SEEING EYE TO EYE: A CONSTRUCTIVIST EXPLANATION OF SINO-AMERICAN COOPERATION

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo
London School of Economics
and Political Science

Introduction

The nature of the relationship between the US and China as the latter marches towards superpower status has become one of the most discussed topics in the field of International Relations (IR). Some scholars, building on the realist tradition in general and power-transition theory in particular, have argued that war between both powers is inevitable as China reduces its power differential with the US. They point out that rising powers tend to challenge the superpower of the day, the only notable exception being the US’ peaceful replacement of Great Britain as the greatest power in the international system early in the 20th century.¹ This view approach to Sino-American relations assumes enmity when not confrontation in the strategic interaction between both.

On the other side there are authors who maintain that China is a status-quo power that wishes to integrate itself within existing institutions and norms. These scholars point at the current liberal international order and argue that even though it reflects American preferences it is also beneficial for most other states. This, coupled with Beijing’s need to concentrate on economic growth for the foreseeable future, has led Chinese leaders to accept the prevailing order to extract as much benefit as possible from it.² Authors purporting this view presuppose collaboration and cooperation between the US and China, in the case of the former to socialize the latter in its worldview and in the case of Beijing to extract maximum benefit from the prevailing international system.

Irrespective of one’s approach to the study of present and future Sino-American relations it seems clear that hitherto cooperation has dominated their interactions at the bilateral and multilateral levels. At the time of writing a Strategic and Economic Dialogue has followed from six rounds of Strategic or Senior Dialogue and five rounds of Strategic Economic Dialogue. In addition, both countries have been working together in multilateral efforts to curb the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea. Furthermore, the US and China have been cooperating to manage the closely-linked threats of proliferation of WMD and failed states since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Finally, Washington and Beijing officials have met on several occasions to reach an agreement on climate change. Predictably this has led some analysts to talk about a G-2 of superpowers working together to solve the major dysfunctions in the international system.³

The above would serve to prove that socialization of China has thus far worked. Material considerations on the part of Chinese leaders have led them to pursue integration within the current


³ This concept was first coined in C. Fred Bergsten and Caio Koch-Weser, ‘The G-2: A New Conceptual Basis and Operating Modality for Transatlantic Economic Relations’ in Werner Weidenfeld et al., From Alliance to Coalitions: The Future of Transatlantic Relations (Gutersloh: Berstelmann Foundation, 2004).
international system. These leaders are increasingly willing to take their share of responsibility in managing the system in return for material gains for their country. For their part, American political and economic elites wish to help China integrate in the existing world order for two reasons. Firstly, this would reinforce this order, which reflects American worldview and interests. Secondly, peaceful integration of China would avert the costs of Cold War-style bipolarity. Hence, socialization of China is a win-win situation for both Washington and Beijing.

However, the argument that Sino-American relations are defined purely or mostly in materialistic terms seems incomplete. As Callahan explains, a number of Chinese scholars have been working on the links between China’s traditional concepts and the country’s foreign policy. Furthermore, a Chinese IR theory based on China’s traditions and the country’s relations with the rest of the world is likely to emerge as long as the country’s rise continues. This indicates that within China there is an acknowledgement that the country’s culture, history and traditions matter when explaining its foreign policy.

The same is the case in the US. There are abundant accounts of how American history and ideology have shaped Washington’s behaviour towards other countries. Also, the most oft-used theories since the inception of IR as a discipline, Realism and liberalism, have their origins in the works of American or US-based academics mostly. This is relevant because theories set both what to think about the phenomena observed and how to study it. Most notably, existing IR theories emphasize three levels of analysis, the three images proposed by Kenneth Waltz in *Man, the State, and War*, not necessarily shared by China or other non-Western actors.

Hence, ideas do matter in the conduct of foreign policy. From this follows that they also matter in the study of bilateral relations between states - in the case of this article relations between the US and China. The notion that non-material factors matter in IR is of course not new. The English School and Marxism had already drawn our attention to this. However, constructivism has been the main driving force behind the move beyond material explanations of IR phenomena over the past two decades.

In this article the author will draw from constructivist accounts of how socially constructed identities and interests shape actor behaviour. The author will argue that cooperation between the US and China is primarily explained by each country’s self-image and the interests associated to their respective self-image. Even though material considerations are important in understanding the relation between China and the US, their identities are the main driver behind cooperation between the two. Each country’s self-image is a result of their particular culture, history and interactions with other actors. In this article cooperation is implicitly assumed to exist. What this article seeks is to elaborate on American and Chinese corporate and mutual social identities to show how Sino-American cooperation is primarily the by-product of ideas, culture and history rather than material consideration.

This article is organized as follows. In the first section the author will explain the strand of constructivism being used throughout the article. Then, the author will lay out the self-image and associated interests of the US. Afterwards, the paper will explain China’s self-image and the interests based on it. In the fourth section the author will illustrate how each country’s self-image and interests have resulted in cooperation between them. A brief concluding section will serve to summarize the argument of the paper.

**Constructivism: Beyond material explanations**

Constructivism moves beyond materialist explanations of IR phenomena and draws our attention to the role that ideas play in shaping actors’ identities and interests and, consequently, actions. This does

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not mean that constructivism denies the existence of a reality (structure) in which human being exist. However, for constructivists this structure is mutually constituted by actors (agents) in a collective process. This is summarized in Wendt's well-known axiom "anarchy is what states make of it."7

Even though authors using very different theoretical and methodological approaches have been lumped together as constructivists, there are nevertheless some common features which are relevant to this article.8 To begin with, ideas are given primacy over material factors. Ideas shape the self-image of actors as well as their interests. From this follows that ideas therefore shape how these actors see the world, including the way in which they see others. Hence, ideas also affect interactions between actors. Ideas are prioritized over material structures because the meaning of the latter is ultimately contingent upon the former.9 Realism and liberalism purport that structures conform a natural world which is independent of how it is perceived by actors. In contrast, constructivism asserts that structures exist insofar agents attach particular meanings to them. These particular meanings derive from the ideas held by actors.

Closely related to the above point is the notion that agency is essential. Some constructivists such as Onuf would argue that agents create structures through their subjectivity. Others, including Wendt, would maintain that structures do exist but agents construct how they are understood. But all constructivists believe that agents are at least as relevant as structures. In fact, constructivism maintains that agents and structures are mutually constitutive and therefore they cannot be disentangled. As Adler put it, “the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world” (in italics in the original).10

A final element most constructivists share and which is relevant to this paper’s argument is the idea that identities are multiple. First, there is an identity intrinsic to each actor which stems from the domestic environment of that actor. At the same time there is a second identity that exists only within the context of an external social structure in which actors interact among themselves.11 Wendt labels the first identity “corporate” and the second one(s) “social”;12 both identities interrelate to shape the interests of an actor.13 If one identity follows domestic developments within an actor, that second one is contingent upon fluctuating external social structures, and both serve to shape interests, one would believe that identities and interests ought to be in constant change. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily the case because this interaction process may instead serve to reinforce previous identities and interests.14 In this article the author will analyze the corporate identity of China and the US, as well as their mutual social identities, starting from their first encounters in the late 18th century.

Given the centrality of identities to understand actors’ interests and behaviour to fulfill those interests it is necessary to know how those identities are created. In the case of corporate identity, it refers to “the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality.” In the case of organizations, such as states, the corporate identity is constituted by its individuals, physical resources and shared beliefs and institutions.15 Wendt believes that the corporate identity is singular and is used by the actor to

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14 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 331-34.
assert its self-image. Zehfuss, however, disagrees. She maintains that corporate identities are contested. This would necessarily mean that they are multiple, since otherwise there would be societal agreement on the corporate identity of the state. In this paper, however, the author sides with Wendt and considers corporate identity as given in the sense that it does not depend on exogenous factors. Even though a state’s corporate identity might be contested at the domestic level, the state will in most cases be able to define and present its corporate identity to the international system through its government.

Social identities refer to “sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object.” Differently from corporate identity, social identities are multiple. Whereas the corporate identity serves the actor to identify itself as an individual, social identities not only serve for this purpose but also to position the actor in relation to others. Thus, social identities shape the role of actors. Social identities may be continuously redefined through interaction processes. Alternatively, they may remain stable in determined contexts, which is not natural but rather the result of an actor’s practices. Wendt later introduced two other categories, ‘type’ and ‘collective’ identities. Nevertheless, Cederman and Daase note that these two categories can be treated as subclasses of social identities.

Identities can change through the interaction between an ‘alter’ and ‘ego’ engaged in a relational process in which social learning takes place. Identities, however, can also be sustained as a result of the process of interaction between ‘alter’ and ‘ego’ in the form of self-fulfilling prophecy. ‘Alter’ and ‘ego’ may treat each other as if a certain response is expected from the other. They will then learn a set of shared ideas that produce those responses. By taking these ideas as the starting point of their interaction process ‘ego’ and ‘alter’ will tend to reproduce them, therefore sustaining the identities (and interests) constructed from this interaction process. In this article the author will argue that the identities of China and the US have to a large extent remained stable since their first encounters. As a consequence their relations are today characterized by cooperation rather than competition.

On the issue of how identities shape actions Lebow argues that the relationship between constitution and causation is reciprocal and fluid. Identities and their consequences can be placed along a continuum. At the higher end we find identities that make require some type of behaviour and almost preclude other actions from being taken. At the lower end of the continuum identities have little impact on the actions of an actor but may be used to justify certain policies. In the middle of the continuum we encounter identities that make certain behaviour more likely. Accordingly, a state’s corporate identity and perception of another state may make certain policies inevitable or more likely if the identity and perception are towards the higher end of the continuum. For example, for most of the Cold War the identities of the Soviet Union and the US made enmity and minimal collaboration unavoidable. In contrast, the author argues that the identities of China and the US have been edging towards the higher end of the continuum. Therefore, cooperation between both is moving from likely to almost inevitable if placed in Lebow’s continuum.

In the following two sections the author will establish the corporate identity of, respectively the US and China, as well as the social identities resultant from the interaction between both powers. The author will also describe the interests of Washington and Beijing resulting from their respective corporate and

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19 Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, p. 224.
21 Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, pp. 326-35.
social identities. The author will explain that the corporate and social identities of both countries have remained relatively stable overtime.

American identities: Exceptionalism and the special relationship with a great power

The role of ideas about self in determining American interests abroad has been explored before. Hunt explains that George F. Kennan and William Appleman Williams produced in the 1950s the seminal work on the links between American ideology and its foreign policy. He himself considers that understanding the ideas shaping the US as an actor is essential to understand its foreign policy. Hunt focuses on continuities in US identity and foreign policy behaviour since its inception. Similarly, Rowley and Weldes acknowledge that some American identities, even though they can be rearticulated as a result of developments in the international system, can also remain unchanged.

There is an agreement that the fundamental, unchanged idea sustaining Washington’s self-image overtime is American exceptionalism. The idea of American exceptionalism predates the foundation of the US as an independent state. In his 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” John Winthrop said that settlers moving to what is now the US “shall be as a city upon a hill”, since “the eyes of all people are upon” them and they should “be made a story and a by-word through the world.” One of the bases of American exceptionalism can be already discerned in this sermon: the settlers colonizing North America were sent by God to spread Puritan Christianity in the New World, serving as a guiding light to all people discontent with the Church of England. These settlers should therefore serve as an example of moral behaviour to enlighten the rest of the world.

The second basis of American exceptionalism is the notion that the US has the power to create a new world different from the exhausted old one. In the pamphlet “Common Sense”, released in 1776, Thomas Paine introduced this point by arguing that the inhabitants of the British colonies in America had in their power “to begin the world over again” by distancing themselves from the discredited norms guiding life in Europe. Paine was mainly concerned with the advocacy of independence from Britain. Hence, he referred to the creation of a separate state with different values such as individual liberty and equality among all members of society. Nonetheless, in “Common Sense” we find the seeds of the idea that the US can and should create a new world.

Self-identification as an exceptional power has produced two core interests surviving all Democratic and Republican administrations. The first one is creation and expansion of a US-centred international system. The underlying rationale behind constructing such a system is extension of American values and ideas, which are deemed to be superior and therefore preferable for other polities as well. The US is not impressing its own values on alien cultures but rather liberating them by introducing them to a more advanced stage of political, economic and social organization. This is related to the idea that the US should enlighten other countries and has the strength to create a more advanced world.

24 Hunt, Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 5.
25 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
US-centred international system

Interest in creating a US-centred international system is not only related to American magnanimity. Expansion of American values and ideas produces one welcomed goal in the form of increased soft power. Coined by Nye, the phrase “soft power” refers to “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”31 Soft power is a cost-effective way of consolidating American exceptionalism because it does not require the use of brute force to expand the new system based on democracy, individual freedom and social equality. Rather, soft power is a by-product of the appeal of culture, political ideas and policies of an actor.32 Hence, the idea of American exceptionalism advances effortlessly through its acceptance by third parties.

Creation of a US-centred internationally system has produced two types of policies. The first one is forceful expansion of the ideas, values and interests associated to American exceptionalism. This was first articulated through ‘Manifest Destiny’, which served as a conceptual framework for justifying westward expansion of the US until reaching the Pacific Ocean. Columnist and Democratic Party politician John L. Sullivan coined this phrase in 1839 to justify annexation of Texas and to denounce third parties opposed to America’s “natural” right to take control of this and other territories.33 The concept was later used to justify expansion beyond the North American continent. In 1898 President William McKinley referred to Manifest Destiny to validate annexation of Hawaii by the US.34 Afterwards this concept was also raised to defend colonisation of the Philippines in order to civilize its population.35 Hence, Manifest Destiny was used as a conceptual device to provide ideological support to the expansion of American interests’ concomitant to American exceptionalism.

More explicit was the ‘Monroe Doctrine’, a policy introduced in 1823 that survived until at least the Reagan administration. The Monroe Doctrine was first used to warn European states against expansion in the Americas. However, by the 1890s it had evolved into a policy of American domination of Latin America, based on American belief of superiority over Latinos.36 According to President Theodore Roosevelt the US had the right to intervene in the region if any Latin American government incurred in “loosening of the ties of civilized society”, that is, Washington had the obligation to bring or protect civilization in the rest of the Americas.37 During the Cold War American leaders, whether Democratic such as President John F. Kennedy or Republican such as Ronald Reagan, again referred to the Monroe Doctrine, in this case to deter expansionism of Communism in the region.38 This implicitly signified Washington’s aspirations to protect its liberal ideas on what was considered as its own backyard.

The last reincarnation of American exceptionalism followed the end of World War II. NSC-68, signed by President Harry S. Truman in September 1950, compared the nascent conflict between the Soviet Union and the US to a confrontation between a “fanatic faith” and freedom, with the US portrayed as the leader of the free world. This report suggested hard internal and external balancing of the Soviet Union as well as conducting offensive operations to defend and extend American interests.39 Arguably it was Ronald Reagan the American president who most openly used the concept of American

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32 Ibid.
exceptionalism. In his farewell address to the nation he referred to the US as the “shining city upon a hill”, almost paraphrasing Winthrop’s words some 350 years before.\(^40\) When President George W. Bush referred to advancing freedom as “the mission that created our nation” the link to expansion of the ideals embodied in American exceptionalism could not have gone unnoticed.\(^41\) According to Stephanson, the behaviour of all American administrations since World War II ended has been consistent with protecting and advancing the interests originating from the idea of exceptionalism, reinforced by the unchallenged position of the US as the leader of the West.\(^42\)

A second policy associated to the creation of a US-centred international system is the development of international regimes supportive of American values, ideas and interests. Regime theory posits that international regimes produce convergence of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures among participating actors. Regimes survive changes in power relations and interests and create obligations leading to predictable behaviour and, subsequently, a certain degree of stability.\(^43\) To maximize functionality regimes should be created by a hegemon invested both in maintaining the regime and in providing public goods. These are two of the key tenets of Hegemonic Stability Theory, which also maintains that when the hegemon works in the interests of other actors it is also benefitting itself. This results from the fact that a hegemon will accrue the most benefits from a regime that ultimately is reflecting its principles and interests.\(^44\) As Keohane argues, the presence of a hegemon is more important in the formative phases of a regime than to maintain it, since regime-based cooperation can function in a non-hegemonic international system.\(^45\) Hence, even if a hegemon declines it will still be served by the regime that it modelled following its ideas and material needs.

The US first tried to shape the international system to its benefit following World War I, with the creation of the ill-fated League of Nations. Nonetheless, it was not until the end of World War II that Washington was able to craft a set of regimes reflective of its interests. On the economic sphere liberal and later neo-liberal pro-market policies were universalized through the World Bank, the IMF and the GATT/WTO. On the security realm Washington created a system of alliances with the cornerstones of NATO and bilateral agreements in East Asia. Finally, on the political realm the UN took from the League of Nations and has worked to promote liberal principles such as democracy and human rights.\(^46\) With the end of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism Fukuyama famously proclaimed the “end of history” and the future universalization of liberalism.\(^47\) In short, Washington has been successful in creating a liberal world order reflective of the values and interests associated to American exceptionalism. Even if liberal values and practices are unlikely to become universal in the near or mid-term, if ever, today most countries purport liberal economic policies and political freedom around the world has been rising over the past three decades.\(^48\)

Conversely, the US has disengaged from or refused to participate in institutions when the practices have moved away from their original models or policy-makers have deemed them too intrusive on

American sovereignty. Hence, the US did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol even though it was one of its main architects. Similarly, the US is the only UN member along with Somalia yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child despite the active role American officials played in drafting it. The US has also refused to join the International Criminal Court. Washington even prohibited military and financial aid to states that recognized its jurisdiction. Washington is not a party of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Land Mines Convention and the Law of the Sea Convention either. Even in the case of NAFTA and broader regional integration in North America, dominated by American values and practices, American policy-makers have opposed deepening integration to avoid a loss in legal and political autonomy.

**The US perceives China: A special relationship with a great power**

States construct social identities as social objects, that is, while taking the perspective of others. Social identities are therefore contingent upon the interactions of a self with an Other. Identities produce interests that subsequently shape behaviour. Hence, we can infer that an Other has the potential to mould the actions of an actor through its actions and even by the simple fact that it exists. Hence, to explain Sino-American relations we ought to understand both the corporate image of each power and their respective social identities that result from their interactions. In the case of the US we have to comprehend how it perceives China and what social identity results from this perspective. As the author will show in this section, two underlying themes have informed American perceptions of China and the related social identity: the idea of a Sino-American special relationship and the notion of China as a great power.

The first recorded contact between the US and China occurred in when the American merchant ship *Empress of China* arrived in Guangzhou, then known as Canton, in 1784. From the onset Americans entertained the idea of having a special relationship with China. Benjamin Franklin, the first well-known American Sinophile, admired the Chinese civilization, which he held in more esteem than the European. For its part, Thomas Jefferson envied China’s isolation from Europe, which he hoped the US could replicate. The Asian giant therefore provoked admiration among American most prominent minds of the time.

However, the perception of China as a more advanced polity was not shared by all Americans. During the nineteenth century a division between admirers and critics of China that still persists to this day first appeared. China enthusiasts pointed out both at Chinese millennial history and trade prowess as evidence of the country’s advanced civilization and work ethic. This group thought that the US should remain friendly with China and protect it from foreign interventionism. They regarded China as a declining power that nonetheless had the potential to regain its status as one of the most advanced nations in the world.

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53 Benjamin Franklin published a series of papers entitled ‘From the Morals of Confucius’ in his weekly magazine *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1737. In these papers he described Confucius philosophy with admiration.
Differently, another group of Americans came to regard the Chinese as backward and inherently inferior to the US. This group regarded China in particular and Asia in general through the lenses of what came to be known as Orientalism. The concept was popularized by Edward Said in his book of the same title, and refers to how Western societies have created an image of the East as an Other with characteristics in opposition to the West. The assumption is that the East is static and uneasy with social and political progress, which makes it backward. In contrast the West is dynamic and intrinsically superior. Groups within the US purporting these views therefore sought to “civilize” China through the forces of democracy, the free market and modernisation.

The convergence of these two conflicting views of China during the nineteenth century resulted in one specific interest: the US should guide the Asian country on the path towards regeneration. This interest was the natural confluence of the two images of China just described. It came from the idea that the US was the only great power with pacific and selfless intentions towards China. The US ought to contribute to Chinese development and integration into the family of nations. American elites argue that this would ensure American influence over a reformed China and allow Washington to help a transformed country regain its historical status as a great power. The US would benefit from free trade with China in return. The Open Door policy introduced in 1899 reflected American interests. Secretary of State John Hay wrote two notes to the other powers with significant economic interests in China. On the one hand, the notes asked for equal opportunity for trade in China. On the other hand, Washington asked for respect towards China’s territorial integrity. The notes reinforced the idea of Sino-American special relationship.

American perceptions of China started to shift in the early decades of the 20th century. In 1912 the Qing Dynasty collapsed, bringing to an end over two thousand years of Imperial rule. In the late years of that decade and the earlier part of the next one a Chinese nationalist movement seeking to transform Chinese civilization along Western ideas developed. This nationalist movement was anti-Japanese and anti-European as well. Hence, American elites again perceived themselves as different from other foreigners, seeking to help China to modernize peacefully and thus not being rejected by the Chinese. Simultaneously, Washington thought that China was on the path towards becoming a democratic great power that would help to maintain security in Asia. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, ordered to send aid to China to fight against Japan in 1939, even before the US entered World War II. He also invited nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to participate in Allied conferences during the war and pressed for China to be included in the Security Council of the UN while discussions to create the organisation were underway.

The victory of the Communist forces in the Chinese civil war brought a brief period of enmity between the People’s Republic of China, today generally acknowledged as the continuation of historical China, and the US. Nonetheless, this period lasted less than twenty years. By the 1960s the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations were making gestures to signal Washington’s willingness to engage China. President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong had their historic meeting in Beijing in 1972. Six years later, the Carter administration announced normalization of diplomatic relations with China. The rationale behind this rapprochement process was more closely linked to the idea of China being a great power more than a special relationship. Washington regarded China as a balancer towards the Soviet Union. Concurrently, normalization of bilateral relations would reinforce Deng Xiaoping’s reformist agenda. If not political liberalization, economic modernization would at least

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56 Ibid. p. 34.
58 Hunt, op. cit., p. 170-1.
allow China to regain its status as an economic giant. American policy-makers once again saw themselves as altruistic defenders of China’s right to reclaim its status as a great power, as well as a driving force behind China’s modernization.

During the post-Cold War period perception of China as a rising great power has been the driving force behind American social identity towards Beijing. Concurrently, the notion of a special relationship has regained strength. Following the 1989 Tiananmen incident, President George H. W. Bush wrote to Deng to emphasize that he sought to maintain the “very good relations” between their two countries. Bush thought of China as an essential actor to ensure stability in post-Cold War Asia and did not want to antagonize Beijing more than required. Afterwards the Clinton administration, for all its rhetoric regarding human rights and democracy in China, sought economic reform in China with the goal of Beijing being admitted into the WTO, which would both reinforce the country’s economy and better integrate in the international system. Clinton also announced a policy of “comprehensive engagement” with Beijing. This was aimed at establishing a bilateral dialogue on issues of mutual concern. Hence, once more we can see that Washington’s self-image as a result of interactions with China was that of a benevolent force behind Beijing’s integration in the international society.

The social identity of the US with respect to China during the George W. Bush administration is explained in a section below. A short note on the Obama administration’s perception of China and the related self-image is also included in that section. Before, the author will now turn its attention to China’s corporate identity and social identity in the interaction process with the US.

**Chinese identities: Tianxia, reform and revolution, and the respectful great power**

Similarly to the case of the role of ideas in shaping American foreign policy, there is extensive literature on the impact of Chinese policy-makers’ beliefs and images on the foreign policy of their country. Nonetheless, it was not until 1999 that Gerald Chan produced the first wide-ranging analysis of Chinese perspectives on international relations and how they affect Beijing’s interactions with other actors. Chan states that, given China’s long and rich history, its understanding of international relations and its foreign policy behaviour are bound to be affected by a culture dating back several millennia. Recent attempts to develop a Chinese theory or school of IR taking into account the country’s history, culture and values indicates the role of identity in shaping China’s perceptions of the international system.

Most students of Chinese foreign policy and international relations would agree that *tianxia* was the most powerful concept driving China’s view of the world throughout most of its history. *Tianxia*, literally “all under heaven”, refers to the world itself as a geographical space, the people in their capacity as the ultimate owners or representatives of that world, and a world institution as the political system to govern that world. Following *tianxia*, the Chinese see the world and relations among its units in terms of “world-ness”. That is, the world as a whole, defined by its trinity of geographical, psychological, and

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political worlds, is primary and smaller units such as states are subordinated to tianxia.\textsuperscript{71} The concept of tianxia produces a worldview in which the world itself (or international system in Realist terms) is a single entity both in material and non-material terms.

Tianxia describes how Chinese leaders have perceived the international system throughout history but does not explain the self-image that these leaders have of their role in that system. Tianming and tianzi are the interlinked ideas that summarize how China saw itself within tianxia. Tianming means “mandate of heaven” and was first developed early in the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC). Tianzi refers to the “son of heaven” and was the title vested upon the emperor of China until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Irrespective of the power of China as a country and the power of the emperor within the country, the tianzi was considered the embodiment of the tianming. The emperor derived its natural position as ruler of tianxia from the fact that his or her mandate was bestowed by tian (Heaven).\textsuperscript{72}

Nonetheless, Heaven cannot only confer power on the ruler. The “son of heaven” can also be removed from its position if it fails the people, one of the three basic elements of tianxia. According to Mencius, the people decide whether the ruler is providing for their material needs and is behaving ethically. If the ruler fails on any of the two accounts Heaven will remove him or her from its position and bestow power on a new ruler. When Mencius says that “Heaven sees according as the people see; Heaven hears according as the people hear” he is referring to the idea that it is the people, not the ruler, who ultimately represent Heaven’s wishes.\textsuperscript{73} The rule of the emperor is thus dependent on the will of the people.

The idea of tianxia produced one interest which still pervades Chinese thinking to this day. This is the development and preservation of a harmonious international system in which all pieces are in place. Such a system allowed the emperor to provide material prosperity to the Chinese population. The system also legitimized the emperor’s ethical and moral prowess, since a stable international system was tantamount to acceptance of the emperor’s position. When China was the most powerful country in its sphere of influence this was articulated through a tributary system. The system bestowed Chinese benign rule and protection on “barbarians” in exchange for regular tributes. Hence, even when Chinese power was disputed by others Chinese leaders still sought to maintain the tributary system or the pretence that it existed.\textsuperscript{74}

The author will return to this interest below. Before it is necessary to introduce a second idea central to China’s self-image since the gunboat diplomacy of the 19th century and the subsequent “hundred years of national humiliation” introduced Beijing to the modern world. This idea is revolution and reform. China’s first substantive contacts with Western powers made it aware of the need to dispense with the old China and create a new one based on the assimilation of foreign principles and norms such as equality or sovereignty.\textsuperscript{75} This awareness was radical inasmuch it broke with millennia-old Confucian notions of order as the organization principle within and between societies. The idea of revolution and reform made China to self-identify as a revolutionary or reformist state, depending on the leader of the time. This led to an interest which has survived the changes in political system and governments that have taken place in China in the 20th and early 21st centuries. This interest is modernisation.

\textsuperscript{75} Chan, Chinese Perspectives on International Relations: A Framework for Analysis, p. 64; Qin, ‘Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?’, p. 331.
As already explained, the creation and preservation of a harmonious international system is directly linked to the idea of tianxia. The tributary system that characterized Chinese relations with the outside world when it was a great power was the articulation of Chinese emperors’ desire to fulfil their mandate as tianzi. The tributary system therefore brought legitimacy, but it was also a means for self-protection. When outside powers did not respect the tributary system China made use of forceful conversion to preserve tianxia. Hence, forceful conversion provided security. Thus, the tributary system and forceful conversion were the two policies employed by Chinese leaders throughout history to achieve the goal of having a harmonious international system.

The tributary system dates back to the unification of China under the Han Dynasty in 206BC, and survived until the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). According to Fairbank and Teng, the system was “a natural outgrowth of the cultural pre-eminence of the early Chinese” and “served as a medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy”, akin to a solution to the problem of how to organize the world.76 The rationale behind the tributary system was sinocentrism – the idea that China was both at the centre of the world and superior to the rest of the world.77 China, the Middle Kingdom or Zhongguo, was at the pinnacle of civilization and had the mission to inspire those “barbarians” living outside its boundaries.78 However, the existence of barbarians did not mean immediate self-other relations. Rather, barbarians were an (uncivilized) extension of the self that need not be conquered.79

Harmonious relations were both the ideal and the end-result of the tributary system. The development of this system allowed barbarians to show their acceptance of Chinese superiority. Acknowledgement of this superiority would create a harmonious (international) society, since heaven (tian, and by extension its representative, the Chinese emperor) would wish for men to live happily through conforming to the cosmic harmony (tao).80 The proper position within the tao for barbarians was that of willingly accepting the superiority of the Middle Kingdom, which the tributary system granted. Hence, foreign powers were expected to become Chinese tributaries were they to have contact with China.81 Not doing so would breach the principles of the harmonious international system concomitant to tianxia.

Besides embodying the notions of sinocentrism and harmonious relations, the tributary system also had a practical function. The tributary system served as an institutional framework to manage relations between the Chinese empire and foreign entities, with China still at the centre.82 As Fairbank and Teng explain, by the time of the Qing Dynasty the tributary system had acquired a fundamental commercial basis.83 In fact, in the case of Southeast Asia the tributary system was regarded historically as an instrument to order trade, since Southeast Asian countries posed little security threat to China.84 As complex interdependence theory would predict, the institutionalization of trade relations between China and its Southern neighbours brought relatively peaceful relations among them. The Qing Dynasty also presided over a period of relative stability extending from the late 17th century to the middle of the 19th century. Hence, the tributary system as an institution was successful in bringing peace and prosperity to China.

Forceful conversion was the policy pursue by Chinese leaders when the tributary system was threatened or disregarded. Wang explains that tianxia could be united through conquest were it
divided. The objective was not the creation or expansion of a Chinese empire but rather the preservation of *tianxia*.\(^6\) Forceful conversion of barbarians not wishing to be part of *tianxia*, usually through war, might seem to run counter to the traditional Chinese approach to war, expressed by Sun Tzu with the words “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”\(^6\) However, Sun Tzu himself wrote that war was acceptable if no other alternative had worked before.\(^7\) That is, forceful conversion was not intrinsically flawed as a policy; it was merely the least preferable option.

Sun Tzu even considers that righteous war, that is, war to suppress violence or quell disorder, is admissible. As Johnston explains, the idea of righteous war pervades the *Seven Military Classics* that form the basis of Chinese strategic thinking.\(^8\) *Tianxia* brought order to the world through a Sino-centric international system. Hence, if we follow Chinese traditional texts forceful conversion of foreign entities disavowing the *tianzi* was perfectly acceptable. The tributary system might have been preferable, but war was certainly not frowned upon. This is akin to today’s talk about the preference of soft power over hard power to extend a state’s influence.

**Modernisation**

Revolution and reform has been the second idea behind China’s corporate identity to remain constant since it first became prominent in the mid-19th century. Chinese leaders became aware of the relative backwardness of their country as a result of the Opium War and the open door policy.\(^9\) Revolution and reform have been the two sides of the same ideological coin that has created an interest in modernisation. Hence, the goal of Chinese leaders for over 150 years has been modernisation; revolution and reform have been both the ideology behind this goal and the overarching strategies to achieve them. Revolution and reform have sometimes coexisted in time, each espoused by competing groups. However, for the most part one or the other has reigned and become official ideology under different names.

Revolution was the prevailing policy in two crucial periods of recent Chinese history: the May 4th or New Culture Movement and the advent of Maoism. The former officially began in 1919, when students gathered in Beijing to protest the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Chen Duxiu, founder of the magazine *New Youth* and one of the critical figures of this movement, sought “to advocate both Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science”, which made necessary “to oppose Confucianism.”\(^9\) The movement had its roots in the disillusionment of many in China with the failure of the 1911 Revolution to eliminate foreign influence over the country’s politics and economy. Proponents of the movement were also deeply nationalistic and wanted to remove Chinese officials considered to be aligned with foreign powers. They thought that China could only become a powerful country again through a fundamental change in its political, economic and social structures.\(^9\) Hence, China needed a revolution to become a powerful country once more.

Maoism borrowed from the May 4th Movement. Indeed, key figures of the movement were instrumental in setting up the Communist Party of China (CPC) and influenced Mao Tse-tung. From the 1930s onwards, Mao called for the destruction of old customs and forms of production. Mao sought to build a new system based on the principles of Marxism and Leninism adapted through the CPC.\(^9\) Maoism could be considered a separate ideology, but in this article it is understood as an epitome of the

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\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, ch. 1.
revolutionary ideology. As a policy, Maoism meant the elimination of those perceived to be enemies of the new societal and economic system based on equality. It also meant strengthening nationalism through, among other things, the defence of Chinese sovereignty. This last theme still informs Chinese foreign policy today. The Great Leap Forward implemented and the Cultural Revolution were two of the clearest examples of Maoist policies and their goals: economic modernization of China and eradication of foreign ideas within Chinese society. Similarly to what 4th of May Movement supporters advocated, Mao believed that this was the key to eventually return China to its great power status.

Reform has been the driving ideology in China’s path towards modernization since Deng Xiaoping introduced Socialism with Chinese characteristics. Similarly to Maoism it can be understood as both an ideology and a set of policies. The author refers to the latter here. Even though it was not the first reformist movement, the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 being the earliest one directed from above, Socialism with Chinese characteristics has been the most enduring movement since the introduction of this ideology.

According to Deng Xiaoping, the goal of Socialism with Chinese characteristics is to develop the productive forces to advance the economy. In other words, the objective is to modernize the Chinese economy. This was done through economic reform and opening up to introduce market principles. However, the state still maintains ownership of a large part of the production units. This is considered the best path for a developing country such as China to modernize, since Marxism was articulated in reference to different societal and economic conditions. The set of policies implemented are reformist instead of revolutionary because they will serve to make the existing economic system evolve in incremental steps. As for the political system, the single-party system is maintained. Similarly, no sweeping societal changes are introduced. Hence, modernization is introduced in incremental stages. No revolution is necessary, since China will slowly become a powerful country.

China perceives the US: Powerful yet respectful

The social identity of the US in relation to China has been explained above. In short, the US has sometimes perceived China as a superior polity, at times as an inferior entity, and occasionally both simultaneously. Nonetheless, the US has invariably seen itself as being in a special relationship with China and for the past few decades, if not longer, has considered China as a rising great power. What about Beijing’s perception of the US?

Once the Chinese started to distinguish between all the barbarians coming from the West, a sympathetic perception of the US as a modern and powerful nation yet respectful of China emerged. This perception has informed Chinese views of the US ever since. Certainly, perceptions of the US as a menacing imperial power have coincided with periods of enmity between Beijing and Washington. Nonetheless, this image has for the most part been short-lived. And even during these periods Chinese perceptions of the US have been mostly positive, at least at the elite level. Shambaugh has referred to this perception as “beautiful imperialist”, referring to the fact that in China there has always been a powerful constituency inclined to view the US in a positive light.

From the 1830s onwards, Chinese authors first articulated the view of the US as modern power yet respectful of their country. In China’s eyes the US was not a threat to the country’s sovereignty in the same way as Britain, France or Japan. In his influential “Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms” scholar Wei Yuan portrayed the US, and especially George Washington, in this positive light. Together with Hsu Chi-yu’s “Brief Survey of the Maritime Circuit”, Wei’s work served to imprint on Chinese minds the notion that the US was friendlier to China than any of the other great powers to which his country had been forced to trade with. This perception of the US as a benevolent, or at least less malevolent, country endured until the early 20th century. Statesman Zhang Zhidong, one of the pre-eminent

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93 Ibid., ch. 2 and 5.
politicians during the later part of the Qing Dynasty, maintained that the US was one of the few outside powers that could be counted on to respect Chinese sovereignty.97

The view that Chinese elites had of the US was translated into one specific interest: to use the US to balance other great powers that wanted to seize Chinese territories. Wei Yuan China should “use the barbarians to control the barbarians”, and no other barbarian was more useful for this than the US.98 Hence, General Li Hongzhang sought American help to contain British, French and Russia expansionism in East Asia in the 1870s.99 Later on, in the early 20th century, General Yuan Shikai tried to enlist Washington to avert Japanese aggression in Manchuria.100 Even though American military help was hardly forthcoming, China sought to at least obtain economic aid.

The strengthening of Chinese nationalists in the early 20th century produced a split on Chinese perceptions of the US. On the one hand, revolutionary nationalists believed that the roots of their country’s backwardness was the imperial system. Hence, this group maintained a positive image of the US consistent with the portrayal of Wei Yuan and Hsu Chi-yu. Sun Yat-sen, the foremost revolutionary leader and one of the key figures in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty in October 1911, thought of the US as a friend of China. Furthermore, he thought that Washington was likely to help his country to become a modern (ie, non-imperial) state.101

On the other hand, reformists maintained that China’s weaknesses was a result of foreign intervention. This group believed that their country could again become powerful through self-reliance and elimination of foreign influences. For reformists the US was a threat to China, no different from other foreign powers seeking to advance their own interests. They argued that Washington had refrained from sending troops or gunboats to help China fight against other countries. American colonization of the Philippines further strengthened the reformists’ negative perception of the US. Liang Qichao, the most influential reformist scholar, was instrumental in shaping this view of the US as a threat to China.102

These two different perceptions informed two seemingly irreconcilable ideas. The Chinese Civil War, fought between the Kuomintang and the CPC between 1927 and 1950, reproduced this ideological battle.103 The Kuomintang, which had had Sun Yat-sen as its first leader, maintained a fairly positive perception of the US. As a result, Washington helped to sustain its war effort throughout most of the conflict. For its part, in the beginning the CPC, which was founded as a result of the 4th of May movement, had a negative perception of the US. Mao’s depiction of the US as “the most murderous of hangmen” was representative of this view.104 Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Mao entertained the idea of diplomatic accommodation with the US until mid-1949.105

The enmity that followed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China was short-lived. The view of Chinese leaders regarding the US started to shift after the Korean War and especially as a result of the Sino-Soviet split. Similarly to Wei Yuan and Hsu Chi-yu, Chinese Communist leaders perceived the US as powerful country yet respectful of their own. In contrast, the Soviet Union, even though also a Communist country, was perceived as an immediate threat. The rapprochement process

97 Ibid., pp. 190-192.
100 Ibid., p. 202
103 This is not to say that the war was connected to each party’s respective view of the US, only that each group was representative of one of the two perspectives on the US mentioned above.
started in the early 1970s and sped up towards the end of the decade. Beijing once again perceived the US as the lesser of its foreign threats. Yet again, this led to an interest on using Washington to balance another power.\textsuperscript{106} In the 1980s China also became interested in using American economic power to advance modernization of China.

Chinese perceptions of the US following the end of the Cold War followed the pattern of considering Washington a great power considerate of China’s importance. Inevitable frictions due to the rise of China and the hegemonic position of the US have not impeded Beijing’s positive image of Washington. Chinese leaders have shown an increasing assertiveness in the international stage, directly correlated to China’s growing economic and political clout. When Jiang Zemin, Secretary General of the CPC between 1989 and 2002, first visited the US in 1997, he stressed the need to develop a “strategic partnership” between both countries.\textsuperscript{107} As Liu Ji, a close advisor to Jiang, emphasized in a speech at Harvard University, China and the US had no geographical disputes, had had mostly positive relations, and were complementary in the sense that China would not pose a threat to the US’ status as the greatest superpower and Beijing sought to learn from Washington in its path towards modernization—all familiar themes in Chinese perceptions of the US. Liu concluded that there was no reason to prevent cooperation between both powers.\textsuperscript{108} Beijing increasingly perceived Washington positively because the latter was recognizing its special position, as shown by Clinton’s willingness to engage in bilateral dialogue with Jiang. This reinforced China’s self-image of a unique power, which pleased Chinese leaders.

Thus far the author has delved on the continuities and changes in American and Chinese identities until the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In the next section the article will engage with the mutual social identities of the US and China towards each other during the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, when changes in leadership took place in both countries. It will be shown that these identities are informed by the respective corporate identity of each power, as well as by their historical social identities towards the other.

**American and Chinese mutual social identities during the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century**

The previous sections have served to explain the key self-images underpinning the American and Chinese respective corporate identities, as well as their mutual social identities. In this section the author argues that the rise of China and the continuing hegemony of the US have worked together to reinforce these identities in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

**Corporate identities**

American exceptionalism continued to be the most prominent self-image of the US during the Bush administration. The president himself was well-known for his numerous references to God and his actions being guided by God. Lines such as “you can’t put freedom and liberty back into a box” or “and we believe that freedom is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind”, aphorisms such as the “Axis of Evil” and policies such as spreading democracy and freedom, as articulated in the 2002 National Security Strategy, have all clear links to American exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{109} In the case of the Bush administration, American strategy borrowed from the Monroe Doctrine rather than consolidation of US-centred American regimes. The Bush Doctrine, based on unilateralism, pre-emptive strikes and the expansion of democracy, was first implemented to stop terrorism, similarly to the way that President Kennedy sought to prevent the spread of Communism. The Bush Doctrine was also another example of Washington seeking to protect its sovereignty without feeling bounded by international law.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., pp. 35-43.  
President Barack Obama’s ascription to the notion of American exceptionalism has been put into question because of a nuanced answer he gave when explicitly asked about it during a NATO summit in France. Nonetheless, before the Democratic primary race began he openly ascribed to this idea. Furthermore, when he referred to Washington being “ready to lead once more” in his inaugural speech there were clear parallels with the belief in the US as an example for the rest of the world. Yet, there are clear differences between Obama and Bush. Even though a clear pattern of how the former’s foreign policy might develop has yet to appear at the moment of writing this paper, it seems that Obama will return to fostering the role of international institutions. This would suggest that Washington would again resort to shaping international regimes, such as the one on climate change, to advance its worldview.

In the case of China reform has carried on as the main idea behind the country’s corporate identity. President Hu Jintao has lauded the reform and opening up process initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Beijing has continued the process of progressive marketization of its economy. Since its accession to the WTO in December 2001 China has reduced barriers to trade, allowed the renminbi to appreciate by 15% and partially liberalized the financial sector. Hu’s emphasis has been on reducing inequalities and improving wealth distribution. These are two of the pillars of building a Harmonious Society.

Concurrently, tianxia has experienced a significant boost among the country’s elites over the past few years. This followed decades in which this idea seemed to have been eliminated from China’s self-identity. But Hu’s emphasis on building a Harmonious World based on multilateralism, cooperation, harmonious coexistence and a reformed UN links to the idea of having a harmonious international system. This system would allow the CPC to provide for the Chinese population, the same way that in the past the tributary system let the Emperor do so. Reproducing the tributary system is not possible due to the realities of the current international system. Instead, Beijing now seeks a greater role in existing international institutions, such as the IMF, or the development of new institutions where it occupies a pivotal position, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the Six-Party Talks.

Social identities

American perceptions of China as a great power with which it maintains a special relationship has been reinforced since the turn of the century. In his second visit to China within four months, in February 2002, Bush labelled this country a “great and enduring civilization” and “a great nation, a nation that has not only a great history, but an unbelievably exciting future” to which offered American “friendship” to aid in its development. In his third visit, in November 2005, Bush talked about a “really special relationship” and a “very special relationship” on several occasions. On his last trip to China, during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Bush once again referred to a “great nation” with which the US had a “strong relationship”, while remembering that both countries shared “a long history” from the time

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when the *Empress of China* travelled to China. Furthermore, when Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick first invited China to become a responsible stakeholder, a phrase that gained traction during Bush’s second term, he also mentioned that the US would help China to do so. Here we can infer the reproduction of Washington’s historical interest in helping China integrate in the international system and modernise. However, the interest moved beyond helping in Beijing’s modernisation into having China as a “global partner” engaged in the resolution of international issues.

The positive perception of China has not shifted with the advent of the Obama administration. In his first major speech on China Obama implicitly recognized the Asian country as a great power and explained that “the relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century”, so the “partnership” between both countries should be underpinned by the importance of their bilateral ties. Earlier, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had stressed that her country and China had “to show leadership to the rest of the world” as a good means to solve the major problems affecting the international system. Obama’s and Clinton’s words demonstrate that the idea of a special relationship between two great powers is now embedded in the American psyche. Washington’s self-image when dealing with China is turning increasingly into that of a relationship between two equally special great powers, as it did during the times of Franklin and Jefferson.

With regards to China’s perception of the US and subsequent self-image, during the Bush administration Beijing felt that it was unequivocally treated as an equal. During his visit to the US in October 2002 Jiang talked about “two great countries” that should develop a “strong and friendly relationship” to be able to deal with international issues. As for Hu, during his first state visit to the US, in April 2006, he compared both countries and argued that they had maintained friendly relations since the *Empress of China* sailed to China and now had a relationship between equals. In addition, Hu called the US “the most developed country in the world.” He also stressed that both countries were of “significance influence” in the world and should therefore work together to promote a stable international environment. Afterwards, in December 2007, Hu said that the two countries were interacting at a “strategic level”, working together to solve major international issues. During the first US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, held in Washington in July 2009, State Councillor Dai Bingguo delved on the historical nature of improved Sino-American relations. The implication of these and other remarks is that China now perceives itself as almost an equal partner to the greatest power. Even though elites believe that the country still needs to continue modernizing, as seen in the previous subsection, Beijing has now gained the respect of Washington.

Causal consequences: Cooperation

Earlier in this article the author introduced Lebow’s idea of the relationship between constitution and causation being placed in a continuum. In the case of Sino-American relations, identities and their corresponding policies are in the middle end of the continuum and edging towards the higher end. For centuries the US has self-identified through the prism of American exceptionalism, while China has an

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even longer history of relying on the frame of Tianxia. This has made each of them self-identify as a special great power. Consequently, the importance of Sino-American relations has increased along with the growing perception that in the near future both countries are poised to become the two greatest powers. The US is already considered the sole superpower. China will soon become the second largest economy in the world and its military capabilities are expanding rapidly. A similar situation during the Cold War led to relations based on enmity and proxy wars between two superpowers. Today, Washington and Beijing maintain a Strategic and Economic Dialogue based on two separate dialogues started during the Bush administration. In addition, both countries have worked together to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks. They are also collaborating on issues such as failing states, terrorism, proliferation and climate change.126

The experience of the Cold War might explain Washington’s and Beijing’s desire to cooperate and prevent conflict. However, as this paper has shown elites in both countries have a long history of positive perceptions. Cooperation between the US and China is therefore better explained by their corporate identities and mutual social identities. Almost since The Empress of China arrived in Guangzhou most members of the American elite have considered China a great power whom they had to help modernize. For its part, Chinese leaders have generally conceived of the US as a great power respectful of their country’s history. Hence, cooperation has become almost inevitable when both of them have developed into the greatest powers in material terms by having, among other things, two of the three largest economies and the two largest militaries. Following Lebow, the relationship between the identities described in this paper and policies based on collaboration is moving towards the higher end of the continuum. These self-images and mutual perceptions have become so entrenched in the psyche of American and Chinese elites that protracted diplomatic confrontation has become unthinkable and the threat of war between both countries is negligible.

Washington’s interest in maintaining a US-centred international system is working together with Beijing’s interest in preserving a harmonious world conductive to its modernisation. These interests have a long history and are entrenched in the ideational structure of, respectively, China and the US. Together they reinforce Sino-American preferences for cooperation, since the international system in its current form allows both countries to materialize their interests. Therefore, cooperation is not only the result of each country’s interests but also a consequence of the interests linked to these identities. Following Wendt, the identities and interests of Beijing and Washington are being continuously reinforced as interactions between both buttress their respective identities and are conductive to achievement of their interests. This reinforces the positioning of the current behaviour of both powers towards the higher end of Lebow’s continuum. As a consequence, behaviour other than cooperation is becoming less likely.

Conclusion

This article has served to show that improving Sino-American relations are to a large extent explained by the frames of reference that both countries employ both to self-identify and to perceive the other. Beijing and Washington elites constructed a favourable perception of each other in the late 18th century and early 19th century that has remained remarkably consistent until today. These mutual perceptions have worked together with the respective corporate identity of China and the US to make cooperation between both powers predictable. Chinese and American elites increasingly acknowledge this. Accordingly talk of the G-2 is not longer circumscribed to academic circles and has now entered public discourse. World Bank President Robert Zoellick and Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin have argued for the G-2 to lead the economy back to growth.127 Hawkish former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski thinks that the G-2 should deal with all sorts of security issues because it brings together “the two countries with the most extraordinary potential for shaping our future.”128 The Strategic and Economic Dialogue first held in July 2009 is the clearest embodiment of this up to date.

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As constructivism purports, ideas and actions are mutually constitutive. Once American and Chinese mutual perceptions of two amicable great powers has become policy through cooperation at the bilateral, regional and global level it will become increasingly difficult for them to perceive the other as a threatening Other. This happened briefly following the inauguration of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Recurrence in the future is unlikely. As this article has shown, Sino-American mutual benevolent perceptions have a long history. Reinforced by cooperation, the most likely outcome is that relations between the current hegemon and the rising great power will be defined by increasing amity and collaboration.