
Toward a Dynamic Theory of International Politics: Insights from Comparing Ancient China and Early Modern Europe

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Abstract This article examines why international relations theories presume checks and balances but universal domination triumphed in ancient China. I argue that one should not presume the European experience as the norm and treat ancient China as a deviant case. I propose a dynamic theory of international politics that views international competition as processes of strategic interaction and that allows for alternative trajectories and endogenous transformation. Realist theories of international politics tend to focus on structural mechanisms and overlook agential strategies. At the same time, these theories focus on causal mechanisms that check attempts at domination and overlook mechanisms that facilitate domination. It is true that attempts at domination are checked by the mechanisms of balance of power and rising costs of expansion. But domination-seekers may overcome such obstacles by pursuing divide-and-conquer strategies, ruthless tactics, and self-strengthening reforms. From this strategic-interactive perspective, universal domination is no less possible than the balance of power.

The field of international relations (IR) is supposed to be concerned with power politics—how it plays out, how to exercise it, and how to check it. However, theories of international politics are so focused on the European experience that the *problematique* of domination somehow disappears from most analyses. At the extreme, liberals and constructivists are interested in how shared norms and inter-

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national institutions have increasingly tempered power politics. While realists do not think that power politics is withering away, they believe that attempts at domination are necessarily checked by countervailing mechanisms. If such bitter theoretical rivals share the view that domination is unlikely, if not impossible, then how should one understand the triumph of domination in various historical systems—including those of classical Greece, ancient Middle East, ancient China, ancient India, and classical Maya? It is beyond the capacity of any single author to study all historical international systems. This article attempts to draw some insights from comparing the early modern European system (1495–1815 A.D.) and the ancient Chinese system in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656–221 B.C.).¹

Many IR scholars have made passing references to the ancient Chinese system to support their claim to universality. Most notably, Kenneth Waltz suggests that “[w]e can look farther afield . . . to the China of the [W]arring [S]tates era . . . and see that where political entities of whatever sort compete freely, substantive and stylistic characteristics are similar.”² Indeed, the ancient Chinese system witnessed processes of international competition that are strikingly familiar to IR scholars. Similar to the early modern European system, the ancient Chinese system experienced prevalence of war, disintegration of feudalism, formation of international anarchy, emergence of territorial sovereignty, and configuration of the balance of power. However, this system eventually succumbed to universal domination. This is an uncomfortable fact that few IR scholars are prepared to confront. I thus examine, in this analysis, why ancient China and early modern Europe shared similar processes of international competition but reached diametrically opposite outcomes.

I propose a dynamic theory of international politics that can accommodate alternative trajectories and endogenous transformation. Mainstream theories of international politics (neorealism, in particular) are flawed by structural determinism and unilinear thinking. A dynamic theory should examine agential strategies as well as structural mechanisms. A dynamic theory should also examine coercive mechanisms and strategies that facilitate domination as well as countervailing mechanisms and strategies that check attempts at domination. In this framework, international competition is seen as processes of strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination who use competing strategies and who are simultaneously facilitated and burdened by competing causal mechanisms. As the strategic-interactive perspective allows for multiple equilibria, it is

1. While I focus on the ancient Chinese system, William Wohlforth is coordinating a project that examines various ancient international systems. For some earlier efforts, see Buzan and Little 2000; Kaufman 1997; and Watson 1992.

2. Waltz 1986, 329–30. Others have also alluded to this ancient international system. See Holsti 1999, 284–86; Jervis 1997, 133; Levy 1983, 10; and Van Evera 1998, 36–37. IR scholars who have paid more serious attention to the ancient Chinese system include Chan 1999; Johnston 1995; and Walker 1953.

then possible to account for both similarity in processes and differences in outcomes: while processes of strategic competition are transcendent across time and space, outcomes are sensitive to historically contingent conditions. In the following sections, I first spell out the framework of strategic interaction. I then discuss the cases of ancient China and early modern Europe and illustrate how the theoretical framework played out in these historical systems.

The Dynamics of Competing Logics

According to realist theories of international politics, “the logic of world politics”³ should be characterized by checks and balances. It is argued that attempts at domination are necessarily blocked by “two of the most powerful regularities in international politics: the balance of power and the rising costs of expansion.”⁴ The first countervailing mechanism is most notably represented by Kenneth Waltz, who argues that the instinct for survival in international anarchy “stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balance of power.”⁵ As Jack Levy elaborates, “the balancing mechanism almost always works successfully to avoid hegemony” because “[s]tates with expansionist ambitions are either deterred by the anticipation of blocking coalitions or beaten back by the formation of such coalitions.”⁶

The second checking mechanism is best described by Robert Gilpin, who argues that “large-scale territorial conquest and empire building [are] prohibitively expensive.”⁷ This is because “as a state increases its control over an international system, it begins at some point to encounter both increasing costs of further expansion and diminishing returns from further expansion.”⁸ Beyond the point at which marginal costs exceed marginal benefits, expansion will become overexpansion and the conquering state will bring about its own ruin. Among the various costs of expansion, the most central is the “loss-of-strength gradient,” or the degree to which a state’s military and political power diminishes as the state attempts to influence other states and events farther away from its home base.⁹ This gradient essentially means that long-distance campaigns—which attempts at universal domination necessarily involve—are almost always bad moves. Even when expansion succeeds, conquest entails administration of conquered territories and

3. Snyder 1991, 125.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. Waltz 1979, 118. Walt argues that states balance against threat rather than power. Walt 1987. If powerful states seek opportunistic expansion, then power is directly translated into threat and there is no need to differentiate between power and threat.

6. Levy 2003, 131, 133.

7. Gilpin 1981, 121.

8. *Ibid.*, 106–7.

9. Boulding 1963, 245.

resistant populations, which frequently “constitute[s] an economic drain on the economy of the dominant state.”¹⁰

Although realists disagree over which mechanism is more important, they tend to see both mechanisms as structural and largely immutable to human efforts. Realists essentially presume that negative feedback is the rule in international politics—that is, that any deviation from equilibrium automatically sets in motion countervailing forces to reestablish it.¹¹ As Waltz argues, “a balance, once disrupted, will be restored in one way or another.”¹² In this mainstream perspective, the possibility of alternative trajectories and endogenous transformation is thus ruled out by fiat. It is true that constructivists and liberals pay more attention to agency as opposed to structural determinism, and change as opposed to continuity. However, these theorists are only interested in normative transformation; the issue of coercive transformation is not on their agenda. Despite Alexander Wendt’s caution that “institutions may be cooperative or conflictual,” many constructivists have continued to “equate institutions with cooperation.”¹³ Paradoxically, then, although constructivists and liberals disagree with realists on many theoretical and methodological issues, they share the same disregard for the *problematique* of domination.¹⁴

To examine the dynamism of international politics, theories of international relations should pay more attention to strategic thinking. Thomas Schelling argues in a seminal work in 1960 that the political environment should be treated as a process of strategic interaction rather than a parametric constant.¹⁵ Although the strategic-interactive perspective came to be sidelined by Waltz’s structural realism in the field of international relations, this view has persisted in other fields within political science¹⁶ and has recently experienced a resurgence in international analyses.¹⁷ Interestingly, despite his explicit dismissal of strategies and statecraft, Waltz in fact defines “external balancing” as “*moves* to strengthen and enlarge one’s own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one.”¹⁸ He even argues that “[w]ith skill and determination structural constraints can sometimes be countered.”¹⁹ In this regard, it is noteworthy that various classical Chinese military texts highlight “the matching of opposites and complementaries one against the other” as the key to victory in international competition.²⁰ In addition, Robert Jervis points out that disruptions to the balance of power are not always restored because inter-

10. Gilpin 1981, 156–57.

11. Jervis 1997, 125.

12. Waltz 1979, 128. Even Gilpin, who speaks of “war and change,” and Morgenthau, who argues that states are domination-seeking, believe in the restoration of equilibrium. See Gilpin 1981, 13; and Morgenthau 1973, 168.

13. Wendt 1992, 399.

14. Neoclassical realism represents a minor exception to this phenomenon.

15. Schelling 1960.

16. See, in particular, Elster 1993; and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

17. See, for example, Arreguín-Toft 2001; Jervis 1997; Lake and Powell 1999; and Milner 1998.

18. Waltz 1979, 118 (emphasis added).

19. Waltz 1986, 343.

20. Lewis 1990, 118.

national politics is characterized by both negative feedback and positive feedback.²¹ Positive feedback refers to the phenomenon whereby a change in one direction sets in motion reinforcing pressures that produce further change in the same direction.²² Although IR scholars often slight positive feedback, various comparativists have amply demonstrated how small differences in power distribution can be exacerbated through path dependence over time.²³

Building on these insights, I argue that the “logic of world politics” should be understood as the “dynamics of competing logics.” In essence, I argue that international competition should be seen as strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination who employ competing strategies and who are simultaneously facilitated and obstructed by competing causal mechanisms. On the one hand, targets of domination are protected by the “logic of balancing,” which involves the mechanisms of balance of power and rising costs of expansion. On the other hand, domination-seekers may pursue the “logic of domination,” which involves counterbalancing strategies, “Machiavellian” tactics, and self-strengthening reforms. In this formulation, recurrent causal mechanisms are not universal laws. As Jon Elster points out, “[t]he distinctive feature of a mechanism is not that it can be universally applied to predict and control social events, but that it embodies a causal chain that is sufficiently general and precise to enable us to locate it in widely different settings.”²⁴ In addition, two elements in the “dynamics of competing logics”—self-strengthening reforms and the balance of power—are simultaneously mechanisms and strategies. They represent causal mechanisms in that they are compelled by international competition, but they also represent strategies in that their success or failure is partly a function of “skill and determination.”

How does the “logic of domination” counter “the logic of balancing”? Waltzian theorists argue that balancing alliances are invariably formed against attempts at domination. However, critics of balance-of-power theory point out that effective balancing does not come about naturally or automatically. Balancing is not a “frictionless, costless activity”; rather, it involves the daunting collective-action problem.²⁵ Although all states want to survive, self-interested states may engage in other strategies that facilitate, rather than check, attempts at domination. The repertoire of such strategies includes distancing (staying away from targets of domination), declaring neutrality, buck-passing (free riding on the balancing efforts of other states), bandwagoning (allying with the domination-seeker), appeasement, and even submission.²⁶ As Randall Schweller highlights, while balancing generates negative feedback, bandwagoning and other strategies generate positive feed-

21. Jervis 1997, chap. 4.

22. *Ibid.*, 125.

23. See, for example, Mahoney 2000; North 1990; and Pierson 2000.

24. Elster 1993, 5.

25. Wohlforth 1999, 29. See also Rosecrance 2003; and Schweller 1996.

26. See Christensen and Snyder 1990; Jervis 1997; Schroeder 1994; and Schweller 1994, 1996.

back, thereby facilitating the coercive transformation of an international system.²⁷ In addition, domination-seeking states may pursue divide-and-conquer strategies to—as Waltz himself puts it—“weaken and shrink” opposing alliances.²⁸ If domination-seekers follow this course of action, they may minimize the likelihood of having to fight concerted countervailing alliances as well as multifront wars with unallied enemies.

To facilitate divide-and-conquer strategies, domination-seeking states may resort to “Machiavellian” stratagems. In Machiavelli’s view, international competition is a game of fraud and treachery. Thus the ambitious prince “should pay no attention to what is just or what is unjust, or to what is kind or cruel, or to what is praiseworthy or shameful.”²⁹ Although the term “Machiavellian” appears Eurocentric, Machiavelli was in fact predated by military strategists in ancient China. Most notably, *Sunzi’s Art of War*, the canon of Chinese military classics, proclaims that “[t]he military is the Way of deceit.”³⁰ Hence, it advises rulers to “conquer with the extraordinary” or employ “techniques of surprise and deception.”³¹ Deceptive tactics work best if targets of domination are self-interested and can be readily tempted by promises of material gains. As the *Sunzi* suggests, “if [the enemy] seeks benefit then tempt him.”³² In addition to deception, “Machiavellian” tactics may also involve brutality. As Machiavelli explains, “[i]f you do [people] minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do.”³³ In addition to counteracting balancing, the *Sunzi* understands that stratagems are also useful in reducing the costs of war. As testified by the oft-cited quote “to bring the enemy’s army to submit without combat is the highest skill,”³⁴ it is significantly cheaper to win wars with “extraordinary” tactics than to engage in direct confrontation with the enemy.³⁵ It should be noted that, while the pieces of advice in *The Prince* and the *Sunzi* may be timeless, the concrete moves that win the game should be tailored to the historical particularities of the actors and circumstances in question.

The second countervailing mechanism of rising costs of expansion is based on the law of diminishing returns—that continued expansion of any organization should eventually face increasing marginal costs and decreasing marginal benefits.³⁶ As implied by the term “law,” this mechanism is often regarded as immutable. How-

27. Schweller 1994, 92–93.

28. Waltz 1979, 118.

29. Machiavelli 1994, *The Discourses*, Book III, chap. 41. Among IR scholars, Mearsheimer, who argues that states may “lie, cheat and use brute force [to] gain advantage over their rivals,” comes the closest to the Machiavellian tradition. Mearsheimer 1999, 7.

30. Lewis, trans. 1990, 124. Some historians argue that Sunzi was a not historical figure. See Brooks 1994, 59; and Lewis 1999, 604.

31. Lewis, trans. 1990, 124.

32. *Ibid.*, 124.

33. Machiavelli 1994, *The Prince*, chap. 3.

34. Lewis, trans. 1990, 116.

35. Ivan Arreguín-Toft makes a similar observation. See Arreguín-Toft 2001.

36. Gilpin 1981, 106–7.

ever, the costs and benefits that go into the calculus are, in fact, amenable to human manipulation. Most notably, if conquests pay and gains are cumulative, then the costs of war may be seen as high-yield investments. Indeed, in many historical instances, “successful war yielded a clear gain: control over territory—additional land and the associated labor force—that added directly to both economic and political power.”³⁷

To a significant extent, the costs and benefits of war are shaped by the pursuit of self-strengthening reforms. Although the term “self-strengthening” is new to the IR literature, it has some affinity with the familiar concept of “internal balancing.” Kenneth Waltz argues that international competition compels states to make “moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies.”³⁸ Waltz takes for granted that states make such moves only to balance against attempts at domination. Randall Schweller is thus correct in criticizing neorealism for its status-quo bias.³⁹ As Peter Gourevitch highlights, international politics presents plenty of “opportunity: power, dominion, empire, glory, total security.”⁴⁰ It is not unimaginable that states may exploit their superior military strengths, higher economic capabilities, and cleverer strategies to pursue opportunistic expansion and even to establish domination. I thus prefer the more dynamic term “self-strengthening reforms” to the one-sided term “internal balancing moves.”

The concept of self-strengthening reforms goes beyond that of internal balancing moves. To begin with, the concept provides a theory of the state, which is necessary for a dynamic theory of international politics. Waltzian realists dismiss international analyses that look inside states as “reductionist.”⁴¹ They thus overlook that internal balancing moves necessarily involve mobilization of human and material resources, which is the very subject matter of state formation theorists. As Charles Tilly argues, war and preparation for war involve rulers in extracting the wherewithal of war, which then creates the central organizational structures of states.⁴² The crucial processes of state formation are monopolization of the means of coercion, nationalization of taxation, and bureaucratization of administration. If states seek to “increase military strength” by building national armies, “increase economic capability” by rationalizing and nationalizing taxation, and “develop clever strategies” by establishing meritocratic administration, then they are simultaneously building state capacity.⁴³ State capacity in state-society relations is a

37. Kaysen 1990, 49.

38. Waltz 1979, 118.

39. Schweller 1996.

40. Gourevitch 1978, 896.

41. Waltz 1979, 18–37.

42. Tilly 1992, 14–15.

43. State capacity refers to “the human and material resources the state can mobilize for its purposes and the effectiveness with which it can achieve its goals.” Wong 1997, 82.

critical component of relative capability in interstate relations.⁴⁴ As Tilly observes, “[t]he transformation of states by war, in its turn, alter[s] the stakes of war.”⁴⁵ Domination-seeking states with enhanced administrative capacity are much better at mobilizing war-making resources, solving logistical problems in long-distance campaigns, consolidating conquests, and extracting additional resources from subjugated populations. Moreover, self-strengthening reforms not only help to “increase military strength” and “increase economic capability,” but also to “develop clever strategies.” Machiavellian tactics and divide-and-conquer strategies are better developed under meritocracy than aristocracy. Further, self-strengthened states have less need to form aggressive alliances to achieve the same expansionist goals. They thus have no need to share the spoils of victory, and are less vulnerable to possible defection by bandwagons.

The concept of self-strengthening reforms also differs from internal balancing in that the former provides room for human creativity and historical contingency. Although international competition should compel states to increase their relative capabilities, international competition does not determine how states meet this challenge. If states mobilize additional resources of war by building up administrative capacity, then they are engaged in self-strengthening reforms. But some reform programs may be better than others, thus conferring an advantage upon those with higher administrative capacity. Moreover, as theorists of state formation have pointed out, while war may strengthen states in some cases, war may also weaken states in other cases.⁴⁶ Douglass North and Robert Thomas observe that, although efficient institutions can pay off handsomely in the long term, their establishment involves higher transaction costs in the short term; hence, political leaders often adopt inefficient institutions instead.⁴⁷ In the context of resource mobilization, states may opt to rely on intermediate resource-holders—that is, states may turn to military entrepreneurs to build mercenary armies, international financiers to provide loans and credits, and venal officials to fill administrative positions. While such measures can bring about larger armies and higher revenues for immediate campaigns, these measures may strain fiscal resources, erode central authority, and even damage fighting capability in the long term. As I will elaborate upon later, the use of mercenaries is particularly problematic. First, mercenaries are often prohibitively expensive. Second, reliance on military entrepreneurs makes it impossible for the state to centralize military command and to monopolize the means of coercion. Third, mercenary troops tend to have serious discipline problems. As Paul Kennedy puts it, the use of expensive mercenaries, contraction of unsustain-

44. Although neither classical nor structural realists pay much attention to state capacity, this is not the case for neoclassical realists. For instance, Christensen’s concept of “national political power,” defined as “the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation’s human and material resources behind security policy initiatives,” is consistent with my conception of self-strengthening reforms. Christensen 1996, 11.

45. Tilly 1992, 29.

46. See Hui 2001; and Ertman 1997.

47. North and Thomas 1973, 7.

TABLE 1. *Self-strengthening reforms versus self-weakening expedients*

<i>Internal balancing moves (Improvement of relative capability)</i>	<i>Self-strengthening reforms (Mobilization by enhancing administrative capacity)</i>	<i>Self-weakening expedients (Mobilization by relying on intermediate resource-holders)</i>
“Increase military strength”	Establishment of a standing army by national conscription	Establishment of a standing army by military entrepreneurs and mercenary troops
“Increase economic capability”	Imposition of direct and indirect taxes; promotion of economic productivity	Tax farming for ordinary taxes; loans and credits for extraordinary revenues
“Develop clever strategies”	Replacement of aristocracy by meritocracy	Sale of public offices to private capital-holders

able loans, and sale of public offices are “expedients, easy in the short term but disastrous for the long-term good of the country.”⁴⁸ Hence, I use the label “self-weakening expedients” to refer to internal balancing moves that involve reliance on intermediate resource-holders. The differences between self-strengthening reforms and self-weakening expedients are summarized in Table 1.

To sum up, I argue that international competition should be seen as processes of strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination. While attempts at domination are hindered by the countervailing mechanisms of balance of power and rising costs of expansion, domination-seekers may overcome them by pursuing divide-and-conquer strategies, ruthless tactics, and self-strengthening reforms. As self-strengthening reforms fundamentally shape relative capabilities and relative costs of war, they constitute the most crucial mechanism propelling the coercive transformation of an international system. In a system where self-strengthened states pursue opportunistic expansion by resorting to counterbalancing strategies and Machiavellian tactics, domination is not at all impossible. On the other hand, in a system where domination-seekers adopt self-weakening expedients instead of self-strengthening reforms, and do not ruthlessly pursue divide-and-conquer strategies and Machiavellian tactics, then conquest will be difficult and system maintenance will be more likely. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that one should not push such “predictions” too far. Processes of strategic interaction allow for multiple equilibria that may be unpredictable a priori. While one can make an educated guess that the stronger side in any competition is more likely to win, actual outcomes are dependent on the strategic interplays between domination-seekers and targets, and between coercive mechanisms and countervailing mechanisms. This is another way to say that one should examine historical contexts.

48. Kennedy 1987, 54.

Cases and Method

The term China or *Zhongguo* is commonly known to mean the “Middle Kingdom.” However, in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, *Zhongguo* referred to “central states”—with *zhong* meaning central and *guo* meaning states. According to Jack Levy, an international system is composed of “states characterized by the centralization of political power within a given territory, independent from any higher secular authority and interacting in an interdependent system of security relations.”⁴⁹ In Europe, “the French invasion of Italy at the end of 1494 and the Treaty of Venice in March of 1495 mark the coalescence of the major European states into a truly interdependent system of behavior.”⁵⁰ In the same fashion, I date the beginning of the ancient Chinese system in 656 B.C.⁵¹ With regard to independence from external authority, although the Zhou court originally exercised some hierarchical authority over feudal units, a disastrous attack from tribal units in 771 B.C. marked “the definitive end of the political and military dominance of the royal house.”⁵² On the issue of centralization of authority within independent polities, the earliest rivals gradually expanded their territorial control by building larger armies, promoting agricultural productivity, and enhancing administrative capacity.⁵³ As for interdependent security relations, the means of communication and transportation meant that it was not until around 659 B.C. that various states began to acquire mutual awareness.⁵⁴ Chu’s repeated attacks on Zheng in 659–653 B.C. and Qi’s mobilization of a northern alliance to assist Zheng in 656 B.C. then formally marked the first systemic (rather than bilateral and local) war involving most major powers. In mobilizing an anti-Chu alliance, Qi also pioneered the practices of sending envoys and demarcating borders, thereby laying down the foundations for diplomatic exchanges, coalition formation, and territorial sovereignty. I date the end of the ancient Chinese system in 221 B.C. when Qin established a universal empire, and the end of the early modern European system in 1815 when Napoleonic France was defeated.

It may be objected that ancient China and early modern Europe are not comparable cases. Indeed, the two systems represent extreme ends of East and West in terms of culture; they are located on different sides of the Eurasian continent in

49. Levy 1983, 21.

50. *Ibid.*, 21.

51. For sources on ancient China, see Brooks and Brooks, <http://www.umass.edu/wsp>; Chan 1999; Chen 1991; Gao 1995; Hsu 1997 and 1999; Hong 1975; Lewis 1990 and 1999; Lin 1992; Mu and Wu 1992; Sawyer 1994 and 1998; Sun 1999; Tian and Zang 1996; Walker 1953; Yang 1986; “Zhongguo junshishi” Editorial Board 1983–91; and “Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao” Editorial Board 2003. Most of the events discussed are widely chronicled in sources on ancient China. Except for specific quotes or frequently less-cited pieces of information, citations for general historical events are not listed.

52. Lewis 1990, 47.

53. As I shall elaborate later, this point is overstated for European states.

54. I thank Bruce Brooks for this point. Personal communication, 2 June 2002. Other historians of ancient China typically date the beginning of the ancient Chinese system in 770 B.C. when the Spring and Autumn period begins. The issue of mutual awareness is analogous to what Buzan et al. call “interaction capacity.” See Buzan and Little 2000, 80–84.

terms of space; and they are separated by more than 2,000 years in terms of time. Hence, these two systems are not amenable to the principle of maximizing underlying commonalities, which requires that researchers “test the validity of propositions by making comparisons between two situations that are identical except for one variable.”⁵⁵ However, if this principle is strictly followed, then comparative analyses would be confined to mostly neighboring countries. To break out of this undue constraint, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly propose an alternative “uncommon foundations” strategy.⁵⁶ They advocate “paired comparisons of uncommon cases” to find out how similar causal mechanisms underlie different political phenomena, and how such recurrent mechanisms interact with contextualized conditions to produce radically different outcomes.⁵⁷

In examining why the two systems witnessed similar processes but reached diametrically opposite outcomes, it is important that one refrains from asking the question “Why did checks and balances fail in ancient China?” Treating ancient China as a deviant case would lead one to “take European developments as the norm” and then “search for what went wrong” in China.⁵⁸ Such a perspective also presumes “a unidirectionality of social development,”⁵⁹ thereby making it difficult to understand alternative trajectories. At the same time, one should also refrain from the Sinocentric perspective that China is inherently unique or that Eurocentric theories are necessarily inapplicable to non-European contexts.⁶⁰ To avoid both one-sided perspectives, I adopt Bin Wong’s “symmetric perspectives.”⁶¹ In the ensuing comparison, I will first use the Eurocentric perspective of international politics to construct a “counterfactual China.” I will then use the ancient Chinese trajectory to construct a “counterfactual Europe” and thus rethink the taken-for-granted European trajectory.

The Ancient Chinese System

Waltz is right to expect similar “substantive and stylistic characteristics” in the ancient Chinese system.⁶² The rise and decline of five domination-seeking states—Chu, Qi (in two different eras), Jin, Wu, and Wei—fit nicely into a combined picture of Waltzian balance of power and Gilpinian costs of expansion. (See Maps 1 to 3.) In the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period, Chu, a southern state, was the first to emerge hegemonic. As Chu sought expansion into the central plain

55. Jervis 1997, 73.

56. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 81–84.

57. *Ibid.*, 82–83. In the tradition of historical institutionalism, McAdam et al. focus on initial and environmental conditions in their analyses of contextualized conditions.

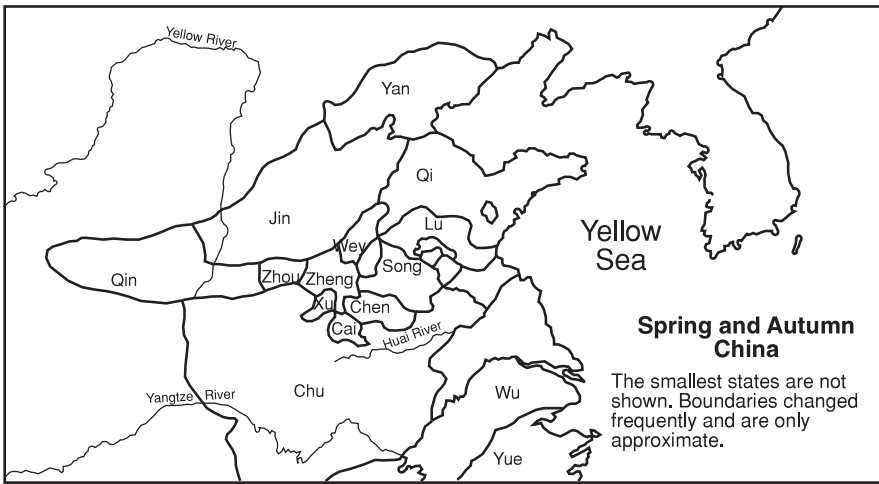
58. Wong 1999, 210.

59. Kohli and Shue 1994, 310.

60. For this view, see Chan et al. 2001.

61. Wong 1997, 93.

62. Waltz 1979, 329–30.



Source: Creel, Herrlee. 1970. *The Origins of Statecraft in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 204.

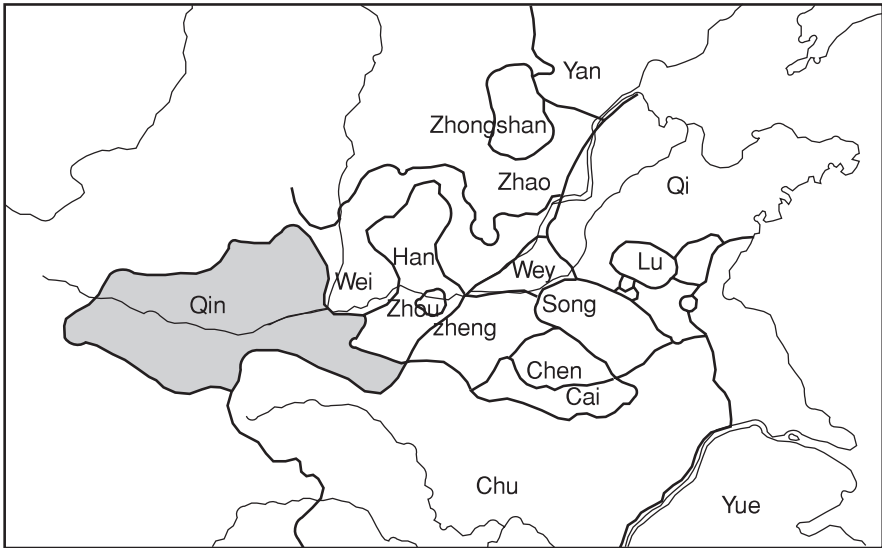
MAP 1. Ancient China in the middle to late Spring and Autumn period

area in the early to mid-seventh century B.C., it was checked by a Qi-led alliance in 656 B.C. (which marked the onset of the ancient Chinese system). Qi soon declined as a result of internal power struggles. But Jin then emerged to check Chu in 632 B.C. In the ensuing century, the Jin and Chu camps were engaged in a tug-of-war and unable to subjugate each other. The two sides finally reached a peace agreement in 546 B.C. But this Jin-Chu balance did not last long. Wu, Chu's southeastern neighbor, rose in power and managed to capture Chu's capital in 506 B.C.⁶³ Wu, in turn, suffered from overexpansion and was even conquered by its own southeastern neighbor, Yue, in 473 B.C. But Yue soon stayed out of great-power competition and focused its attention on neighboring weak states. Another great power, Jin, was split by three ruling clans into Han, Wei, and Zhao in 453 B.C. In the ensuing Warring States period, Wei was the first state to emerge hegemonic, and then attempted to subjugate its neighbors. But Wei's expansion into Zhao in 354–352 B.C. and Han in 344–340 B.C. brought about Qi's interference and decisive defeats. Qi's own attempt at domination, in turn, was thwarted by an anti-Qi alliance in 284 B.C. In short, for more than three centuries, ambitious domination-seekers rose but fell, attempts at domination were made but checked, balancing as a foreign policy was pursued, and balances in the distribution of relative capabilities occurred at various times.⁶⁴

This scenario of relative stability was gradually disrupted as Qin embarked on what I call the “logic of domination” from 356 B.C. onward. Before then, how-

63. Chu soon solicited assistance from Qin and drove away Wu's forces.

64. For a discussion of the balance of power as both balancing and balances, see Levy 2003.



Source: Gao, Rui. 1995. *Zhongguo Shanaggu Junshishi*. Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, map 20.

MAP 2. Ancient China ca. 450 B.C.

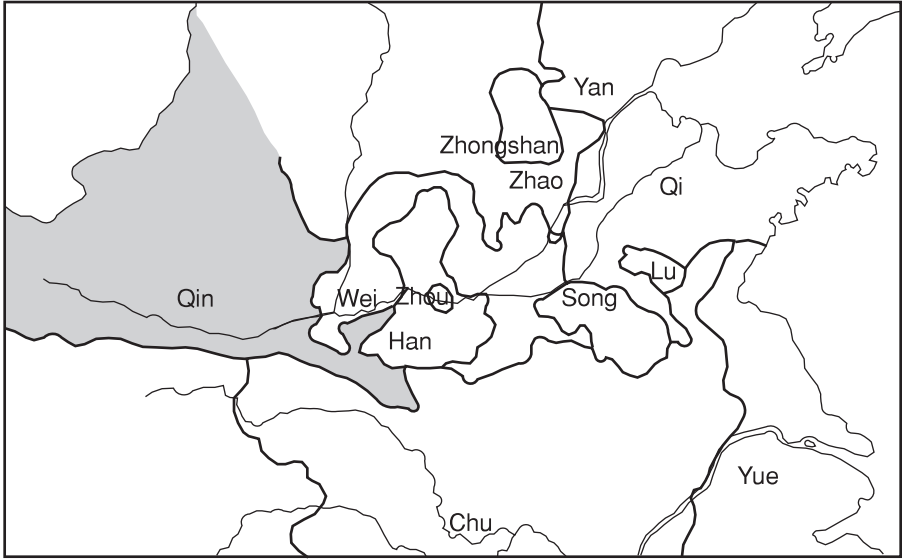
ever, Qin was weaker than other great powers. For centuries, Qin generally pursued a defensive foreign policy. It may even be said that Qin performed the role of the “balancer” during the rivalries between Jin and Chu from 632 to 546 B.C.—as both sides actively sought Qin’s alliance—and between Chu and Wu in 505 B.C.—as Qin saved Chu from conquest by Wu. Moreover, Qin was badly beaten and lost large tracts of strategic territory on the west bank of the Yellow River to Wei (a successor state of Jin) in the period 419–385 B.C. Nevertheless, the conjuncture of early weakness and late development also carried advantages. When Qin proclaimed in the mid-fourth century B.C. that it pursued aggressive reforms and strategies merely to restore Qin’s place among great powers,⁶⁵ the claim was relatively credible. More importantly, late development could bring about the “advantage of backwardness.”⁶⁶ Qin’s rulers could draw from the large repertoire of self-strengthening measures and ruthless tactics that had been well practiced by other great powers through the centuries. While Qin’s reforms and strategies were not entirely new, Qin’s theoreticians adapted old models to changing circumstances and “put them into practice more systematically than had any of [its] precursors.”⁶⁷

Qin’s self-strengthening reforms, introduced from 356 B.C. onward, were modeled on various *fuguo qiangbing* (rich country and strong army) programs of pre-

65. Yang 1986, 215.

66. This term is borrowed from Gerschenkron 1966.

67. Lewis 1999, 611.



Source: Gao, Rui. 1995. *Zhongguo Shanaggu Junshishi*. Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, map 23.

MAP 3. Ancient China ca. 350 B.C.

vious domination-seekers, especially those of Wei. But Qin's reforms surpassed others in terms of comprehensiveness and institutionalization. To "develop clever strategies," Qin strictly applied the principle of meritocracy and completely eradicated the nobility from the administration. Most notably, Qin established an administrative hierarchy of prefectures, counties, townships, and villages that allowed the Qin court to penetrate deep into the society down to individual households. With this unprecedented capacity for direct rule, Qin could then engage in total mobilization for war. To "increase economic capability," Qin granted lands to the entire registered male population to encourage productivity, and then taxed almost all wealth above subsistence level.⁶⁸ To "increase military strength," Qin developed an elite professional force and introduced universal military conscription. To motivate its soldiers, Qin introduced handsome rewards for victories (including lands, honors, and servants) and severe punishments for evasion, desertion, surrender to enemies and losses in war (including torture and death). Qin's rulers and reformers thus seemed to understand Douglas North and Robert Thomas's insight

68. In Qin, peasants were subject to land tax, head tax, military service, and all kinds of *corvée*. One account estimates that nearly two-thirds of a household's productivity were taxed. Lin 1992, 328. But there is no systematic analysis of the total tax burdens of free peasants in the historical literature. Brooks, personal communication, 15 June 2003.

that state policies which “bring social and private rates of return into closer parity” can be highly effective in promoting a state’s international competitiveness.⁶⁹

While the originally weaker Qin pursued a defensive policy before 356 B.C., the self-strengthened Qin switched to an offensive policy in the post-356 B.C. period. Although Qin initiated only eleven (or 7 percent) of 161 wars involving great powers in the period 656–357 B.C., it initiated fifty-one (or 54 percent) of ninety-five wars involving great powers in the period 356–221 B.C.⁷⁰ In its aggressive drive for opportunistic expansion, Qin faced the problem of rising costs of expansion. Because it was located in the peripheral west, Qin had to travel long-distance when it conquered eastward. To overcome this countervailing mechanism, Qin proceeded with piecemeal encroachment. It would first seize pieces of territory nearby before projecting its forces further away. Territories taken earlier could then be used as forward bases to facilitate logistics and supplies, to safeguard its rear and sides, and to encircle its targets in future expansionist wars.

As Qin’s strength ascended, a *hezong* or balancing strategy, which called for the uniting of weaker states to resist domination, emerged in the 330s and 320s B.C. However, the neighbors of Qin’s victims rarely “flock[ed] to the weaker side” as Waltz would expect.⁷¹ As diplomatic strategist Zhang Yi explained to Qin’s king: “Even blood brothers fight over money, the impracticability of the *hezong* strategy is obvious.”⁷² Indeed, Qin’s targets (Chu, Han, Qi, Wei, Yan, and Zhao) were “indifferent to mutual cooperation.”⁷³ They were overwhelmingly concerned with short-term gains and pursued their own opportunistic expansion. They fought bitterly amongst themselves to scramble for territories from weaker neighbors and from one another. As many as twenty-seven (or 28 percent) of the ninety-five wars involving great powers in the period 356–221 B.C. involved mutual attacks among these six states.⁷⁴ The prevalence of mutual aggression simultaneously weakened the balance-of-power mechanism and facilitated Qin’s opportunistic expansion. Qin frequently invaded its targets when they were fighting amongst themselves. As states could rarely do well in two-front wars, the phenomenon of mutual aggression offered Qin many opportunities to seize territory with minimal efforts. In addition, the fact that all great powers pursued opportunistic expansion also created the scenario of multiple threats. It was not obvious to statesmen of the time that the rapidly ascending Qin was the most threatening state. This situation was compounded by the fact that Qin’s early ascendance was eclipsed by the growth of Qi, which took over the hegemony from Wei in 341 B.C. It was not until 288 B.C.

69. North and Thomas 1973, 2.

70. Hui forthcoming. Wars involving great powers are wars with at least one great power. Levy 1983.

71. Waltz 1979, 127.

72. Mu and Wu, 1992, vol. 2, 148.

73. Sawyer 1994, 58–59.

74. By following Levy’s rule of counting only wars involving great powers, I underestimate the degree of mutual aggression. Many wars that occurred after both (or all) belligerents lost their great-power status are not counted.

that Qin caught up with Qi. Qin then exploited the scenario of multiple threats and turned *hezong* efforts against its rival. It was only after Qi was devastated by an anti-Qi alliance in 284 B.C. that Qin emerged as the unmistakable threat. By then, however, the dominoes had already fallen—other powers had been drastically weakened.

On top of the inherent weakness in the balance-of-power mechanism, Qin further pursued a *lianheng* or divide-and-conquer strategy to forestall *hezong* alliances from being formed and to break up already formed alliances. To divide and conquer and to minimize the costs of expansion, Qin “was never reluctant to lie in diplomatic meetings, to acquire information on other states by espionage, and to bribe key figures in the courts of other states into collaboration.”⁷⁵ Although there existed a Confucian-Mencian norm arguing that force should be used “only in the name of the righteous tradition of a moral-political order,”⁷⁶ interstate relations of the period were dominated by military strategists who advocated “ruthless amorality.”⁷⁷

For instance, in 341 B.C., Qin tried to take advantage of Wei’s crushing defeat by Qi and invaded Wei. As Qin’s commander-in-chief was uncertain that he could defeat this formidable foe in a direct confrontation, he invited Wei’s commander-in-chief to Qin’s camp to negotiate a peace agreement. But Qin’s commander captured Wei’s commander instead and then seized territory with minimal fighting. Although Wei was originally significantly more powerful than Qin, the Qin-Wei balance of relative capabilities was reversed from then on. Three decades later in 312 B.C., Qin was still weaker than Qi and Chu, the two strongest states at the time. Even worse for Qin, these two powerful states were allied together. Qin’s king then offered Chu’s king 600 *li* of territory if the latter would break the alliance with Qi.⁷⁸ Chu readily took the offer but Qin ceded only 6 *li*. Chu’s king was furious and launched two poorly planned revenge campaigns against Qin. However, Chu suffered humiliating defeats while Qi looked on. At the end of this war, Chu even lost 600 *li* and two cities. Again, the Qin-Chu balance of relative capabilities was reversed.

Moreover, when balancing alliances were formed despite all odds, Qin would use bribery to sow discord among allies or to have competent generals removed. In 247 B.C., Qin was defeated by an alliance under the unified command of a Wei general. To arrest this setback, Qin bribed officials in the Wei court to spread the rumor that the commander-in-chief had ambitions to take over the throne. Wei’s king soon dismissed the commander, and the alliance was dissolved. From then on, there was no more effective *hezong* alliance against Qin.

75. Hsu 1997, 5.

76. Johnston 1995, 249.

77. Lewis 1999, 591.

78. One *li* is roughly equivalent to 0.3 mile or 0.49 kilometer. There is no agreement among historians as to whether 600 *li* in the historical materials referred to a total area of 600 square *li* or 600 *li* on one side. Exchanges on the Warring States Work Group, June 12–15, 2003.

With weak balancing and strong counterbalancing, Qin's fifty-one expansionist wars in the period 356 to 221 B.C. met with only eight allied responses.⁷⁹ Qin defeated or dissolved five of the anti-Qin alliances. Although three of these alliances defeated Qin, the defeats were not decisive enough to block Qin's rise to domination. On the other hand, Qin won forty-seven (or 92 percent) of the fifty-one wars involving great powers that it initiated, and three of the five wars in which it was the target.⁸⁰ As Qin scored victory after victory, various great powers were successively defeated one after another. Han and Wei lost the great-power status after Qin annihilated their elite troops in 293 B.C. An anti-Qi alliance crushed the once-hegemonic Qi in 284 B.C. Chu faced a fatal blow in 279 B.C. when Qin seized the western half of its territory. The peripheral Yan was relatively weak compared with other great powers for most of the Warring States period.

Nevertheless, Zhao still had the capability to resist Qin. Unfortunately, Zhao's experience testified to the prevalence of opportunistic expansion, the weakness of the balance of power, and the effectiveness of stratagems. Although Zhao launched a military reform and established an independent cavalry in 307 B.C., it did not use its increased military strength to balance against Qin. As Qin encroached on other neighbors, Zhao pursued its own territorial ambitions, including conquest of the medium-sized state Zhongshan and expansion in the northern frontiers. When Qin planned a massive invasion of Chu in 279 B.C. and asked for a peace agreement with Zhao to avoid a rear attack, Zhao agreed despite the fact that since 284 B.C., Qin had emerged as the unmistakable threat to all states. Zhao eventually fought Qin only when Qin attacked it in 262 B.C.⁸¹ With fearsome armies, Zhao was able to resist Qin's invasion. Unable to subjugate Zhao by force even after two years, Qin then bribed high officials in the Zhao court to have the capable commander-in-chief dismissed. Zhao thus suffered a crushing defeat in 260 B.C.

It may be said that, after repeated defeats by Qin, other states should have increasingly understood that their survival was seriously at stake. In such a situation, IR scholars would expect Qin's targets to overcome the collective-action problem and engage in more effective balancing.⁸² As Kenneth Waltz puts it, "balance of power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive."⁸³ However, successful balancing is not a simple function of the wish to survive. States may not balance against a threat if they see that such a strategy is "futile and counterproductive."⁸⁴ At the end of the Qin-Zhao war in 257 B.C., Qin man-

79. Hui forthcoming.

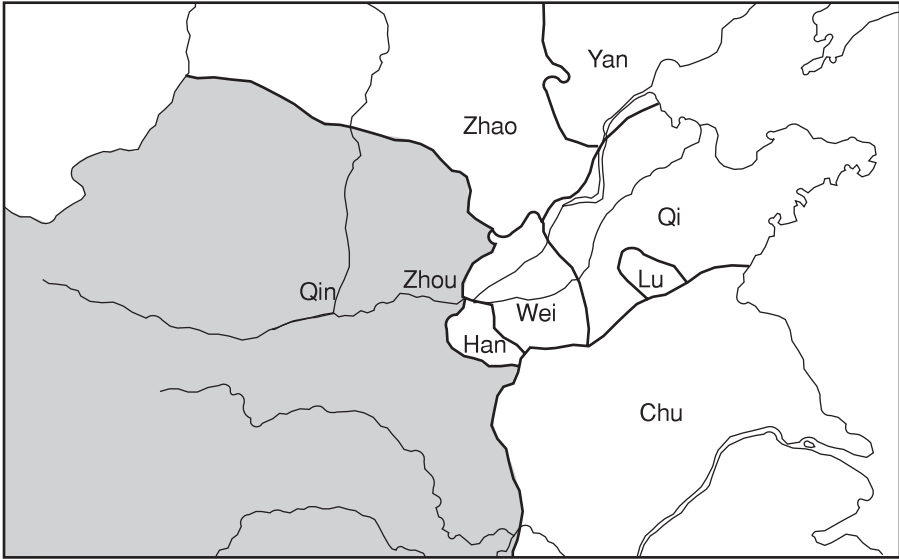
80. Ibid.

81. According to critics of balance-of-power theory, resistance does not constitute balancing. See Levy 2003; and Vasquez 1998.

82. Rosecrance 2001, 134–35.

83. Waltz 1979, 121.

84. Schroeder 2003, 121. Schroeder notes that Denmark and Norway did not balance against Hitler in 1939–40.



Source: Gao, Rui. 1995. *Zhongguo Shanaggu Junshishi*. Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, map 26.

MAP 4. Ancient China ca. 257 B.C.

aged to occupy about half of the territory in the system (see Figure 4). From then on, even the combined capabilities of all the six states would no longer match that of Qin.⁸⁵ It is thus not surprising that Han Fei, who witnessed the last decades of the Warring States period, had no faith in the balance-of-power strategy: “Joining the *lianheng* alliance means prostrating oneself before the might of Qin, and states that routinely prostrate themselves find their territory pared down until nothing is left. On the other hand, joining the *hezong* alliance means rescuing impotent states that are about to be annexed by Qin, and states that routinely rescue their impotent neighbors find their own strength weakened until their armies are defeated.”⁸⁶

Waltz also argues that “states tend to emulate the successful policies of others.”⁸⁷ If international competition could compel states to pursue self-strengthening reforms—and creative adaptation of successful models indeed occurred for most

85. However, one should refrain from the determinism implied in mathematical calculation of relative capabilities. It is possible that ancient Chinese history remained open-ended for quite some time. Most notably, an anti-Qin alliance in 247 B.C. could still defeat Qin forces, and pushed them back to the Yellow River. This was the only anti-Qin alliance that enjoyed unified command. As noted above, Qin arrested such a major setback by getting rid of the commander-in-chief of allied forces. It was only after this incidence that unification became more or less inevitable.

86. *Han feizi*, cited in Goldin 2001, 152.

87. Waltz 1979, 124.

of the multistate era in ancient China—then why did Qin’s targets not emulate Qin’s strategies and tactics? In self-strengthening reforms as in effective balancing, the wish to survive is not always matched by the capability to pursue the necessary courses of action. As Elster explains, “when people are badly off their motivation to innovate . . . is high. Their capacity or opportunity to do so, however, is the lowest when they are in tight circumstances.”⁸⁸ It is particularly noteworthy that Qin’s targets had all pursued various elements of self-strengthening reforms during Qin’s early ascendance, but all except Zhao had been badly beaten by the time Qin became the unmistakable threat in 284 B.C. Compared with rising powers, declining states would have more difficulty playing the game of catching up. Qi, for instance, retreated into isolationism in 284 B.C. after it lost the great-power—as well as hegemonic—status. Qin further weakened the six states’ capabilities to renew their strengths by adopting a policy of “attacking not only territory but also people.”⁸⁹ At each victory, Qin would seize territory and kill enemy soldiers *en masse* so that losing states could not easily recover. With ever-widening gaps in relative capabilities, it became increasingly futile for Qin’s targets to pursue meaningful buildups. Han and Wei, in particular, became so demoralized that they followed a self-defeating policy of appeasement, ceding pieces of territory without fighting.

While Qin pursued a strategy of piecemeal encroachment during its rise to domination, it switched to swift conquests in 236 B.C. when the conditions for unification seemed ripe. Qin’s strategist Li Si advised King Zheng that “the states now listen to Qin as if they were our prefectures and counties. Qin’s strength and your honor’s competence are enough to annihilate the states to build an empire. This is a rare opportunity in history. If Qin still proceeds slowly, then the states may recover and form another *hezong* alliance. When that happens, even your competence will not suffice for unification.”⁹⁰ In mapping out a grand strategy for the final wars of unification, Li Si understood that other states, facing imminent death, would fiercely resist Qin. To preempt last-minute balancing efforts, Qin complemented military campaigns with handsome bribes. In their final struggles for survival, therefore, Qin’s targets could only resort to “self-help”—in the literal sense of self-reliance—by mobilizing their entire (adult and teenage, male and female) populations, rather than the Waltzian sense of balancing. Fighting alone, they were conquered one after another.

But how did Qin swallow whole, sovereign territorial states on its march toward universal domination? This is an important question because the last effective check against domination is often the inability of conquerors to consolidate conquests. As noted above, a dynamic theory of international politics requires a theory of state formation. Qin’s total conquests were significantly facilitated by its

88. Elster 1989, 18.

89. Lewis 1999, 639.

90. Mu and Wu 1992, 10.

superior administrative capacity. At the same time, although other states had less centralized authority and were thus less capable of mobilizing resources and resisting Qin's stratagems, all of them had developed relatively coherent administrative and coercive apparatuses. As Niccolò Machiavelli and Max Weber observed two millennia later, impersonal, hierarchical administration—as opposed to the personal, decentralized authority of the feudal era—would facilitate wholesale takeovers.⁹¹ As Qin swept across the ancient Chinese system, it was able to turn conquered states into new prefectures and counties. Furthermore, the earlier strategy of piecemeal encroachment not only minimized the costs of expansion, but also facilitated final conquests. By the time Qin launched the wars of unification in 236 B.C., Han and Wei had been reduced to the size of single prefectures; Chu and Zhao had also been cut by about half compared with their heydays. Qin was then able to vanquish Han in 230 B.C., Zhao in 228 B.C., Wei in 225 B.C., Chu in 223 B.C., Yan in 222 B.C., and Qi in 221 B.C. Soon afterward, King Zheng established the Qin Dynasty and proclaimed himself the “First Emperor.”⁹²

The Early Modern European System

Knowledge of the ancient Chinese system may now be used to construct a “counterfactual Europe” so as to rethink the early modern European system. In light of the triumph of domination in ancient China, why was the multistate system preserved in early modern Europe? Bin Wong points out that “[t]he comparative historical perspective reveals an element of contingency that reflects the *incompleteness* of European patterns of . . . change.”⁹³ Is it possible that European attempts at domination were, paradoxically, inadequate? Machiavelli advised at the onset of the early modern period that domination-seekers should combine the strength of the lion and the wit of the fox.⁹⁴ Did European kings and princes heed his words? Among various coercive tools in the “logic of domination,” European domination-seekers widely practiced counterbalancing strategies, but they came late in the pursuit of self-strengthening reforms and rarely employed ancient-Chinese-style ruthless

91. Machiavelli 1994, *The Prince*, chap. 4; and Weber 1958, 229. Note that ancient China also witnessed a feudal era in the Western Zhou period.

92. After unification, the mechanism of balance of power ceased to function, but that of rising costs remained in force. The First Emperor was not content with ruling only the preexisting areas of the conquered states, but sought to rule “all under heaven.” Various expansionist projects into multiple frontiers quickly pushed marginal costs of expansion to exceed marginal benefits. The subjects had to pay onerous military service, corvée, land tax, and head tax. As compliance meant hard labor, starvation, and even death, the people had little left to risk in staging rebellion. The death of the First Emperor in 209 B.C. provided a window of opportunity. Rebellions soon sprang up all over the empire. Nevertheless, the centralized bureaucratic and coercive apparatus laid down by the First Emperor significantly facilitated reimperialization. Although the Qin Dynasty collapsed in 206 B.C., the universal empire was reproduced by the Han and subsequent dynasties. Hui forthcoming.

93. Wong 1997, 87 (emphasis added).

94. Machiavelli 1994, *The Prince*, chap. 18.

tactics against one another.⁹⁵ It is true that European rulers engaged in widespread subversion and even assassinations—as did the ancient Chinese. But Europeans rarely blatantly violated diplomatic norms without decent excuses, and they certainly never engaged in mass slaughter of defeated troops. As discussed above, cunning and brutish tactics were critical to Qin’s ability to divide and conquer, minimize war costs, overcome relative weakness early on, and prevent other states from catching up after it achieved hegemony.⁹⁶ It is unlikely that Qin could have achieved domination without such tactics; hence, it is quite plausible that their extremely rare use weakened the “logic of domination” in Europe. Moreover, while European domination-seekers did play the divide-and-conquer game, they also made themselves heavily reliant on the strengths of allies to achieve their ambitions. They ignored Machiavelli’s observation that “auxiliaries” or allied troops were “useless and dangerous.”⁹⁷

Even more importantly, the earliest domination-seekers in Europe adopted self-weakening expedients rather than self-strengthening reforms. In ancient China, the earliest domination-seeking rulers of Chu, Qi, and Jin gradually built up their administrative capacity, expanded their armies from their own populations, promoted agricultural productivity as the basis of national wealth, and consolidated their control over conquered territories. Such early measures increasingly deepened over time, culminating in Qin’s total mobilization for war in the fourth and third centuries B.C. In contrast, their counterparts in early modern Europe, France and the United Habsburgs, relied on intermediate resource-holders. To build larger armies, the French court and the Habsburg house did not improve their extractive capacities to mobilize national armies; instead, they relied on military entrepreneurs to establish mercenary armies. Although it was possible to build numeri-

95. Europeans did apply such nasty and brutish tactics against “uncivilized” colonial populations. One may then say that colonies provided “outlets” for Machiavellian tactics.

96. Some readers may find it counterintuitive that the early modern European system was in fact less “Machiavellian” than the ancient Chinese system. For realists, the European system is supposed to be a Hobbesian world of war of all against all. This view is exacerbated by cultural relativists and many constructivists who claim that non-Western cultures are far less warlike. See contributors to Chan et al. 2001. However, it is doubtful if such claims are grounded in fact. For instance, Snyder shows that many non-Western primitive cultures are in fact quite belligerent in anthropological accounts. Snyder 2002. Johnston further argues that the ancient Chinese strategic culture was characterized by “a *parabellum* or hard *realpolitik* view.” Johnston 1995, 61. As Sawyer points out, “the Warring States clearly displayed an ethos of violence and its admiration, contrary to much verbiage about China’s pacific heritage and pervasive deprecation of martial values.” Sawyer 1998, 111. At the same time, more and more Europeanists have argued that the European system is in fact far from a state of war of all against all. See, for example, Schroeder 1994; Ruggie 1998; Oslander 2001. Holsti thus argues that the European system is more properly characterized as “a society of states” with shared norms while the ancient Chinese system is “a system of states” where power politics reigns supreme. Holsti 1999, 284–86. I agree that the relative prevalence of Machiavellian tactics may be explained by norms. But it may also be explained by the difference between self-strengthening reforms and self-weakening expedients. Most notably, European domination-seekers needed defeated states as allies and thus could not kill enemy soldiers *en masse* like Qin. For a more detailed discussion of both culture and norms, see Hui forthcoming.

97. Machiavelli 1994, *The Prince*, chap. 12.

cally stronger armies this way, Machiavelli had already observed that mercenary troops, as with allied forces, exhibited “cowardice” and were “useless” in terms of fighting capability.⁹⁸ Mercenary troops could not be trusted to engage in tactical maneuvering, and quasi-independent military entrepreneurs could not be trusted to support one another. Wars were therefore “limited in a very real sense—namely in the restricted ability of armed forces to carry out the grand strategic or political aims ordered by their rulers.”⁹⁹

Mercenary armies were also extremely expensive in terms of costs. When the use of mercenaries was combined with the use of artillery, the costs of war became so high that both the French court and the Habsburg house were constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. Ordinary revenues only “dribbled in small amounts throughout the year”¹⁰⁰ and so could not meet the monthly bills demanded by military entrepreneurs. When rulers could not pay—which happened often—mercenary armies would mutiny and military entrepreneurs would surrender to the enemy. To raise higher revenues, the French court and the Habsburg house did not reform their tax structures; instead, they turned to contraction of loans and sale of offices. Having little faith that kings and princes would repay their principals and interests in full, capital-holders typically demanded that rulers sign away both the yield and the administration of future ordinary revenues for years on end.¹⁰¹ Hence, while such fiscal expedients no doubt provided ready cash for immediate campaigns, they further alienated future ordinary revenues and dragged these states into ever-escalating fiscal crises in the long term. The sale of offices also created structural corruption, as venal officials were in privileged positions to pocket significant portions of the national wealth. The sale of offices further complicated efforts to develop clever strategies and stratagems, as clever ideas had lower chances of getting adopted and implemented in a venal system than in a meritocratic system.

Together, the use of costly mercenaries, contraction of unsustainable loans, and sale of public offices fundamentally undermined—if not negated—efforts to increase relative capabilities. Although European domination-seeking states generally could win wars against weaker neighbors, these states rarely could consolidate conquered territories. Moreover, as great powers did not have the administrative capacity to mobilize resources from their own populations, they also could not make conquests pay. Because even the most powerful states had severe difficulty mobilizing the resources of war, securing decisive victories, and consolidating conquests, international competition was significantly tempered in early modern Europe. Wars thus “repeatedly ended in restoration of either the status quo or a close ap-

98. *Ibid.*, chaps. 12, 13.

99. Black 1994, 67.

100. Kaiser 1990, 20.

101. For more elaborate analyses of these fiscal expedients, see Ertman 1997, chap. 3; and North and Thomas 1973, chap. 10.

proximation of it,"¹⁰² and survival was rarely at stake except for small political units that were not recognized as sovereign territorial states.

If self-weakening expedients hindered domination while self-strengthening reforms would have facilitated it, then why did European rulers adopt self-weakening expedients? It is noteworthy that Charles VII of France had embarked on nascent self-strengthening reforms before the onset of the early modern period. During the Hundred Years' War, France was so severely beaten that Charles VI accepted the king of England as his heir before he died in 1422. But the Dauphin Charles did not relinquish his claim to the throne. In his struggle to reclaim France, Charles VII established the first standing army in Europe, the *Compagnies d'Ordonnance* (twenty companies of heavy cavalry formed by French knights in 1445). He also imposed drastic increases in direct and indirect taxes. If France had carried forward such self-strengthening measures, then the European trajectory might have been more similar to the ancient Chinese trajectory.

However, Charles' policy package included other elements that were to have lasting consequences. France had earlier adopted mercenary forces from England. Charles created the standing cavalry, but mercenaries continued to serve in the infantry. Equally importantly, Charles adopted an earlier French practice of selling public offices.¹⁰³ When Charles's successors set their ambitions on Italy in 1494, they turned to the easier measures that involved reliance on intermediate resource-holders, rather than the harder measures that would have required administrative reforms to improve the court's extractive capacity. Although the self-weakening nature of various expedients became increasingly apparent over time, it also became increasingly difficult to reverse course: sold offices could not be relinquished without huge compensations; and contracted loans could not be redeemed without full payment of principals and interests.¹⁰⁴ Through international competition, moreover, France's self-weakening expedients were spread to other European states, in particular France's top rival, the United Habsburgs. The competition between France and the Habsburgs (first the United Habsburgs and later Habsburg Spain) thus witnessed a peculiar kind of balance of power—one better characterized as balance of relative weaknesses than balance of relative capabilities. As Kennedy puts it, "the two contestants resembled punch-drunk boxers, clinging to each other in a state of near-exhaustion and unable to finish the other off."¹⁰⁵

This scenario began to change in the mid-seventeenth century, when Brandenburg-Prussia—a late developer less burdened by various self-weakening expedients of established great powers—embarked on internal balancing moves

102. Gulick 1955, 39.

103. This leads to another question: why did such self-weakening expedients exist in Europe but not in China? See Hui forthcoming.

104. Brewer 1989, 24. As North puts it, because institutions involve transaction costs, there is no guarantee that international competition would discipline actors to switch from inefficient to efficient measures. North 1990, 16, 93, 99.

105. Kennedy 1987, 58–59.

through administrative reforms. Similar to Qin in ancient China, the “little Brandenburg” that was badly exploited in the Thirty Years’ War emerged a century later as the “mighty Prussia” that prevailed over Austria in 1740.¹⁰⁶ Russia similarly pursued self-strengthening measures and defeated Sweden in 1709. Faced with the rise of previously weaker states, Austria was also compelled to adopt some self-strengthening measures.¹⁰⁷ As in ancient China, these self-strengthened states in Europe pursued opportunistic expansion and colluded to partition Poland.

International competition became further intensified in the Revolutionary era. The French Revolution overthrew not just the *ancien regime*, but also centuries-old self-weakening expedients. Revolutionary France could then pursue comprehensive self-strengthening reforms that were common in the late Warring States period but unprecedented in the early modern period: direct rule was installed; universal military conscription was introduced; and taxation was nationalized and rationalized. The introduction of universal military conscription, in particular, allowed France to enjoy multiple advantages of higher fighting capability, larger army size, and much lower war costs. Moreover, the revolutionary principle of meritocracy allowed Napoleon to rise to prominence. Napoleon was a genius not only on the battle front, but also on the diplomatic front. He was able to organize most of Europe for war against a single isolated foe in various instances. With coercive mechanisms and strategies that more closely resembled those in the ancient Chinese system, the Napoleonic Empire was able to sweep through the continent, conquer weaker states, and make conquests pay. At the height of its strength in 1810, Napoleonic France was on the verge of taking Europe onto the ancient-Chinese trajectory.

Nevertheless, even the Napoleonic Empire lived in the shadow of a self-weakened past. The late pursuit of self-strengthening reforms and the legacy of self-weakening expedients stacked the odds against France. First, while Qin enjoyed access to a large repertoire of coercive measures that had been accumulated through several centuries, Revolutionary and Napoleonic France had to innovate them more or less from scratch. Second, Qin’s reforms and strategies were not revolutionary but merely surpassed those of other states in terms of comprehensiveness and institutionalization, thus allowing Qin not to appear too threatening for many decades. In contrast, France’s revolutionary innovations made it an unmistakable threat to all, thereby triggering a stronger balance-of-power response.¹⁰⁸ Third, ancient Chinese states generally had relatively high levels of administrative capacity, so that Qin could incorporate conquered states as prefectures and counties. But European

106. Downing 1992, 143.

107. Among these earlier self-strengthening programs, Austria’s reforms were the most half-hearted. This is not surprising given that Austria was split from the United Habsburgs.

108. Critics of balance-of-power theory point out that balancing against Napoleonic France was very weak. See Rosecrance and Lo 1996; Schroeder 1994; and Schweller 1994. However, to the extent that Great Britain was determined to check France for even self-serving reasons, balancing was much stronger in early modern Europe than in ancient China.

states typically had much lower levels of administrative capacity, making it harder for the Napoleonic Empire to consolidate conquests. Fourth, Qin pursued opportunistic expansion and final unification by relying on its own national resources. France, on the other hand, was heavily reliant on allies to contribute human and material resources, leaving it highly vulnerable to their defection.¹⁰⁹ Fifth, the heavy reliance on allies for the wherewithal of war also created significant disincentives against the pursuit of Machiavellian tactics—as today’s enemies might well become tomorrow’s friends. The result was that disbanded Spanish troops could launch a guerrilla war against the French occupation, and Prussia, Russia, and Austria could engage in rapid buildups after they turned against France. This is in sharp contrast to Qin, which did not need allies and could therefore slaughter defeated armies *en masse* to prevent losing states from making a speedy recovery. Lastly, the early use of mercenaries and the contraction of loans had led Napoleonic France’s top rival, Britain, to develop the public credit system at the turn of the eighteenth century. Although the public credit system did not exist in the ancient-Chinese repertoire of self-strengthening reforms, it should be treated as such because it involved enhancement of administrative capacity to directly mobilize resources from the general population. In an international system where “preparation for war [was] a financial question,”¹¹⁰ wealthy Britain enjoyed a significant upper hand over cash-tight France.¹¹¹ Britain could use its immense wealth to lure French allies, thus making France even more vulnerable to the balance-of-power mechanism.¹¹²

109. Although the French Revolution brought about fiscal reforms that significantly increased national revenues, France inherited from the Old Regime crippling national debts that brought about the revolution in the first place. Most notably, when Napoleon mobilized 600,000 troops to attack Russia in 1812, he relied on allies to provide half of the troops and other resources. In contrast, when King Zheng mobilized 600,000 troops to invade Chu in 226–223 B.C., he called on only Qin’s populations. The difference in extractive capacity is even more striking if one considers that France could well have had a larger population size (about 25 million) than that of all Warring States combined (about 20 million). For population estimates about ancient China, see Yang 1996, 54.

110. Hintze 1975, 192.

111. Hence, not all loans and credits are self-weakening. Britain’s public credit system was very different from the old regimes’ reliance on intermediate resource-holders, which did not involve enhancement of administrative capacity. There have been many studies on how the public credit system significantly enhanced Britain’s relative capability. See Brewer 1989; Ertman 1997; North and Thomas 1973; and Shultz and Weingast 2003.

112. It may be countered that this historical comparison is also confounded by other environmental conditions, in particular, geography, military technology, and culture. With regard to geography, Van Evera argues that “the geography of Western Europe, with its mountain ranges and ocean moats, is less favorable to conquest.” Van Evera 1998/99, 19. However, in the areas unified by Qin, there are also significant geographical barriers—including the Qin Ranges, Taihang Mountains, Yellow River, Yangtze River, and Huai River—which facilitated the emergence and consolidation of independent states in the first place. With reference to military technology, Gilpin argues that “the imperial unification of China by Qin was due to advances in the offense over the defense.” Gilpin 1981, 61. However, it severely strains credulity to argue that cold weapons in the ancient period would favor universal domination while sophisticated artillery in the early modern period would favor the defense. As for culture, it is argued that domination was inherently easier in ancient China because Chinese states were more culturally homogeneous. However, as Fairbank points out, “it would be an error . . . to imagine

While balance-of-power theorists believe that it was the mechanism of balance of power that defeated France, their critics charge that it was the mechanism of overexpansion that brought about Napoleon's demise. For instance, John Vasquez argues that "[b]alancing did not defeat . . . Napoleon; overexpansion did."¹¹³ However, this view misses a simple but critical fact: aspirants for universal domination rather than mere hegemony, such as Napoleonic France and Qin, inevitably had to attack bandwagons and neutrals. The question is not whether they should do so, but how to design the grand strategy. In short, neither of the two countervailing mechanisms alone can explain the European outcome; even the two mechanisms together cannot provide a sufficient answer. Rather, it is the conjuncture of weaker coercive mechanisms and strategies on the one hand and stronger balancing mechanisms and strategies on the other that explains the maintenance of checks and balances in Europe.

Conclusion and Implications

In sum, the theoretical framework of "dynamics of competing logics" provides a theory of international politics that can account for alternative trajectories and endogenous transformation. When international competition is seen as a process of strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination who employ competing strategies and are facilitated or hindered by competing causal mechanisms, the outcome of balance of power versus universal domination is not predictable a priori. While targets of domination are helped by the countervailing mechanisms of balance of power and rising costs of expansion, domination-seeking states may overcome such obstacles by self-strengthening reforms, divide-and-conquer strategies, and ruthless tactics. Self-strengthening reforms, in particular, critically shape relative capabilities and relative costs of war, thus providing the fuel for the coercive transformation of an international system.

The preceding analysis shows how the ancient Chinese trajectory unfolded according to this theoretical framework. In this system, domination-seeking rulers embarked on self-strengthening reforms right at the onset of system formation. As self-strengthening reforms allowed domination-seeking states to mobilize more resources of war, score more victories on the battlefields, and make conquests pay, their early pursuit tilted the competition toward domination-seekers. As territorial losses were common and even survival was genuinely at stake, states were compelled to constantly deepen their self-strengthening reforms and even to pursue

ancient China as an embryonic nation-state. We would do better to apply the idea of culturalism and see ancient China as a complete civilization comparable to Western Christendom, within which nation-states like France and England became political subunits that shared their common European culture." Fairbank 1992, 45. For a more in-depth discussion of these alternative explanations, see Hui forthcoming.

113. Vasquez 2003, 92; see also Rosecrance and Lo 1996; Schroeder 1994, 2003; and Schweller 1994.

dirty stratagems and barbaric tactics. In such an increasingly brutish and nasty world, the latecomer Qin could then achieve universal domination by pursuing the most comprehensive self-strengthening reforms and the most ruthless strategies and tactics.

In comparison, international competition was less intense for most of the early modern period. Although European rulers practiced balancing and counterbalancing, they rarely pursued ancient-Chinese-style stratagems and brutality against fellow Europeans. More importantly, the earliest domination-seekers adopted self-weakening expedients rather than self-strengthening reforms. With limited coercive capabilities and high war costs, wars were often indecisive, conquest was difficult, and the survival of sovereign states was rarely at stake. This scenario changed when Revolutionary and Napoleonic France eventually embarked on ancient-Chinese-style self-strengthening reforms and divide-and-conquer strategies. However, with the legacy of self-weakening expedients, Napoleonic France amassed much weaker coercive capabilities but faced much stronger balancing mechanisms. Paradoxically, then, it was the use of cowardly and costly mercenaries plus useless and dangerous auxiliaries as condemned by Machiavelli—that helped to deflect Europe from the Chinese trajectory.

Although Napoleonic France failed to dominate the European system, one should not overlook the fact that it came so close to succeeding against all odds. It is remarkable that even Europe, which lived in the shadow of a self-weakened past, eventually returned to the coercive trajectory. Although the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars brought about the Concert of Europe that tempered great-power competition, the Concert soon began to decay in the 1820s.¹¹⁴ Various self-strengthened states that defeated Napoleonic France again resumed opportunistic expansion. In the modern era, industrialization became the *sine qua non* for self-strengthening reforms. At the same time, developments in administrative and communication technologies significantly eased the mechanism of rising costs of expansion, thus extending the struggle for power from the European continent to the rest of the world. Britain exploited its industrial and naval power to build a global empire. Prussia accelerated its self-strengthening efforts and unified Germany. Japan in the Meiji era likewise embarked on an ambitious modernization program to pursue *fukoku kyohei* (rich country and strong army). Moreover, all these self-strengthened powers scrambled for colonial concessions around the world. As colonial outlets gradually disappeared at the turn of the twentieth century, international competition became intensely zero-sum. In such an increasingly competitive world, international-political life also became increasingly nasty, brutish, and short. In their struggles for domination, the Axis countries did not hesitate to resort to Machiavellian tactics. They not only practiced traditional mass killings of soldiers and civilians, but also created modern chemical and bacterial warfare. Fortunately, such stronger coercive forces were matched by stronger balancing efforts

114. Jervis 1982, 368.

and capabilities. With relative balance between coercive and countervailing forces in the process of international competition, the outcome of system maintenance was thus reproduced at the end of the World War II.¹¹⁵ Many students of international politics misinterpret such a contingent outcome as evidence for some universal law. But history has always been open-ended in the past and is likely to remain so in the future.

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115. In the postwar era, the motivation for opportunistic expansion that was common in both ancient China and modern Europe underwent significant transformation. Despite further increases in coercive capabilities, the European continent was transformed from a war zone into a peace zone. As a dynamic theory should explain both coercive and normative transformation, I will address the latter aspect in future work.

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