hegemonic powers (or rival great powers for that matter) were faced with increasing centrifugal forces within their nation during their respective ascendancies on the scale China is facing today. For the United Provinces and the United States, the tendency was the opposite. In the course of their rise to world hegemony, they became more united than before. In the course of the Eight Years' War, the United Provinces became a new unit, which was no longer a collection of seventeen city-states. Likewise, on the eve of U.S. material expansion and before its bid for world hegemony, the Northern states of “the United States” crushed secessionist movements in the South. The American Civil War not only smashed state-

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<sup>13</sup> We must note that these processes are also reinforced by other global-level political-economic developments that we cannot address here due to space limitations. Let us suffice to mention that Chinese corporations are still the beneficiary of the existing capitalist world economy hence they do not want any instabilities that would risk their profits. Considering that the current world hegemonic power does not have vast colonies to be liquidated, China does not have much to gain economically or politically by using the same liquidation strategy of the previous and current world hegemonic powers. Furthermore, the contemporary phase of “globalization” and “financialization” seems to have intensified socio-economic linkages and interlocked U.S. and Chinese corporations in the global commodity chain, making China very unwilling to disturb existing relationships.

seeking aspirations by brute force but also made “the United States” more united than before. As they say, “before the war, it was said ‘the United States are’” but after the war, ‘the United States is.’”<sup>14</sup>

The case of the United Kingdom was rather different. As we already discussed, the loss of the thirteen colonies in the last quarter of the 18th century and simultaneous escalation of nationalist movements within its mainland territories (i.e. the Irish movement) made the United Kingdom more vulnerable to nationalist movements than its counterparts and pushed it to establish a conservative coalition with the *Holy Alliance* to suppress nationalist and patriotic forces in Europe. However, the level of nationalist movements in the United Kingdom was not as high as contemporary China and the existence of vast overseas colonial possessions helped the U.K. contain the Irish problem to a large extent. Thus, when necessary, the United Kingdom was still able to selectively and pragmatically support a large number of national liberation movements on both sides of the Atlantic in its rise to world hegemony.

In contrast to all previous rising hegemonic powers, however, throughout its ascendancy China is facing strong centrifugal forces and secessionist movements on its mainland. In contrast to the United Provinces and the United States, China is not gradually becoming a more unified political entity during its ascendancy, and it feels the need to implement very elaborate containment mechanisms, policies and principles—such as the “One Country, Two Systems” principle—to maintain its territorial unity. In contrast to the British Empire, which had lost the Thirteen Colonies at an early period of systemic chaos, China has not lost any of its territories but even gained new ones such as Hong Kong and Macao. Also, considering that it is not a core state like the United Provinces, the United Kingdom, or the United States, but rather a peripheral state rapidly becoming a semiperipheral one, one can see how the structural conditions surrounding contemporary China are categorically different from previous and current world hegemonic powers. Therefore, containing secessionism is a more serious problem for China, than it was for the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and the United States.

China’s territorial vulnerability is not independent from its rapid rise as well. As China climbs the ladder of the world power hierarchy, the United States’ policy-makers (and those of other great powers as well) are becoming more preoccupied than before with how to counter-balance Chinese power. In this discussion of *realpolitik*, nationalist problems in China such as Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, its territorial disputes with neighbors, and rival claims in South China are at the forefront. Although Mearsheimer's (2001) or Kaplan's (2005) foreign policy proposals have their differences,

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, today, when Chinese authorities talk with US authorities on “sensitive matters” such as the Tibet or Taiwan problems, they often underline that they are taking the United States of the 1860s as their role model and they are doing nothing but following the teachings of the United States, especially those of Abraham Lincoln (Wong 2009; Wong 2012; Wachman 2010).

they all focus on the same question: how to use these territorial vulnerabilities to contain the rise of China.

In our analysis, we explained how these problems have been pushing China to increase its leadership capacities in the international sphere to contain secessionism at home. What does this mean for the possibility of China's rise to world hegemony from a macro-political perspective? Of course, our analysis does not tell us whether or not China can rise to global political and economic preeminence in the following decades or sometime in the near future. However, we underline an interesting puzzle. If China continues its political-economic rise in the medium run but fails in coordinating the existing sovereign states for the preserving the global status quo, we argue, it would probably be more difficult to keep its political-territorial unity in the long run. Put differently, although Chinese policy makers make it clear that they do not seek *hegemony*, these rising territorial vulnerabilities have been pushing China to play the role of a hegemon. Preservation of territorial unity is the primary drive. Without its territorial unity, it will be very difficult to sustain its economic strength. Thus failing to reestablish and to preserve international stability will be a limit to its rise. To contain its internal problems, territorial unity and economic strength, China needs a more stable international order. This requires *leading* a large number of states in pursuit of providing international stability, and countering acts of imperialist aggression (primarily the ones increasingly implemented by the United States), which create macro-political instability in the world.

We are skeptical about the plausibility of this scenario where China becomes a new world hegemonic power, as we understand the term today. The current path China follows is akin to the path followed by Genoese merchant-traders of the mid-fifteenth century who established a “political exchange” with the Iberian kings. In this Genoese-Iberian systemic cycle of accumulation, which was a non-hegemonic period of capitalist world economy spanning from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century, the Genoese “capitalists” were the economic motor of the capitalist world economy. The Iberian powers were the geopolitical and territorial motor (Arrighi 1994). Of course, China's current path is also different from the Genoese merchant-traders in key respects. For one thing, the state apparatus and military power of contemporary China is extremely strong in direct contrast to the Genoese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, in contrast to the Genoese-Iberian “political exchange,” contemporary China does not leave world affairs completely at the hands of the United States, but it also pressures the United States not to alter and disturb the geopolitical configuration of the current inter-state system. Still, however, when territorial configuration of the inter-state system changes—as in the cases of South Sudan and Crimea—China tries its best to avoid conflicts with great powers.

From this perspective, then, even if China became a new hegemon, the inter-state system it will be leading would not be a *new* (i.e., a more “progressive” and more “democratic”) system. On

the contrary, instead of altering the geopolitical configuration of the inter-state system, it will be leading the former inter-state system established by the previous hegemonic power. Still, even if this scenario occurred, from a macro-political perspective, China's rise to world hegemony will not be a replica of the previous instances of hegemonic transitions but will be a radical and major rupture from the existing patterning we have observed so far. It will be a perfect example of a stalemate in which, if we may borrow from Antonio Gramsci, "the old is dying but the new cannot be born."

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### **Disclosure Statement**

Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article's text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of their article to the journal.

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