The American Tributary System

Yuen Foong Khong*†

This article employs the idea of the tributary system—most often associated with China’s international relations from antiquity—to interpret how America relates to the rest of the world. I argue that the United States has instituted the most successful tributary system the world has ever seen. As the hub or epicenter of the most extensive network of formal and informal alliances ever built, the United States offers its allies and partners—or tributaries—military protection as well as economic access to its markets. In return for all its exertions, the tribute America seeks is straightforward: first, that it be recognized as the power or hegemon, and second, that others emulate its political forms and ideas. With both tributes in hand, the United States finds equanimity; it and the world are safe, at least from the United States’ point of view.

America has more in common with China than is generally recognized. In this article, I employ the idea of the tributary system—most often associated with China’s international relations from antiquity—to interpret how America relates to the rest of the world (ROW). I argue that the United States has instituted the most successful tributary system the world has ever seen. As the hub or epicenter of the most extensive network of formal and informal alliances ever built, the United States offers its allies and partners—or tributaries—military protection as well as economic access to its markets.¹ Through an equally impressive array of international institutions and organizations, many of which it created, the United States transmits and imposes its values and its preferred rules of the game on the international

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¹ Tributaries, secondary states, subordinate states, and vassal states are the terms commonly used to describe those who send tribute missions to China, perform the requisite diplomatic rituals, and engage in trade. For the purposes of this article, I shall use the first two terms—tributaries and secondary states—interchangeably.
system. The ensuing economic and politico-military ‘orders’ are construed as ‘public goods’ provided by a benign American hegemony. In return for all its exertions, the tribute America seeks is straightforward: first, that it be recognized as the power or hegemon, and second, that others emulate its political forms and ideas. With both tributes in hand, the United States finds equanimity; it and the world are safe, at least from the United States’ point of view.

I elaborate on these arguments below and provide preliminary evidence in support of them. We begin with a discussion and critique of some of the most influential contemporary interpretations of America as an international actor, focusing on accounts of the US empire, the United States as the unipolar power, and as the chief patron of a system of client states. I suggest that while these accounts illuminate important aspects of the US–ROW relationship, they fail to emphasize the payback the United States wants in return for its exertions as the hegemon. This paves the way for introducing the idea of the tributary system, which takes hierarchy as its point of departure, but which emphasizes two insights not found in the existing accounts: the United States’ desire for recognition (by its tributaries) that it is the number one power, and for them (the tributaries) to adopt (US-style) liberal democratic norms and institutions. A discussion of the Chinese tributary system follows, focusing on six of its key characteristics. I then demonstrate how each of these features has parallels in America’s approach to world since 1898. Differences between the Chinese tributary system and that of the United States will also be discussed. The article concludes by spelling out the empirical/theoretical payoffs and implications of viewing US–ROW relations through the tributary lens.

Characterizing America

City upon a hill, the first new nation, promised land, special providence, indispensable nation: these are some of the time-honored and contemporary conceptualizations of how America relates to the ROW. The common theme is difference: how America, by virtue of its history, ideology, and geography is different from all other nations. From George Washington’s

warning about not following the Europeans in getting entangled in alliances, to John Quincy Adam’s adage about not looking for external dragons to slay, the United States in its early history portrayed itself as disdainful of the power politics that characterized Europe. For Walter MacDougall, the United States was a ‘promised land’ from its founding in 1776, to 1898; thereafter, it fell from grace as its growing power transformed it into a ‘crusader state’ for much of the 20th century.3

Consistent with MacDougall’s portrayal of the United States as betraying its promise, long range interpretations of the United States during the Cold War tended to be critical. George Kennan’s American Diplomacy was perhaps the most prominent and problematic.4 Delivered as a lecture series at the University of Chicago, the author of the famous X-article took his readers through six key episodes of American diplomacy, from the Spanish American War to World War II, in search of the fundamental drivers of US foreign policy. He found it in the legalistic–moralistic approach of the United States to foreign policy, which he assessed as lamentable and dangerous. For Kennan, as for all realists, national interest, not legalism–moralism, should drive policy. Kennan worried that a policy driven by the latter would endanger America’s security in the age of rivalry with the Soviets.

But he need not have worried: the general consensus is that legalism–moralism took a back seat to realpolitik in shaping America’s conduct during the Cold War. The Soviet, and later Chinese, threat concentrated American minds, and prompted it to respond to numerous perceived challenges to its power position, from Korea to Vietnam to Nicaragua to Angola. Concerns about the prestige and credibility of American power and looking to history to learn about the consequences of not exercising power in time trumped legalistic–moralistic thinking so much so that later editions of American Diplomacy had Kennan wondering if the United States should have traded some realpolitik national interest thinking for a bit more of legalism–moralism. During the Cold War, however, such long range interpretations gave way to more traditional diplomatic histories and cases-based studies by political scientists interested in building and testing theories.

As the Cold War came to an end, long-range interpretations of the United States returned in force. The demise of the Soviet Union meant that the United States became the sole superpower, or the unipolar power. Was it a unipolar moment or was it something more enduring? William Wohlforth probably had the better of the argument when he wrote that US unipolarity would last a generation, challengers would hesitate to take the United States

3 Walter McDougall, Promised Land, Crusader State.
on, and consequently, a stable order would ensue. While international relations scholars debated when and if unipolarity would give way to multipolarity, and whether ‘soft balancing’ against the United States was already in train, a different cluster of writings, anchored around the notion of an US empire emerged.

This was evident even before the September 11 attacks, but after the attacks, with the United States invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, characterizations of the empire impetus increased exponentially. The notion of an American empire is especially intriguing for the purposes of this article for three reasons. One, the empire idea has spawned a voluminous literature, suggesting that historians and political scientists see it as an apt description of the United States. Two, it is also theoretically richer than most other characterizations in that inherent in the concept are a variety of hypotheses about the motivations and forms of American foreign policy. Finally, it also bears the closest resemblance to my characterization of America as the hub of a tributary system; it is thus necessary to spell out their differences as well as to suggest in what sense, if any, the tributary characterization gives us more analytic traction than that provided by ‘empire’.

Narratives of the American empire often begin with the westward expansion of the New England colonies, the depredations against the native Americans, and the wars against Mexico that annexed Texas, New Mexico, and California, to the United States. Securing the continental land mass was a pre-requisite for turning America’s gaze outwards. As America came of age as a world power, overtaking Great Britain at the turn of century, it also began to acquire lands beyond its own continent. Like Britain and France during their heydays, the United States, beginning with the Spanish–American War, began acquiring colonies and over time, an empire. The United States entered World War II to prevent German hegemony over the European continent and Japanese hegemony over East Asia; success meant that the United States became the hegemon in both Western

Europe and East Asia. Between 1945 and 1991, it had to confront the Soviet Union, but the superiority of US political ideas, economics, technology, and culture (soft power) allowed it to outplay and outlast the Soviets. Aided by willing acolytes who provide it with hundreds of bases worldwide to project its power, the United States sits at the apex of a system of states more responsive to its will than that of most others most of the time. There is a case for the United States as the ‘New Rome’.9

Yet the empire lens faces several challenges. First, the notion of ‘empire’—conjecturing up images of Rome, Great Britain, and France—is fundamentally at odds with America’s sense of self. Peter Katzenstein puts it well: ‘Most Americans believe that the United States, by its history and very nature, cannot be imperial, let alone imperialist.’10 Without batting an eye, Katzenstein proceeds to advance his argument about the ‘American imperium’, in Europe and Asia.11 But the contrasts between the empire/imperium and the ‘City upon a Hill’ constructs are too stark for the former to be accepted by most Americans. That is why US officials almost never utter the ‘E’ world in public. Historians and political scientists who see some utility in the concept have also seen fit to qualify the ‘E’ word by adding adjectives before or after as in ‘inadvertent empire’, ‘empire by invitation’ or ‘empire lite’.12 These qualifications accentuate the acceptability and benignness of the American empire: unlike previous empires, subjects of the US ‘invited’ or consented to US domination. Or the United States stumbled into acquiring an empire and runs it with a ‘lite’ touch. From the Spanish–American war forward, the way the United States acquired and annexed territories or tried to stop others from doing so do not seem that ‘lite’ or ‘inadvertent’ to those at the receiving end. The question that arises is whether the guts of what it means to be an empire have been expunged by such qualifications.

A novel variant of the empire thesis is David Sylvan and Donald Majeski’s recent contribution viewing America’s relations with the ROW through a patron–client lens.13 What is new about their interpretation is they focus on the instruments accumulated by the United States over time; these instruments, they argue, became a decisive force in shaping US policies. Equally interesting is their categorization of much of the world into clients and

10 Peter Katzenstein, A World of Regions, p. 209.
11 Ibid., chapter 7.
nonclients of the United States, which we will later adopt as proxy indicators for US tributaries and nontributaries. Where I differ from Sylvan and Majeski is that in focusing on the instruments, they seem to lose sight of how and why the United States acquired those instruments of power. For them, ‘what is distinct about 1898 is the relative paucity of policy instruments.... Policymakers had few ready-to-hand responses for dealing with those problems...’ However, ‘[by] the 1940s and even more so by the 1990s, the situation was radically different....The United States then had a set of developed policy instruments which had become the standard way of interacting with....’

This focus on policy instruments begs the question of what was responsible for the advent and expansion of those policy instruments? The answer is of course the growth of American power. The cut off dates for Sylvan and Majeski are revealing. The year of the Spanish-American war, 1898, is seen by historians as the year signaling the United States’s coming of age as a great power. The early 1940s is when it becomes clear that it has overtaken Britain as the hegemon (in Europe), for without its intervention in World War II, Western Europe might have fallen to Hitler. The 1990s is of course when the United States inherits its unipolar position. In other words, Sylvan and Majeski are right to point to the development and availability of policy instruments, but what needs to be emphasized, in my view, is the growth of US power that made the acquisition of those policy instruments possible.

The empire and patron–client concepts, however, contain the seeds of a new and potentially fruitful idea: the United States as the hub or epicenter of a tributary system analogous to that of China’s during the Ming and Qing dynasties. No author writing in the above or other genres has argued for the relevance of the (Chinese) tributary system as a possible framework for understanding how America relates to the ROW. Neither has any of the new and important works on the Chinese tributary system (many published

14 Ibid., pp. 251–52.
16 Two important works that focus on hierarchy address some of themes discussed here but they stop short of using the tributary frame to analyze the United States. David Lake’s Hierarchy in International Relations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) argues that hierarchy is as important as anarchy as an ordering principle in international relations. Lake’s analysis focuses on the hierarchic nature of US relations with ‘subordinate’ countries; he views the United States as providing ‘order’ in exchange for its subordinates’ complying with, and according legitimacy to, the hierarchical relationship (pp. xi, 176). The argument presented here agrees with Lake on what is being exchanged, but adds a critical component that is absent from Lake’s model: the United States’ expectation that secondary states will emulate its political ideas and forms. The latter, encompassing political–psychological considerations, do not fit easily with Lake’s transactional model. Evelyn Goh, ‘Hierarchy and the Role of the United States in the East Asian Security Order’, International Relations of the Asia Pacific, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2008), pp. 353–77, provides a nuanced account of East Asia’s ‘layered regional hierarchy’, where the United States provides ‘hierarchical assurance’ in exchange for ‘deference’.

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by this journal) made the link between the latter and American foreign policy. That will be the purpose of this article.

Why have parallels between China and America’s approach to the world been so invisible? For a country steeped in the ‘exceptionalist’ mould, attempts to liken the United States to others (even and especially Europe!) are, to begin with, an uphill struggle. The ‘new world’, ‘the city on the hill’, and ‘special providence’ all construct an America that stands apart from the ROW, in both domestic and international politics. If American exceptionalism’s ‘other’ was Europe, imagine how many times more alien it would be to liken the United States to China. For most Americans, it would be an especially dissonant parallel, perhaps even anathema, given the political, ideological, and cultural differences between the two countries.

These challenges notwithstanding, the parallels between the Chinese tributary system and America’s approach to the world seem rather compelling to me. I want to make the case for exploring the extent to which the idea of an American tributary system can contribute to our understanding of American foreign policy. Such an exercise will not only allow us to appreciate the importance of hegemony and democracy to American policymakers, it will also allow us to connect some dots—such as America’s emphasis on maintaining prestige and credibility—that are often left far afield by existing frameworks. Those who find this exercise too alien or outlandish might view the analysis presented here as a ‘plausibility probe’, i.e. an attempt to ascertain the potential of the tributary idea (as applied to America) before embarking on a full fledged study. This article would have served its purpose if it stimulates discussion and debate about the novelty and applicability of the idea to our thinking about the United States in international relations.

The idea of an American tributary system, I suggest, subsumes many of the claims of the above approaches while adding crucial insights not emphasized by them. Like the above approaches, the tributary model begins with the idea of American hegemony. By eschewing the empire label, it carves out a middle ground between the ‘city upon a hill’ and empire conceptions of America. That is, it comes across as less discordant with American conceptions of the self than the empire thesis. This might be especially so if one

accepts that the Chinese tributary system was conducive to interstate peace and stability (as opposed to empire’s narrative of conquest and domination); the tributary idea appears less distant from the city on a hill view than at first glance.

More importantly, the tributary idea hones in on what America expects of the world, an insight not emphasized or elaborated by the other approaches. The insights that America wants its tributaries to acknowledge its pole position and emulate its political ideas and forms (in the same way that China expected its tributaries to emulate its cultural forms) are the distinct contributions of the tributary idea. In practice it is hard to separate these twin expectations: US claims to hegemony are based in part on its overwhelming material power and in part on its identity as a liberal democracy. How else is one to interpret America’s unvarying discourse about its having to provide ‘leadership’ or as the ‘indispensable power’, if not in terms of wanting the world to recognize it as the nation at the apex of the international power hierarchy? For a country that fought World War I to ‘make the world safe for democracy’ and whose Department of State issues yearly human rights reports to shame—and sometimes punish—those not showing the requisite respect for the rights of their citizens, is that not tantamount to asking others to adopt its liberal democratic ideas and policies? It is in the US DNA to want its interlocutors and allies to emulate its liberal democratic ideas. Examining this payback as tribute—what the United States wants in return for its exertions and the willingness of the secondary states to oblige—enables us to understand the ‘deep psyche’ of American diplomacy and the nature of its interactions with the ROW.

By now it is probably clear who I consider America’s tributaries to be: basically its formal treaty allies and informal strategic partners. The latter are mainly those who host US bases and military installations on their territory. In general, these are states that are aligned with the United States in a military-strategic sense, and are content to follow the American lead in economic, political, and military affairs. In effect, I have adopted the criteria used by Sylvan and Majeski to code ‘clients’ and ‘nonclients’ in

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18 Emmanuel Todd’s *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (London: Constaaable, 2004) touches on the notion of tribute via his comparison of the Roman and the US ‘empires’. For Todd, the tribute America exacts from its allies is primarily economic in nature, including profits from arm sales.


20 Not all of them are liberal democracies; many are not. See Appendix Table A1 for a list of America’s tributaries, ranked in terms of mutual affinity.
their rich and massive work on US foreign policy. I do so on two grounds. First, we are tapping a broadly similar phenomenon (patron–client or hub–tributary relationship) although we use different theoretical frameworks to characterize it; second, they have assembled a very high quality and comprehensive set of data that analysts of US foreign policy can profitably use to test their claims.

These considerations argue in favor of our adopting their list of US ‘clients’ as a proxy for US tributaries and their list of ‘US nonclients’ as a proxy for nontributaries. There is the risk that transposing the concepts this way may involve some loss of precision for the tributary concept, but for the present purpose, that is more than offset by the gains of relying on quality data not specifically generated for the tributary thesis. Going by their data, 40% of the world fall into the US ‘clients’—or tributaries—category. The breakdown of US ‘clients’ or ‘tributaries’ for the various regions of the world in 2005 are: Western hemisphere (97%), Middle East/North Africa (55%), Europe (43%), East Asia/Oceania (43%), Caucasus, Central and South Asia (13%), and Africa (7%).

The Chinese Tributary System

The Chinese tributary system is usually construed as a means of organizing and regulating China’s external relations from antiquity to the 19th century. It was a system that, according to John Fairbank, ‘handled the interstate relations of a large part of mankind throughout most of recorded history’. Generally seen to have reached its apogee from the 14th to the 19th centuries (the Ming and Qing dynasties), the system structured China’s cultural, economic, and security relations with both its neighbors in East Asia and countries from afar. In his recent study of the Chinese tributary system and its impact on East Asia’s international order, David Kang provides a succinct and historically sensitive elaboration of what the system was about:

[T]he tribute system was a set of institutional structures that provided an overarching framework for organizing external relations among political actors in early modern East Asia. A set of rules and institutions developed over time that regulated foreign diplomatic relations, social and economic interaction, and provided a clear sense of order to the system.

22 Ibid., p. 33.
23 Ibid., pp. 34–36.
25 David Kang, East Asia before the West, p. 81.
For the purposes of analysis, it is useful to disaggregate the ideas, institutional structures, and rules that constitute the tribute system into the following six features.

**Sinocentrism and Civilizational Greatness**

China saw itself as the ‘Middle Kingdom’, or the ‘Central Country’, the source and exemplar of public and private virtue, good governance, proper conduct, and intellectual wisdom. As these categories suggest, the basis of China’s claim to greatness and centrality was cultural, not material, even though China was bigger, stronger, and wealthier than all its neighbors. The Chinese writing system, Confucianism and its teachings, the ‘official examination system, and the imperial Chinese monarchy and bureaucracy’ coupled with ‘age, size, and wealth’, according to John King Fairbank, ‘all made China the natural center of the East Asian world’.26 From this assumption or myth about the superiority of Chinese civilization flow many of the other features of the Chinese tributary system. Trade with foreigners was an important part of the tributary system, but it was more central to the merchants—both foreign and domestic—than to the emperor’s court. The crucial thing about tribute for the foreign traders was ‘the material value of trade’.27 And while Chinese merchants may have also benefitted materially from such economic exchanges, the ‘important thing to the rulers of China was the moral [not material] value of tribute’.28

**Hierarchy, Inequality, and Hegemony**

The principle of sovereign equality was absent in theory as well as practice in the Chinese tributary system. Sovereign equality was not possible in theory and practice because, as Benjamin Schwartz put it, ‘The traditional Chinese perception of world order was not based simply on a devotion to the abstract doctrine that the world ought to be organized hierarchically about some one higher civilization but on the concrete belief that Chinese civilization was that civilization.’29 As such, those interested in establishing relations and trade

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28 John K. Fairbank, ‘Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West’, p. 139. See also John K. Fairbank, ‘A Preliminary Framework’, p. 13, where he order ranks the role of trade (material interest) as an ‘aim’ in China’s foreign relations: cultural and ideological attraction trumped trade for tributaries from the innermost Sinic zone, while trade trumped culture in relationships with the Outer zone (Russia, Holland, Sulu, etc.).
with China had to accept their secondary status. China stood at the apex of the system. As the dominant military and economic power, China was the hegemon of the East Asian international system. As international relations theorists have emphasized, hegemony is based not just on material preponderance; it also implies that the other states assent—implicitly if not explicitly—to the leadership role of the hegemon. So long as this hierarchy and China’s hegemony were recognized, interstate peace was likely.

Concentric Radiation

The first two features imply a third, on how others—the nonChinese—fit into the Chinese world order. Three main zones, radiating out from the center (China) could be distinguished: an inner Sinic Zone, or ‘Chinese Culture Area’, consisting of Korea, Vietnam, Liu-ch’iu (the Ryukyus), and Japan; an Inner Asian Zone (Mongolia, Tibet, and Central Asia), and the Outer Zone (Russia, Sulu, Portugal, Holland, and England). As should be apparent from the rankings, the zone one belonged to was based on proximity to Chinese culture, i.e. those deemed closest constitute the inner zone, while those farthest, were considered outer zone ‘barbarians’. The advantage of being in the inner zone was that the secondary state derived greater prestige (by being closer than others to the epicenter); it was accorded more tribute missions, meaning more opportunities for trade. Thus among the Qing tributaries in 1818, Korea was accorded four missions year, Lui-ch’iu once every other year, Vietnam once in two years, Siam once in three years, Burma once a decade, while Portugal and England were allowed to send tribute missions ‘at no fixed periods’.

Rituals and Tribute

A distinguishing characteristic of the Chinese tributary system is the set of rituals that secondary states are expected to perform when they seek relations with China. These rituals have been viewed as China’s way of regulating diplomatic relations with other states. The key rituals include (i) the sending of missions by secondary states to China (note the unidirectional path of travel); (ii) the foreign envoys’ performance of the kowtow ceremony before the emperor, ‘a symbolic recognition of their inferiority’ and ‘their

30 David Kang has defined hegemony as ‘a form of hierarchy, arising… from the acceptance by some states of the leadership and greater responsibility, influence and roles of another state [the hegemon]’. See David Kang, East Asia before the West, p. 22. See also Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 116, fn. 6.
33 Ibid., p. 11.
acknowledgement of their status as a ‘vassal’ state or tribe; (iii) the presentation of tribute, usually in the form of native goods such as gold, pearls, horses, elephants, with the emperor presenting his ‘vassals’ gifts, usually of greater value in return; (iv) investiture, a diplomatic protocol by which China recognized the status of ruler (of a secondary state) as the sovereign and legitimate king of his land. Even if the main payoff that the secondary states were after was what transpired after all these courtly ceremonies and enactments, i.e. trade and economic exchange, by partaking in these rituals, they reinforced the underlying norms and assumptions of (the other features of) the Chinese tributary system.

A Benevolent and Noncoercive Hub

While China’s wealth and military power made it the undisputed hegemon of its region, the emphasis on cultural attainment ‘dictated that the power to move others came from right conduct according to certain virtuous norms’. The source of those virtuous norms was Confucianism, with its focus on hierarchy in familial, interpersonal as well as international relations. Insofar as that hierarchy was observed, the ‘righteous life on earth’ could be cultivated, through education in the classical Chinese texts, with peace and harmony following. As far as the ‘barbarians’ were concerned, they were to be assimilated, if at all, by winning ‘their admiration for the grandeur of Chinese civilization through the virtuous and benevolent concern for their welfare given by the Son of Heaven. It was the function of the emperor to be compassionate and generous’. Prestige and moral recognition were what drove China to extend its beneficence; force was to be avoided.

The Domestic is the International and Vice Versa

The overarching myth of cultural superiority vis-à-vis foreigners was also a basis for domestic legitimacy, based on China as the fountainhead of civilization and moral virtue, and Chinese rulers as the sons of heaven and governors of tianxia. As many analysts have observed, even when the myth of Chinese superiority could not be reconciled with China’s actual diplomatic practice (as in China’s treating some Central Asian ‘barbarians’ as equals), it was crucial for it to be maintained for domestic political

35 David Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 56.
reasons. As Joseph Fletcher put it, ‘the myth of world suzerainty was a useful ideological instrument for ruling China’.38

The above characterization of the Chinese tributary system draws substantially from John Fairbank’s standard narrative. Important criticisms, however, have been raised against it. Chief among these is the question about the accuracy as well as the utility of the concept as a general characterization of China’s international relations. On the issue of hierarchy, for example, it has been claimed that in periods when China was weak, such as in the Sung dynasty, the principle was relaxed to the point where China actually paid tribute to others.39 The importance of culture has also been questioned. James Hevia, for example, juxtaposes the Chinese tributary system with the British empire, viewing their ‘encounter’ as that ‘between two imperial formations, each with universalistic pretensions and complex metaphysical systems to buttress such claims’.40

Variations of this theme are arguments looking to pragmatic and realist considerations, rather than culture, in understanding China’s foreign policy.41 Drawing on these themes, Zhang Feng has provided a stimulating social science assessment of the extent to which such deviations in China’s behavior render the tributary model not fit for the purpose of analyzing China’s international relations. According to Zhang, these deviations can be observed not just when China was weak, but also when it was strong. During the early Ming period, for example, the Hongwu emperor’s dealings with Korea (the model tributary) were motivated not just by ‘prestige and legitimation’ but also security concerns; contrary to the tributary model, the Chinese emperor resorted not just to persuasion, but also blackmail, when necessary.42 While acknowledging that Fairbank was aware of these exceptions, Zhang maintains they should have been incorporated into the model, for that would have made it better able to handle the more pragmatic, security, and power-based concerns of China.43

These works provide helpful correctives to the uncritical adoption of the Fairbank framework and they advance our understanding of the tributary system. By alerting us to the importance of variations in the salience and application of the tributary principles, they encourage us to be more precise about the period to which our claims apply. Following David Kang, the

42 Zhang Feng, ‘Rethinking the “Tribute System”’, pp. 563–64.
43 Ibid., p. 573.
portrait of the tributary system presented here is drawn from the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the system was at its apogee. Focusing on the latter is appropriate because we are interested in comparing China with the United States also at its apogee of power. We also do not need to assume that the above six features were invariant throughout the existence of Chinese tributary system, or that they are the only important ones. It would be sufficient if they manifested themselves with some consistency over time and they feature in the major accounts of the Chinese tributary system.

While the critiques of Fairbank add important insights—such as the appreciation of defense and the adoption of realpolitik practices—to our understanding of the actual workings of the tributary system, they do not, in my view, invalidate his main insight about the centrality of culture. The strength of Fairbank’s cultural model is that it provides a satisfactory answer to the question why China’s system of international relations failed so miserably to maintain its security in the face of the European incursions of the 1840s. If realpolitik or pragmatic security considerations had held consistent sway during the Ming and Qing dynasties, China would have had more than four centuries to prepare itself against military contingencies. It should have been able to give any potential aggressor a good fight. The fact that it could not do that when it collided with the European ‘imperial formations’ gives heft to arguments emphasizing China’s fixation on its cultural, not political–military, strength as the key to understanding its tributary system.

What was the impact of the tributary system on the international relations of East Asia? David Kang has argued that it brought China and the region four centuries of inter-state peace and stability. All six elements had a role in engendering that peace. Most in East Asia accepted, or at least did not contest China’s civilizational greatness. The Sinicized states voluntarily gave China what it wanted—acknowledgement of its hegemonic status and recognition of its civilization-based superiority. For China, that was in large part what the tributary missions, kowtowing, and investiture ceremonies were about. For the secondary states, it was that and more: they also got protection and commerce. In the main, they also bought into the ideational system and this can be seen in the way that they sought to replicate the tributary model among themselves and in their idealizations of what the model ruler/bureaucrat did. They were not, as David Kang put it, smirking behind China’s back. They internalized the Confucian values and sought to replicate them in their dealings with one another.

With the principles and effects of the Chinese tributary system laid out, it is now possible to ask: do they have their parallels in America’s approach to

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44 This is the main thesis of David Kang’s *East Asia before the West*, see pp. 1–2, 10–11, and chapter 5.

Table 1 Features of the Chinese and American Tributary Systems Compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>China</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sinocentricism</td>
<td>American exceptionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilizational Greatness</td>
<td>National greatness: standing taller, seeing further</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy/inequality</td>
<td>Hegemony/leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity based on cultural emulation</td>
<td>Affinity based on political–ideological emulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence/noncoercion</td>
<td>Benign hegemony/public goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomatic Rituals</td>
<td>Diplomatic rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribute mission</td>
<td>State visits and summits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kowtow ceremony</td>
<td>Annual Human Rights report/address congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investiture</td>
<td>Recognition/nonrecognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic–international nexus</td>
<td>Domestic–international nexus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son of Heaven/Ruler of Tianxia</td>
<td>Leader of the free world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the ROW? The task here is not to find exact parallels—an oxymoron and impossible task at any rate—but to discover plausible analogs in US diplomacy that resemble the elements and workings of the Chinese tributary system. Analogical reasoning does not prove; it functions best as a heuristic device for discovering new observations or hypotheses.46 For example, using the Chinese tributary analogy as a lens to examine US diplomacy allows us to ask, what might be the analog (in America) for the Sinocentrism/civilizational greatness assumption? Hypotheses we come up with can and should be assessed against the historical and contemporary experience of American diplomacy.

Table 1 presents, in a summary form, the US analog to each of the above features of the Chinese tributary system. The next section elaborates on each of these analogs.

**American Exceptionalism and National Greatness**

The American analog of Sinocentrism is an idea well known to students of American government and foreign policy: the idea of American exceptionalism.47 From John Winthrop’s ‘city upon a hill’ to Magdalene Albright’s ‘standing taller, seeing further’, America’s sense of self has revolved around its being special and distinct, especially on the moral and political–ideological fronts.48 Whereas China saw itself as the Middle Kingdom—a center of the universe conceit, the United States sees itself as the city on the hill—a

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sitting at the pinnacle of the world conceit. Like China, the basis of the US
difference was moral distance from the ‘other’. The New World’s ‘other’ was
the Old World, Europe, rife with inequality, autocratic rule, warfare, and
balance of power politics. And if the ideological basis of China’s moral
rectitude was Confucianism, then that of the United States was liberal
democracy, with a focus on individual liberty or freedom. Heavenly
interjection was also central to both of their political identities. While the
Chinese emperor ruled ‘all under heaven’ (tianxia) as the metaphorical Son
of Heaven, Americans saw their land and themselves as being blessed by
God and Special Providence. As President Andrew Jackson put it,
‘Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number
and has chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit
of the human race.’

Difference alone, however, does not qualify one for occupying center stage
or hub status in the hierarchy of nations. Greatness is also essential. China’s
claim to greatness and to being the epicenter to which tribute must be paid
was based on the discourse about the superiority of its civilization. Does the
United States also have a notion of greatness, and if so, what is it premised
on? Michael Hunt has argued that a vision of national greatness constituted
one of three major strands of US ideology by the turn of the 20th century.
That vision was premised on protecting and promoting liberty via an assertive
foreign policy.

While some initially worried that the pursuit of national greatness might
strengthen the executive to the point of threatening liberty within America,
those who argued the reverse—that a policy of national greatness would
actually enhance liberty within—won the debate by the late 1880s. By
then the United States had become a great power. Not surprisingly, visions
of national greatness captured the popular imagination and welding those
visions to protecting and projecting liberty seemed natural. Josiah Strong,
the evangelist, summarized the zeitgeist of the times well when he argued
that God was ‘preparing mankind to receive our impress’. As the remarks
of John Winthrop and Andrew Jackson’s suggest, no great mental leap is
needed in moving from the ‘city on the hill’ to ‘national greatness’—all one
needs is a rationale or justification connecting the two, and the United States
found it in the idea of liberty. American elites conjured up a view about the

49 Cited in Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University

50 Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 17–18 and chapter 2. The other two
strands of US ideology for Hunt are racial hierarchy and hostility toward social
revolutions.

intimate and mutually reinforcing relationship between liberty at home and liberty abroad. Hunt describes this mindset eloquently:

A policy devoted to both liberty and greatness... was far from being a dangerous and unstable union of incompatibles. Instead, greatness abroad would glorify liberty at home... Secure in their faith in liberty, Americans would set about remaking others in their own image while the world watched on awe.52

Pursuing national greatness, supporting liberty abroad to protect it at home, and remaking others in America’s image remain consistent and enduring themes in US diplomacy, as anyone familiar with US foreign policy, the speech-acts of US leaders, and the writings of US analysts will attest. From Woodrow Wilson’s fighting World War I to ‘make the world safe for democracy’, to the makeover of Germany and Japan into democracies after World War II, to winning the Cold War and becoming the unipolar power, to the Clinton administration’s (and before that Reagan and Carter’s) efforts at promoting and enlarging democracies, it is clear that the United States acted on these imperatives when it could.53 There are of course competing imperatives such as strategic necessity (Bahrain during the Arab Spring), economic renewal (in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008), or world public opinion (in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq) that complicate and hold back supporting liberty and pursuing greatness, but they do not detract from their overall importance as major strands of US foreign policy.

Hierarchy, Inequality, and US Leadership

By the time the United States burst onto the world stage as a great power in 1898, the norm of sovereign equality was already firmly entrenched in international society. Half a century later, this norm was supposedly woven into the conduct of international relations and enshrined in the United Nations Charter after the World War II. Yet, whatever the United Nations Charter says, few would presume to deal with the United States as an equal. To be sure, the United States, as John Ikenberry has argued, may mitigate that inequality by exercising ‘strategic restraint’, creating, and locking itself in international institutions aimed at providing ‘public goods’ such as security and economic order. In so doing, it may facilitate the ‘buy in’ of its tributaries to the American-led hegemony.54 But that should not be confused

52 Ibid., p. 42.
with the existence of a real or substantive equality among nations. The institutional structure of the United Nations—the existence of the five permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council with veto power—buries the rhetoric of sovereign equality. Some states are indeed more equal than others.

Of the P-5, the United States sits at the apex by virtue of its military, economic, and political–ideological strength. The United States spends more on its military than all the other major powers combined; it has the highest share of world GDP, and its research and technological prowess are peerless. And the United States also sees itself, and is perceived by many, as the greatest democracy on earth. It is this combination of military, economic, technological, and ideological might that makes the United States the unipolar power.

Consider the 77 countries where the United States has military bases or installations. Possessing bases in foreign countries is a prerogative of great powers. But of the P-5 powers, the United States is unique: it has acquired or negotiated a vast network of foreign bases—766 in the year 2006—that allow it to project power into the far corners of the earth. It is this military reach, supported by the most advanced military arsenal imaginable, and undergirded by the world’s largest and most innovative economy, that makes the United States so much more formidable than its rivals and admirers. Hierarchy and inequality, in other words, are inherent in US relations with the secondary states. For the United States, the bases are necessary for its economic and military security—protecting sea lanes, projecting power, and deterring adversaries. In return, the hosts of these bases receive US protection and usually, economic and financial advantages.

The tributary framework highlights the hierarchic and unequal relationship between the United States and the secondary states or tributaries hosting it; the framework also underscores the secondary states’ willing acceptance of that hierarchy. Alexander Cooley’s study of US bases captures the host-US relationship well when it points out that ‘all basing agreements are, to some extent, a hierarchical security contract in which a base host legally cedes part of it sovereignty when it accepts a foreign military presence on its territory’.

Host countries or tributaries sacrifice a segment of their territorial sovereignty to the military forces and/or assets of a friendly foreign power. They also surrender some political sovereignty when they sign Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) with the United States, where US

57 Ibid., p. 10
military personnel are subject to US laws instead of the host countries’ laws.\textsuperscript{58} While it is easy to understand why the United States consider SOFA to be essential, the loss of political sovereignty can be a contentious issue within the host country.

Another revealing indicator of the United States’ (top of the) pole position—and of others’ acceptance of it—is the discourse surrounding the kind of power the United States is. We have alluded earlier to the empire epithet that historians are fond of, but which does not resonate as well with American policymakers, international relations specialists, and foreign elites. ‘Hyperpower’—coined by former French foreign minister in a moment of fit—also imply a psychologically unsound and over the top approach to power. More consonant with US self-understandings are descriptions that portray the United States as a superpower (1945–1990), hegemon (since the early 20th century), or the unipolar power (since 1991).\textsuperscript{59} Interestingly, these dominant frames have their origins in US international relations scholarship. This is not surprising, since it is the job of International Relations scholars to provide appropriate descriptions of the phenomena under study. And these descriptions also aspire to be value neutral, i.e. devoid of normative content. William Wohlforth’s three-dimensional graphs of how the United States outclassed all others in the past and everyone else today along all the relevant power indicators, for example, went far in establishing his description of the United States as the unipolar power.\textsuperscript{60} Once established and mainstreamed, such descriptions—with their explicit connotations of hierarchy and inequality—become the frames through which its users view the world.\textsuperscript{61}

Unipolarity and hegemony, however, are not the favored descriptions of America for policymakers in the United States and its tributaries. Unipolarity sounds too social scientific and soulless while hegemony smacks of domination.\textsuperscript{62} Their preferred discourse is one of US leadership.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., pp. 33–34.


\textsuperscript{60} William Wohlforth, ‘The Stability of a Unipolar World’.

\textsuperscript{61} Being mainstreamed does not mean being uncontested. Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Lonely Superpower’, p. 35, has tried to contest the unvarnished notion of unipolarity by introducing the idea of uni-multiplolarity.

\textsuperscript{62} Chinese and Russian officials/analysts reject ‘hegemonism’ in international affairs: they claim domination by any one power is undesirable and they vow not to pursue it. Their preference is for a multipolar world.
Figure 1, an N-gram of the terms ‘US, Soviet, and British world leadership’, shows that the United States is associated most consistently, since the 1940s, with world leadership. It shows that the phrase ‘U.S. world leadership’ began appearing in books (written in English) in the early 1940s, with its usage showing a strong and consistent upward trajectory from the late 1970s. Britain makes an appearance from the 1930s to 1950s, but thereafter pales in comparison with the United States. The N-gram finds virtually no works in the English language associating world leadership with the Soviet Union. To be sure, most of these works are probably written by Americans, but one would also expect them to include authors from other English-speaking countries who generally buy into ‘the need for American leadership’ perspective.

In the post-Cold War era, both official discourse and policy sustained this conception of American leadership. Officials talk about US leadership, academics write approvingly of it, and Pentagon plans call for preventing other powers—friendly or unfriendly—from challenging the United States in the key regions of the world (Europe, Persian Gulf, and Asia). When the US conception of the ‘New World Order’ was challenged by Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States felt it necessary to go to war to beat back Iraq’s aggression against its tiny but rich neighbor.

The necessity and desirability of US leadership are ably summed up in a recent Op-Ed by Danielle Pletka, a moderate Republican from the conservative think tank, the American Enterprise Institute. Written in the heat of the 2012 Presidential campaign, Pletka sought to give some critical foreign policy advice to the Republican challenger Mitt Romney. She warned him against being a ‘George W. Bush retread’ and then rehearsed the familiar

litany of US self-descriptions, calling for a ‘new vision for American greatness’ based on an understanding of ‘how American power since the end of World War II provided the foundation for the most prosperous and successful era in human history’. Crucially, for Pletka:

Americans must know that it is not for mercantile benefits alone that it has exerted leadership. It is because there is no other power, and no other people, that can—or, if able, would—exert the benign influence that has characterized our role in the world. Whether you like the Iraq war or hate it; like the battle in Afghanistan or not; believe in the ouster of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi or revile it—in no case has the United States intervened for malevolent purposes (italics added).64

Pletka may be a Republican, but her panegyric cuts across the American political spectrum. It is utterly in sync with America’s self-understanding of its engagement with the ROW. The key terms, ‘greatness’, ‘leadership’, ‘no others can do it’, ‘benign’, and ‘not malevolent’ will be found repeatedly in official, academic, and popular discourses about the US role in the world.

When Barack Obama was re-elected in November 2012, the few foreign policy references in his speech were about the need to have an America ‘that’s safe and respected and admired around the world, a nation that is defended by the strongest military on earth’, and that will move ‘with confidence . . . to shape a peace that is built on the promise of freedom and dignity for every human being’. The President ended the speech by pointing to how the elections ‘remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on earth’.65 Such post-election rhetoric must of course be taken with a pinch of salt, yet the themes invoked—military strength, benign world leadership (world respect and ability to shape things) and political freedom—are not that different from those of the Republican Pletka.

Democracy as the Sincerest Form of Flattery

There are two hierarchies in the Chinese tributary system. First, there is China, sitting at the apex of the system. Second, among the tributaries, those most similar culturally to China are ranked higher (and receive more perks) than those less similar. In the American case, the United States of course occupies the pole position. But are the secondary states ranked? They undoubtedly are. As Table 2 suggests, those who make it to

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64 Danielle Pletka, ‘Mitt Romney’s Missing Foreign Policy’, New York Times, October 8, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/opinion/mitt-romneys-missing-foreign-policy.html? The features of American foreign policy emphasized by Pletka fit most of the manifestations of the (US) tributary system summarized in Table 1. The one manifestation not covered by her is ‘diplomatic rituals’.


The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 6, 2013
the top echelons or inner circles of the American system are overwhelmingly liberal democracies.

Closeness or proximity to the United States is measured by 15 indicators developed for the purposes of this article. The indicators are: participation in America’s wars since 1945, hosting US troops and/or bases on one’s territory, opportunities to address joint Houses of the United States Congress, how favorable and/or great a friend the tributary is according to US public opinion, visa waiver status, signing of Free Trade Agreements with the United States, formal military allies since 1945, Major Non-NATO Ally status (MNNA), OECD membership, and major partners in intelligence sharing. Appendix Table A1 shows how US tributaries and nontributaries score on each of the indicators; Appendix Table A2 provides brief descriptions of the indicators and identifies the sources used for each of them. Space limitations prevent us from delving into and elaborating on each of these ‘measures’ of proximity to the United States, but most of the measures should not be controversial. Countries are given one point for each indicator in which they feature (e.g. South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War garners it one point), with 15 points being the maximum.

### Table 2 America’s Closest Tributaries a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Score b</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12–14</td>
<td>South Korea, Australia, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10–11</td>
<td>Canada, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8–9</td>
<td>Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>Argentina, Chile, Denmark, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Panama, Peru, Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>Afghanistan, Austria, Bahrain, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Taiwan, Venezuela</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Ranks 1–4 are populated exclusively by US tributaries. Ranks 5–6 are also dominated by US tributaries, but include nontributaries (not shown above). Nontributaries in Rank 5: Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia and South Africa. Nontributaries in Rank 6: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Romania, Switzerland, and Ukraine. China, a nontributary, is absent from Tables 2 and Appendix Table A1 because its overall score is 1 (some intelligence cooperation with the United States), below the 2 threshold needed for inclusion.

aOriginal data from David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski, *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, Enemies, and Empire* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 34–36. See also their discussion on pp. 29 and 259, fn 56, of what constitutes ‘clients’. Sylvan and Majeski’s ‘clients’ and ‘nonclients’ have been reclassified as tributaries and nontributaries, respectively, for the purposes of this article. Fifty of their 81 US world-wide clients (62%) show up in the above table. Small island nations (e.g. Bahamas, Saint Lucia, Palau) from their data set have been omitted; also omitted are countries with an affinity score of less than 2.

bScores compiled by summing up across 15 indicators of closeness to the US. See Appendix Table A1. Appendix Table A2 provides brief descriptions of each of the indicators and sources used.

cThese countries are nondemocracies, going by the Polity IV Project’s criteria/framework. More specifically, they are either autocracies (Polity score \(-6\) to \(-10\)) or anocracies (a middle category between autocracy and democracy, Polity score \(-5\) to \(+5\)). Countries need scores of \(+6\) to \(+10\) to be considered as democracies according to the Polity framework. See Appendix Table A1 for Polity scores of the tributaries/nontributaries featured. See also www.systemicpeace.org/org/polity/polity4.htm
The results are in basic accord with our intuitive sense of who America’s closest allies and friends are. South Korea, Australia, and Britain emerge as the United States’ closest allies or tributaries (band 1); South Korea ticks 14 of the 15 boxes, compared with 12 each for Australia and Britain. Canada and France occupy band 2 while Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Spain are to be found in band 3. In band 4 are Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Turkey.

One should not make too much of the exact band that any particular ally or tributary is in. Some may argue that Japan and Israel deserve to be a band or two higher and with a different set of indicators, that may well be true. Even if that were the case, it should not change the central message of Table 2: America’s closest tributaries (bands 1–4) are, without exception, democracies. However one juggles the relative rankings of countries in the first four bands, the result is the same: fellow democracies make the best tributaries. In the lower bands (5 and 6), nondemocratic tributaries do show up, but they are in the minority.

The overall pattern is clear: the odds are strongly against nondemocracies being admitted to the highest ranks of the US tributary system. In that sense, both the Chinese and American tributary systems are very similar in possessing a ranking system of the secondary states. In the former, the basis for being admitted into the inner zone was proximity to Chinese civilization; in the latter, the criterion for joining the inner circle is adherence to liberal democratic norms and practices.66

**American Rituals**

Students of diplomatic rituals agree that ‘diplomacy without ritual is inconceivable’,67 and they also argue that by being performed repeatedly, rituals play key roles in establishing and legitimating authority.68 The most prominent rituals of the Chinese tributary system were the tribute missions, the kowtow ceremony, and the investiture rite where a new ruler of a tributary state was invested and provided with a seal to confirm and legitimize his rule. The purpose and effect of these rituals were to affirm the centrality of China, establish China’s position at the top of the hierarchy, and reinforce

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66 This comparative point may also be expressed in terms of the ‘standard of civilization’ vocabulary popular among English School theorists: if China’s criterion for how one fares along the standard of civilization criterion was proximity to Chinese culture, the standard of civilization criterion for the United States is proximity to American-style democracy. See Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).


the greatness of its culture. What might be the modern day analogs of these rituals for the United States? And more crucially, what is the deeper meaning of those rituals?

That foreigners desirous of contact with China had to send tribute missions suggest that a key ritual of the Chinese court—as far as diplomacy was concerned—was to remain in situ, waiting for ‘men from afar’ to come and pay tribute, before ‘cherishing’ them.69 Outside of China, especially in Europe, diplomacy was of course characterized by bilateral negotiations, with visits by leaders and diplomats who dealt with one another as representatives of nominally equal, sovereign states. In that sense, the United States could not be more different from China. American diplomats and military officials were primed to travel far and wide to secure America’s interests. During its war of independence against Britain, Benjamin Franklin was dispatched to France to forge an alliance; after winning independence, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin traveled to Europe in 1784 to negotiate commercial treaties. As its power grew, the United States warned off adventurous Europeans from interfering in its hemisphere (Monroe Doctrine). By the time it became a great power, it was not shy about acquiring faraway territories (the Philippines) or having Commodore Perry and his black ships convince Japan to open up itself for commerce. The rest, as they say, is history.

Yet, since 1945, there is a sense that Washington—by virtue of its power and prestige—is the hub where ‘men from afar’ jockey to visit, to pay tribute, and in return, be ‘cherished’, i.e. receive America’s blessings and assistance. Foreign embassies in Washington lobby to have their leaders visit. Deciding who gets to visit in effect becomes ‘a significant element of American public diplomacy, communicating to foreign leaders and peoples alike message about their relative centrality to the American world view’.70

Once a visit is agreed, foreign embassies work to secure the best type of visit for their leaders because for most, the invitation to visit or attend a summit Washington is a crowning foreign policy achievement. Hence foreign leaders fuss over the level of the visit and associated rituals. Is it a state visit, an official visit, or just a working visit? Does the foreign leader get to spend time at Camp David and will s/he be accorded the privilege of addressing a joint session of Congress? Stays in Camp David and addressing Congress are privileges reserved mainly for favored tributaries. The list of countries that have been given the most opportunities to address a Joint

69 ‘Cherishing men from afar’ is of course the ‘description [of] and injunction [for]’ how the Chinese emperor should treat foreigners who come to pay tribute, as stipulated in the Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing. The point here is before men from afar can be cherished, they need to journey to China. See also James Heavia, Cherishing Men from Afar, pp. xi and xiii.

Meeting/Session of Congress most (since 1874) reads like a Who’s Who of America’s favorite tributaries: Britain (8), France (8), Israel (7), Mexico (7), Italy (6), Ireland (6), Germany (5), South Korea (5), India (4), Canada (3), Argentina (3), Australia (3), and the Philippines (3).71

To be sure, tributaries are not the only central nations when it comes to who should visit Washington. State visits may also be needed for nontributaries and even adversaries to lower tensions, seal deals, and sign agreements. One such meeting was the second summit in June 1973 between President Richard Nixon and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev in Washington D.C. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin’s account of the meeting is worth recalling because it also lends support to the contention that rituals like summits play important legitimation roles for both sides:

I still remember the ceremonial reception... on the South Lawn of the White House, with Brezhnev and the American president standing on a special platform. For Brezhnev, it seemed the moment of his highest triumph. What could be greater than being placed on a footing equal to the American president, with the Soviet Union equal to the United States—of all powers—in its nuclear might, its missiles, and their warheads? Even the brilliant sunshine seemed to accentuate the importance of the event.72

The most striking, even poignant, revelation of Dobrynin’s account is that the Soviet Union in 1973 felt the need for a White House ritual, first, to symbolically establish its equality with America, and second, to seal the moment of Brezhnev’s highest triumph. Was it not clear to the ROW that as the other superpower, the Soviet Union was by definition America’s equal? Would not most of the world have recognized the military parity between the two superpowers by the early 1970s, or latest, by the 1972 Brezhnev–Nixon summit in Moscow, where they signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty? Perhaps the answer is that the world was not enough; the achievements of Brezhnev and the Soviet Union were best confirmed and legitimated in America, with Brezhnev on that special platform in the South Lawn. Such was the draw and prestige of Washington that although the Soviet Union was far from being a tributary, its mindset—on the need for Washington’s (and by extension America’s) approbation—resembled that of America’s tributaries. Dobrynin’s rhapsodic account of the White House ceremony as sanctifying parity also evokes parallels of the investiture ritual, where emissaries from the secondary state look to the hub for formal sanction of the legitimacy of the new ruler to lord over his subjects.

A sounder US analog for the Chinese tributary system’s investiture ritual is probably US recognition policy. Recognition is the contemporary equivalent of investiture: both are about according legitimacy to new rulers. New states in the international system invariably seek the recognition of the international community in general and the most powerful states in particular. Hence it is not surprising that US recognition would be deemed essential by virtually all new states or regimes keen on joining the international community. US recognition is far from automatic. The United States withheld recognition from the Soviet Union after the Bolsheviks emerged victorious in 1917, and recognition was only granted 16 years later, in 1933. China had to wait even longer: a few months after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the United States moved its embassy to Taipei, recognizing Taiwan instead. Whether the United States would have recognized China if the Korean War had not erupted is a moot question. Whatever aspirations Dean Acheson might have had about recognizing China to drive a wedge between it and the Soviet Union were dashed by the Korean War; the Eisenhower administration’s stance was that Taiwan was China, that ‘the United States would recognize no other’. It took 30 years for recognition to be restored, with the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 between the United States and China.

The examples of the Soviet Union and China suggest that political ideology is an important consideration in US recognition policy. The United States’ refusal to recognize the Soviet Union and China was based in large part on their being communist states, and their regimes’ acquisition of power through violent social revolutions. Recognition (or its withdrawal) therefore seems to perform similar functions as the investiture ritual (in the Chinese tributary system): both are about according legitimacy to new leaders or governments of a secondary state. The fact that neither the Soviet Union nor China seemed like probable candidates for tributary status vis-à-vis the United States was another reason why the United States was in no hurry to recognize them.

Related to the issue of recognition as a diplomatic ritual expressing approval or disapproval of new regimes is a more recent US ritual: the issuing of annual Human Rights reports. The US Congress has required the Department of State to publish these reports since 1975, and the American government’s human rights work is also facilitated by a

formidable array of official as well as nongovernmental organizations—Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Amnesty International—dedicated to the same mission of promoting human rights and democracy. To some extent, these are fitness to rule reports; they involve the naming and shaming of those who fail to uphold the rights adumbrated in the reports. Taken as a whole, this naming and shaming ritual—which annoys those so named to no end—is at minimum a measure of ‘otherness’ (which of our cherished values do they not hold) and at maximum, a measure of ‘barbarian-ness’. The similarity to China is interesting, where the relevant criterion for ‘sameness’ was not political practice but adoption of Confucian norms and ways.

**Benevolence for Tributaries, Malevolence toward Challengers**

Insofar as the Chinese tributary world order was premised on the voluntary respect and adoption of Confucian culture and morality, it was, on the whole, benevolent and noncoercive. Foreigners unappreciative of Confucian culture’s excellence need not visit nor pay tribute. It was their loss as far as China was concerned. The United States also comes across as benevolent and noncoercive toward its tributaries, mostly. Like Danielle Pletka, US analysts and opinion makers portray the United States as a benign hegemon, a description widely shared by US allies throughout the world. Hence, like China, the United States finds it easy to engage the secondary states in benevolent and noncoercive ways.

The difficulty lies in dealing with those who challenge you, and those who refuse to respect your power and ideas. The United States has not hesitated to use force and coercion against such adversaries and nontributaries. Those at the receiving end of US ‘malevolence’ and coercion—Germany during the World Wars, North Korea and China in 1950, Cuba during the Bay of Pigs, the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis (and much of the Cold War), North Vietnam for much of the 1960s, Milosevic’s Serbia in the 1990s, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1991 and 2003—certainly do not see the United States as benign. Even secondary states may stray occasionally, like Britain and France in 1956 when they invaded Egypt during the Suez crisis without US permission. When that happened, the United States was not beyond using economic–diplomatic coercion to bring them back to the fold. The general pattern, however, is clear and not that different from China: benevolence and non-coercion toward tributaries and a willingness to employ force and coercion against nontributaries when the occasion demands.

Our discussion of the United States as a benevolent and non-coercive hub would not be complete without touching on the prestige and credibility of the United States. A major reason why the United States takes its prestige and credibility very seriously is because if others—allies and adversaries—believe in it or fear it, it will have less need to use force or coercion to obtain
the outcomes it wants. In other words, if US prestige is high and the credibility of its power great, the United States has less need to prove itself. Challenges are less likely to be mounted against it, and the United States can afford to act benignly. But sometimes, the United States have had to fight ‘limited’ wars to maintain its prestige, so that they can help it avert larger wars. Presidents Truman and Johnson took the United States to war in Korea and Vietnam, respectively, in part because they felt they had to protect the prestige of the United States and maintain the credibility of its power. They were willing to fight a limited war in order to demonstrate to the larger world—as much to allies such as General de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer as to adversaries like Khruschev and Mao—that the United States meant what it said (in wanting to ‘protect’ South Korea and South Vietnam) and would use its power to back up its commitments. If the United States had not intervened in those conflicts, Truman and Johnson worried, no one would believe the United States or respect its power and that would be a recipe for larger and more destructive wars in the nuclear age.

The Domestic-International Nexus: Free World Leadership

The rulers of the epicenter of the tributary system, where the rest of the relevant world come knocking to pay homage and tribute, stand to reap substantial domestic benefits. The jockeying for visits by foreigners, the rituals they perform, and their internalization of the hub’s ways provide external validation of the hub-ruler’s political legitimacy, i.e. right to rule. This is especially true for China, whose rulers see themselves as the Sons of Heaven and the governor of tianxia. The tianxia—all under heaven—concept therefore implies that the Chinese emperor is the ‘governor’ of not just China, but ‘all under heaven’. What better confirmation of this myth than the arrival of streams of anxious foreigners to the emperor’s court, bearing gifts and paying homage to his civilization and benevolence? As analysts of the Chinese tributary system have maintained, the Chinese emperor’s gifts to the tributaries tended to be of greater economic value than those he received. Moreover, China also paid for the travel and lodging expenses incurred by the secondary states, which must have amounted to substantial sums. If tribute missions entailed such negative economic gains for China, the rationale for continuing them must reside in their domestic political legitimation roles and the psychological satisfaction China got out of others’ recognition of its status and cultural superiority.

Is a similar process at work in the United States? One needs to be cautious here. Foreign policy almost always impacts on the domestic. In China’s case the relationship was particularly compelling because of the underlying ideology of the tributary system: the Son of Heaven’s mandate to rule ‘all under heaven’. Any act—such as the kowtow by foreigners—that is consistent with that ideology reinforces the domestic legitimacy of the emperor. Consequently, the question for the United States is whether there is an analogous ideology that connects the domestic to the international, and in so doing, buttresses the domestic legitimacy of the government?

The answer is yes: ‘leader of the free world’ is it.\(^7^9\) The Chinese emperor claimed to be the ruler of the world, when in fact his actual jurisdiction did not extend far beyond Northeast and Southeast Asia. Successive emperors were content because they were constrained by culture: it was not worth the effort to rule over those incapable of being Sinicized. Leader of the free world, however, knows no such bounds: the United States sees itself as the leader of all those who are free and who seek to be free.

Leading the free world implies, in the first instance, making America strong and that means taking care of domestic challenges—unemployment, poverty, healthcare, for example—integral to any administration’s fitness to rule. Handling external challenges, however, is the other crucial determinant of domestic legitimacy. In confronting the external world, the United States takes its epithet as leader of the free world seriously. The discourse of US leadership has been discussed above; it is a constant in how the United States perceives itself and it cuts across the two political parties. No President can avoid the ‘bound to lead’ discourse—the foreign policy establishment believes in it, and the American public expects it.\(^8^0\) Moreover, the secondary states also support or acquiesce in that view. A preponderance of power, to use Melvyn Leffler’s apt phrase for the United States, is what marks it out for leadership.\(^8^1\)

But it is also more than that: what uniquely qualifies the United States to lead is its political credo, freedom. As the New Hampshire state motto puts it, “Live free or die.” The emphasis on freedom, by which is usually meant individual liberty, stems from the liberal democratic ideals that undergird

\(^7^9\) ‘Leader of the free world’ was the dominant US self-description during the Cold War. Samuel Huntington’s puts it succinctly: ‘After World War II, the United States defined itself as the leader of the democratic free world against the Soviet Union and world communism’, see his ‘The Erosion of American National Interests’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (1997), p. 30. Post-Cold War, the US self-description underwent a subtle change: ‘leader of the democratic world’ captures it well. Huntington, writing in 1997, combines the two.


American democracy. The consent of the governed, manifested in representational government, is paramount; welded to a system of institutional checks and balances (American) democracy works to protect the individual’s liberty and rights in ways approximated by few other forms of government.

And it is the combination of ‘leadership’ and ‘freedom’ that is especially potent in permitting the external to impact on the internal. Hence US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton writes about America’s staying power in the Pacific as flowing ‘from our model of free democracy and free enterprise…. I hear everywhere I go that the world still looks to the United States for leadership’.82 President Barack Obama was even more emphatic in his speech to the Australian parliament heralding the United States pivot or rebalancing toward Asia. He reiterated his view that ‘The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay’ and like his Secretary of State, spoke of US world leadership, and how America had fought in Korea and Vietnam so that ‘democracies could take root’. He ended the speech by reciting five freedoms (speech, the press, assembly, religion, and selection of leaders) that ‘stir every soul’ and that make ‘democracies…the greatest form of government ever known to man’.83

To be sure, the President’s speech was directed primarily at an Australian and Asian Pacific audience. But the domestic angle is seldom far away. A sine qua non of domestic legitimacy is not only the upholding of democratic ideals at home, but also advancing them abroad, or at least building a bulwark against their erosion by anti-democratic forces abroad. The Cold War was as much an ideological contest as it was a military one. In other words, external challenges and dangers do not just help script the US identity, they also feed importantly into domestic legitimacy.84

For much of the Cold War, persuading the American public that one is able and willing to lead the free world in taking on, or containing, the Soviet Union was a key measure of one’s fitness for office. Republicans were perceived to be better able to protect America’s national security, putting the Democrats on the defensive. It has been argued that the latter might have partially contributed to their engaging in two Asian land wars—neither Truman nor Johnson could be seen to be losing Korea and Vietnam to communism and survive as political leaders. In the event, Truman managed to restore the status quo ante, although not the more ambitious plan to liberate North Korea (and still got re-elected), whereas Johnson’s inability to win in Vietnam cost him his re-election.

When the Cold War came to an end, Japan temporarily replaced the Soviet Union as the potential adversary. US–Japan economic frictions and the perception that Japan might be ‘hollowing out’ key US industries led to discussions about ‘containing’ Japan.\(^8\) By the mid-1990s, however, China replaced Japan as the main external ‘other’. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush said harsh things about China during their Presidential campaigns, though once they won the election, dealt with China in more pragmatic ways. Barack Obama, perhaps learning from the excessive rhetoric of Bill Clinton (from which he backtracked upon becoming President), was more cautious about criticizing China during the elections of 2008. Four years later, in the lead up to the Presidential elections of 2012, Obama took a harder line. His administration filed a World Trade Organization suit against China, on the grounds that China’s auto industry was subsidizing its exports, to the detriment of the American auto industry. Obama was facing pressures from his challenger, Mitt Romney, who threatened to name China as a currency manipulator if he was elected. Appearing and acting tough vis-a-vis America’s ideological ‘other’ is part and parcel of exercising leadership of the free world. Sitting Presidents and their challengers (in election years) who fail to do that risk losing domestic legitimacy and potentially the Presidency as well.

Leading the free world has also assumed a second dimension in the post-Cold War era: democracy promotion. As Tony Smith put it, promoting democracy has always been ‘America’s mission’.\(^8\) The case for promoting democracy does not rest merely on its normative appeal, with a benevolent US wanting to extend the ‘greatest form of government’ to humankind. It is intertwined with the belief that America cannot be really secure in a world dominated by nondemocracies. Hence there is also a national security case for promoting democracy.\(^8\) America’s intervention in World War I, if one were to take Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric seriously, was to ‘make the world safe for democracy’. Ditto for World War II, the remaking of Germany and Japan, the Cold War, Korea, and Vietnam. In all these cases, the United States saw itself as confronting or fighting totalitarian ideologies—Nazism, Fascism, or Communism—espousing values antithetical to the democratic way of life. To be sure, the power element—maintaining or expanding US power—was just as important in US decision-making, but power and ideology were often inextricable in these cases.

It is true that in the first couple of decades of the Cold War, the United States did not shy away from cultivating dictators and autocrats—our ‘sons of bitches’ to use a term popular with US policymakers—throughout the

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87 *Ibid.*, p. 8. This is also an omnipresent theme in official US speeches, especially for post-Cold War US administrations.
world, so long as they aligned themselves with the United States in the mega battle against the Soviet Union (and China). Much as the United States would have liked to push for human rights and democracy in the third world, the competition with the Soviet Union relegated those concerns to the back burner. When the United States ambassador to Chile sought reassurances from President Pinochet about Chile’s observance of human rights, Henry Kissinger was reported to have ordered his ambassador to ‘cut out the political science lectures’. Yet it is significant that Ambassador David Popper saw fit to raise the question: he may have run afoul of Kissinger’s realpolitik imperatives, but he was pressing Pinochet on an issue rooted in the American political soul. As many nondemocracies and even illiberal democracies would learn after the Cold War, the human rights and democracy promotion agendas would return to the forefront of US diplomacy.

The perception that the Nixon administration went too far in neglecting human rights abroad facilitated Congress’ insistence on the formation of a human rights bureau within the Department of State. Jimmy Carter’s appointment of Patricia Derian, a former civil rights activist, to the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs was widely seen as a successful attempt to elevate the human rights agenda in US foreign policy. More significantly, the advent of the human rights bureau within State, known today as the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, has served to institutionalize human rights, and since the early 1990s, democracy as integral elements of US foreign policy.

Most Presidents after Carter have been able to pursue the democracy and human rights agendas with some regularity: Reagan emphasized it, George H. Bush was more restrained, whereas the Clinton administration was explicit about the expansion of democracy, based in part on the theory that democracies do not fight each other. The neoconservatives who were influential in the George W. Bush administration took things even further: luxuriating in America’s preponderant military power and professing moral clarity about America’s role in international affairs, they were not averse to overturning John Adam’s advice about not going out to slay dragons. Their response was why not? Did the United States not have a moral responsibility to use force to remake the world and foster more democracies?

The excesses of the George W. Bush administration—in Iraq and in world consternation about America’s less than benign use of its military power—led his successor, Barack Obama, to adopt a more low keyed approach to promoting democracy. Compared with the ‘moral clarity mixed with force’ approach of the Bush administration, the Obama team did appear more pragmatic and cautious. Moreover Obama had to wind down the wars started by his predecessor. But that did not mean that his administration had put democracy and human rights on the backburner. His speeches were replete with the importance of democracy for the United States and the world.\(^9^1\) His words came back to haunt him: the Arab Spring of 2011 forced the United States to abandon Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s authoritarian leader but an important US strategic asset. The same was true for human rights agitators in Libya and Syria. In Libya, after initial hesitation, the United States decided to participate in a NATO operation to establish a no fly zone, sounding the death knell for Muammar Gaddafi. The United States has come full circle: by the 21st century, the argument that autocrats aligned with America are our ‘sons of bitches’ would no longer resonate with US policymakers: when the domestic uprisings against such autocrats reach a certain threshold, calls for democracy become hard to ignore.

**US–China Differences**

Analogies highlight the similarities between what are ultimately different things. While our exercise in analogical reasoning has revealed fascinating and significant parallels between the ways early modern China and contemporary America deal with the world, it is also necessary to point out the differences. A key difference is the degree of enthusiasm for expansion. China seemed content with exercising hegemony over its ‘near abroad’ or Asia. The United States, in contrast, was keen to go beyond just being the hegemon in Latin America (circa the Monroe Doctrine), it wanted to bring Canada under its fold, and by the 1890s was willing to use coercive diplomacy and military force to annex Hawaii, the Philippines, and Samoa. It fought the two world wars in Europe and Asia in part to prevent a hostile hegemon from dominating the European and Asian continents. To be sure, the Ming dynasty’s Zheng He did set sail with 300 vessels and 28,000 crew members, travelling as far south as Africa, but it did not lead to a vast expansion of tributaries for China.\(^9^2\)

While economic and military prowess were important underlying factors behind China’s hegemony in East Asia, they did not take center stage in

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\(^9^1\) Remarks by the President, ‘On a New Beginning’, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09

China’s dealings with its tributaries. China acquired its tributaries primarily through trade and civilizational pull: neighboring states like Korea were desirous of trade with China and were also attracted by Confucian culture. The focus of the system and the way it was maintained was ideational—the internationalization and internalization of Chinese culture by foreigners. Insofar as they acknowledged Chinese cultural superiority, they would voluntarily want to be part of the tributary system and uphold its values.

The United States’ way of reproducing and maintaining the system, however, is both ideational and material, with the latter being at least as important as the former. The ideational forces that hold the US system together are of course democracy, individual liberty, and the market economy. Democracy and liberty have been discussed above. Some observations about economics will therefore round up the discussion. From its early days, the US approach to economic organization has revolved around market capitalism, where the state, after providing the basic set up, cedes the role of producing, buying, and selling, to individuals or private firms. This is also known as lassiez faire capitalism. In the American economic scheme of things, free markets are part and parcel of how a liberal democracy works: the freedom of the individual to transact business and commerce with minimal intervention from the state complements and reinforces democracy’s emphasis on individual liberty. This is in contrast to socialist or communist economies where the state plays a decisive role in the production and exchange of economic goods. From the US perspective, such heavy state control is a major reason for the lack of individual freedom in planned economies.

This liberal capitalist ideology comes with an important foreign dimension: economic expansion. Analysts have used the term ‘Open Door’ to describe America’s penchant for pursuing trade and investment abroad in ways that spread and reinforce ‘individualism, private property, and the capitalist marketplace economy’. Christopher Layne describes the connection between US economic ideology, security, and economic expansion (for material and ideological gain) as follows:

The Open Door blurs the line demarcating domestic politics from foreign policy, because the security of America’s core values is seen as being tied not only to the distribution of power in the international system but, even more, to economic expansion abroad and to the outside world’s openness to America’s liberal ideology. . . . Economic expansion has gone hand in hand with the extension globally of American political ideology.

Just as crucial, the United States relies on an extensive array of existing institutions—many of which it was instrumental in founding—to back up,
propagate, and defend its ideas. The World Trade Organization (and GATT earlier), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund advocate economic ideas and policies—free trade, comparative advantage, open markets, human development, exchange rate, conditionality—that reflect the preferences of the United States and its European allies. Many of these ideas came to be known in the 1980s, rather aptly, as the Washington Consensus. Countries wishing to enjoy favorable terms of trade with the rich industrial West or in need of development or emergency funds will have to play by the rules of the game dictated by these institutions.

Most palpable of all, for the ROW, is the United States interest in and ability to project its military power. With its vast network of bases and places abroad where it stations or move around its troops and aircraft carriers, the United States projects its military power in ways China never did even at the height of its tributary days. The existence of these bases is usually highlighted by those who write about the US empire; the bases are seen as an indication of America’s worldwide reach or over-extension. US navy chiefs, on the other hand, like to refer to the 72-hour principle, i.e. with so many bases and places around the world, US military power can be brought to bear on any spot within 72 hours, a feat that no other power is capable of. This power projection capability is a central element in the US tool kit for realizing its national security interests, including protecting the secondary states who are its allies and partners.

The final difference, which is related to the first two, is about the relative success of the systems. The Chinese tributary system was extremely successful in terms of its longevity, lasting over 1800 years, from the beginning of the Han dynasty to the mid-19th century. It was also successful in upholding the general peace of Northeast Asia for many centuries (especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties), even if practice sometimes collided with theory in that China had to relax its assumptions about hierarchy and superiority when it was weak. The American system is barely over a century old (assuming 1898 as the start date) and it is therefore too early to judge its success on the longevity criterion. It has also maintained peace between itself and its tributaries, although it has also gone to war (against nontributaries) who threatened it and its tributaries. Table 3 assesses the achievements of the two tributary systems along these and several other criteria, including the expanse/extent of rule, economic returns, acceptance, and emulation. The

95 Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire*, esp. chapter 6; see also Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*.
bottom line is that the American tributary system emerges as the greater success (so far).

The Self-Perceptions and Behaviors of the Tributaries

Our focus so far has been on the self-perceptions, actions, and expectations of the United States, in an attempt to show that its thinking and behavior since 1898 resemble some of the key assumptions and diplomatic practices of China’s tributary system. What about the self-perceptions and behaviors of America’s tributaries? Few of America’s allies and partners think of themselves as secondary states or tributaries, at least in public. That may be in part because they have not had the vocabulary to think about themselves that way. The dominance of the American exceptionalism narrative ensures that alternative narratives such as the United States as the epicenter of a (Chinese like) tributary system would come across as alien, and conceptually beyond the pale for both Americans and their tributaries.

Is it necessary for the secondary or tributary states to think of themselves that way for the tributary system to exist? I believe not. Frameworks or models are analytical devices scholars use to simplify and order complex relationships in order to tease out the fundamental relationships of the phenomenon under study.98 What the tributary framework does is to enable us

### Table 3 Attainments of the Chinese and American Tributary Systems Compared

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<th>China</th>
<th>United States</th>
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<td>Years in operation</td>
<td>473°</td>
<td>115</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geographic expanse</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td>Global</td>
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<td>Political–cultural impact</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
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<td>Economic gains/losses</td>
<td>Net Loss°</td>
<td>Net gain</td>
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<td>Political gains/losses</td>
<td>Regional peace (Ming and Qing)</td>
<td>No hegemonic war since 1945</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Domestic legitimacy</td>
<td>Domestic legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military–security gains/losses</td>
<td>Losses by 1840s</td>
<td>Unrivalled since 1930s</td>
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°Years in operation will be closer to 1850 if the origins of the Chinese tributary system is traced to the Han dynasty; the article’s focus on the operation of the system during the Ming and Qing dynasties suggests that the more relevant figure here might be from the advent of the Ming dynasty (1368) to the beginning of the Opium Wars (1841).

°For the emperor’s court.

98 The cogency of John L. Gaddis’ famous symmetrical–asymmetrical model of US containment strategy, for example, does not depend on whether successive US administrations thought of their strategies in those terms. That is, they would most likely not have recognized the terms ‘symmetrical’ or ‘asymmetrical’ as descriptors of their policies but they would probably recognize that they (Democrats) were either prone to meeting Soviet probes with proportional counter measures (symmetrical) or being selective (Republicans) as to where and how to respond (asymmetrical). See John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Similarly, how illuminating the
to understand the behaviors of US allies and partners in terms of its analytic 
categories. Like Molière’s Mr Jourdain, who has been speaking prose all his 
life without knowing it, US tributaries may have been behaving like tribu-
taries without knowing it. Two aspects of their behavior illustrate this: the 
terms they use to describe their relationship with the United States and the 
things they do for the United States or at its behest.

If America’s allies and partners do not see themselves as tributaries, what 
is their preferred vocabulary? Friends, allies, and partners, usually. These 
terms capture an important part of the relationship, but they also imply an 
equality that is often absent. The hub-and-spokes metaphor favored by 
American policymakers to describe US strategic links with its allies in 
East Asia, for example, is more telling. Interestingly, most of America’s 
East Asian military allies seem comfortable with that description. On first 
glance, the mechanical analogy describes America’s centrality (‘the hub’) 
and its connections to its Asian allies (‘the spokes’) well, and without 
undue normative connotations. On closer inspection, however, the ‘hub 
and spokes’ metaphor is far from devoid of the hierarchy and inequality 
highlighted by the tributary lens: the suggestion of an epicenter or hub, from 
which radiate spokes connecting it to the periphery implies resources and 
directives flowing from the hub to the spokes, and hence hierarchy (tribu-
taries may call it leadership) and inequality.

Two other discursive routines are also noteworthy: calls by secondary 
states for US leadership in the world or their region, and pleas, especially 
by East Asians, for America to play a ‘balancing’ role in their region. 
America’s allies and friends routinely ask for and seek US leadership in 
confronting the world’s problems. That is natural, since the United States 
has unrivalled military and economic resources to meet those challenges. In 
not only acknowledging but also calling for US leadership, US tributaries 
are doing exactly what tributaries do: recognizing the hierarchy and inequal-
ity, and deferring to the hub. Similarly, the attempt by some East Asians to 
cast the recent United States ‘pivot’ or rebalancing to East Asia in terms of a 
‘return to the region to balance rising powers’ reveals a strong penchant for 
American leadership. This need to ‘balance rising powers’ appears to be the 
mainstream discourse or interpretation among America’s formal and infor-
mal allies.99 Either there is a misunderstanding here about the power

99 See for example Pavin Chachavalpongpon, ‘ASEAN at 45: Still Unsettled over China’, 
*The Straits Times*, August 10, 2012, p. A25, who writes about the United States pivot as an 
attempt at ‘counterbalancing’ and keeping ‘the balance of power truly balanced’.

The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 6, 2013
equation in East Asia, or it is a discursive stratagem for maintaining and consolidating US hegemony,100 phrased in balance of power terms.

On the discursive front then, there is evidence to support the view that America’s allies are doing the talk (expected of secondary states). But are they also doing the walk? Is there evidence for America’s tributaries adopting policies along the lines expected by the hub? Put differently, what does it mean to pay homage or tribute in the 20th and 21st centuries? Clearly, it is no longer about tributaries sending elephants, horses, and pearls to the epicenter. The first tribute the United States expects from the secondary states is acknowledgment of US hegemony. As the preceding analysis indicates, that acknowledgement has been given in spades by US allies at the speech-act level.

At the policy level, the strongest evidence that secondary states have acknowledged US hegemony comes from their not challenging the US (instead calling for it to lead) and their willingness, by and large, to play by the rules of the game as stipulated by the United States.101 On the security front, they are happy to join formal military alliances or be ‘strategic partners’ of the United States. As allies or partners, they provide places and bases for the United States, thus enabling the United States to project its power globally. On the economic front, they are content to conduct commerce via rules stipulated by the United States and they willingly join the international financial institutions set up and led by the United States. They do not challenge free market capitalism, they abide by intellectual property protection rules and they do not seek to dethrone the US dollar as the international currency, even though these institutions and rules are not cost free to them.102

In addition, tributaries also tend to vote with the United States in international organizations. Thus if one were to study votes in international organizations such as the United Nations, one would expect those closest to the United States to diverge infrequently from the United States on votes that matter to it. One study of voting behavior in the United Nations General Assembly concluded that ‘[m]uch of the Cold War East-West

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101 The policy actions described here resemble some of the behaviors of ‘hierarchical deference’ found in Evelyn Goh’s excellent ‘Hierarchy and the Role of the United States in the East Asian Security Order’, p. 359.

conflict has carried over into the post-Cold War period’. 103 That is, by and large, the United States can continue to count on its allies to align their votes with it. The secondary states closest to the United States, however, do more. South Korea, Australia, Britain, France, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand have fought alongside America in at least two of the four major post-1945 interstate wars involving the United States. Although the secondary states might have had good national security reasons to join America in these wars, they may also be said to be paying the ultimate tribute to the epicenter by sending their troops to fight America’s wars. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, committed the UK to join the United States in Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, despite strong opposition within his cabinet and from the British public. But it was a commitment deeply appreciated by the United States. Canada, which had joined the United States in the 1990–1991 war against Iraq, opted out in 2003, and that led to a palpable chill in US–Canadian relations. 104

The second tribute expected by America is for the secondary states to emulate its political ideas and forms, i.e. liberal democracy. This is of course not an issue for the mature democracies, most of whom are America’s closest allies. As Table 2 suggests, all the high ranking tributaries are democracies. Although four of the five American top allies (bands 1 and 2) have been democracies for a long time, some of the others in ranks 4–6 did not become democ racies until the 1970s, 1980s, or even 1990s. What Table 2 also suggests is that so long as one becomes a democracy, one can nudge closer to the United States. In some cases, the United States actively promoted democracy (South Korea, Spain, Greece, and Philippines), but in other cases, the role of the United States was minimal. So it is not the case that the secondary states’ adoption of democratic ideas and forms was a response to US demands: that would only be true for some. What matters is that they become democracies in the end.

A democratic tributary is by definition one that is already paying homage to the political ideas and forms that constitutes the inner core of US identity. That kind of homage is as deep as the internalization of Confucian values that characterized China’s inner zone of tributaries. China was always confident that its most enlightened tributaries would come to their senses on that issue. The United States is not that different—it is equally confident that its most enlightened tributaries, if they are not already democracies, would want to become democracies, not necessarily to rise up in the hierarchy of America’s tributaries, but because they would achieve the political freedom they deserve. In fact, the United States does China one better: it

believes its political model is also relevant even for nontributaries and is willing to provide aid and other forms of assistance to nudge them along.105

What the above suggest is that America has succeeded in coaxing, coercing, and extracting a more substantive tribute from its secondary states than China ever did. To be sure, we are starting from a low base. In return for the tribute China received, it is said that the Chinese court gave back more in economic terms to the secondary states than it received. Apart from peace and stability, the main satisfaction China’s rulers got was psychological: the feeling of self-affirmation and power-prestige when others acknowledged its hegemony and cultural superiority. The satisfaction the United States gets is also profoundly psychological: the same feeling of affirmation and power, but premised in this case on the US economic and military superiority. In the case of the United States however, in addition to the psychological, it (including its commercial enterprises such as multinational corporations) derives substantial material benefits from trade and investment, all conducted around rules conceived by the United States. To be sure this is not a one way street: US tributaries (like China’s) have also benefitted, as can be seen from the economic and security benefits accruing to US tributaries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Conclusion

The novelty of the tributary framework does not rest on the contention about American hegemony, a point that many international relations scholars accept. The novelty of the tributary concept resides elsewhere. First, its normative take on hegemony: it casts hegemony in a less positive light, emphasizing the hierarchical and unequal nature of the relationship. Mainstream international relations theory tends to portray hegemony in a predominantly positive light, emphasizing leadership, provision of public goods, and stability.106 The idea of the tributary system, in contrast, lays bare the inequality of the relationship by its very vocabulary. China thrived on that inequality and the rituals that affirmed it. The United States, however, is understandably more conflicted: inequality, manifested in the desire for recognition of US superiority, seems at odds with the self-understanding of a nation whose Declaration of Independence begins with ‘All men are created equal’.

The tributary idea, in other words, emphasizes hierarchy and inequality in ways that the notion of hegemony seeks to dissipate. Which concept fits better with America’s relationship vis-à-vis the ROW, I leave it to the reader’s judgment. Note, however, that while hierarchy in and of itself may have

105 Thomas Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad.
106 See G. John Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan, esp. chapter 5, on American hegemony, public goods, self-restrain, and order.
negative connotations or seems at odds with the notion of ‘sovereign equality’, it is presumed to have stabilizing effects by a veritable lineage of international relations scholarship. Hegemonic stability theory suggests that hegemons play a crucial role in underwriting the economic and security order by providing the public goods that lesser states are incapable or unwilling to ante up to.\textsuperscript{107} To be sure the hegemon also reaps huge all round gains.\textsuperscript{108} David Kang argues that Chinese hegemony during the Ming and Qing periods brought the region five centuries of peace and stability.\textsuperscript{109} William Wohlforth makes the case that US unipolarity is likely to last a generation and that it is also conducive to peace and stability.\textsuperscript{110} East and Southeast Asians who welcome American hegemony in their region might also be subscribing to a ‘hegemony is conducive to peace and stability’ line of thought than to balance of power principles.

The second novelty inspired by the tributary idea is the focus on ‘tribute’—if you recognize my pole position, what should you be doing when we meet and when we are far apart? China’s answer was: let me decide if you can visit (and how frequently), kowtow to the emperor when you come to pay tribute, and allow me to invest you with the legitimacy to rule; and finally, emulate our cultural forms when you are back home. Those who bought into the system reaped substantial economic and security benefits. Viewing the United States as the hub of the tributary system provides similar insights about what it would expect from its tributaries: acknowledge its superior power by not contesting it and by allowing it bases and places; play by US rules of the economic game, and emulate American political ideas and forms. The economic and security payoffs for the secondary states are as great as those garnered by China’s major tributaries.

Finally, viewing America as the fountainhead of a tributary system connects many of the most interesting—hitherto disparate—dots that constitute the landscape of American diplomacy: hegemon, leader of the free world, democracy (promotion), prestige/status, and credibility. These self-understandings and concerns have featured prominently as key factors impacting on US foreign policy, but there does not exist a narrative that connects them in a coherent way. The tributary idea connects them and sees these elements as essential parts of the (tributary) system. Hegemony needs a legitimating discourse to justify the hierarchy and inequality and while the extant literature hones in on the provision of public goods, it neglects the politics: democracy and leadership (of the free world). What is really distinctive about the US legitimation discourse is the fusion of the two: how democracy and US leadership are joined, as in the term leader of the free

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{107}
Ibid.
\bibitem{108}
\bibitem{109}
David Kang, \textit{East Asia before the West}, pp. 8–10.
\bibitem{110}
\end{thebibliography}
world. The latter accords the United States a moral status, prestige, and credibility that are critical ingredients in maintaining the tributary system. When the epicenter is perceived to be unrivaled on these qualities, tributaries will want to edge closer to the epicenter for protection (and prestige by association) and adversaries will think twice before challenging it. It is only in understanding how seriously the United States takes that leadership role that prestige and credibility become central concerns that must be protected in the overall scheme of things.

In a piece for *The Atlantic* as the Cold War was winding to an end, John Lewis Gaddis proposed characterizing the period from 1945 to 1989 as The Long Peace. ‘Change the name’, Gaddis wrote, ‘and you change the thing’. By the latter he meant that the very speech-act of naming it a ‘Cold War’, imparts a negative take on how we view and understand the period, perhaps making us less able to discern the positive developments. Viewing it as the Long Peace, in contrast, should dispose us to better understand, and perhaps preserve, the elements that sustained that peace. This article has sought to introduce a new vocabulary to view the way the United States relates to the ROW. Its distinctive contributions consist in introducing the (Chinese) tributary idea as a framework for analyzing US foreign policy and in fleshing out the parallels suggested by the framework in a preliminary way.

We began by observing how America and China’s approach to international relations have unrecognized similarities. Perhaps it is appropriate to end by commenting on an underappreciated difference. In his superb analysis of the Chinese world order and how it collapsed in the face of Western pressures, Yongjin Zhang honed in on a vocabulary change that revealed China’s existential dilemma after the mid-19th century: China’s sense of its place in the world shrank from ‘tianxia’ (all under heaven) to ‘guojia’ (a state), i.e. ‘the Chinese world became a China in the world’. Using the tributary lens to illuminate the longue durée of American diplomacy leads one to a rather different conclusion about America’s foreign policy trajectory in the 20th and 21st centuries: the United States’ place in the world seems to have moved from ‘guojia’ to ‘tianxia’. The term that most of us have used until now to describe that trajectory and state of affairs is the *Pax Americana*. Could that be a euphemism for the American tributary system?

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## Appendix

### Table A1  Indicators of Closeness to the Unites States (Tributaries and Non-Tributaries)

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White indicate US Tributary State.
Grey highlights indicate US Non Tributary State.
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<td>Countries listed by Sylvan &amp; Majeski as ‘client states’ and ‘non-client states’, excluding those scoring less than 2.</td>
<td>clients = tributaries; non-clients = non-tributaries</td>
<td>David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski, <em>US Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, enemies and empire</em> (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.34–36</td>
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<td>Country is participant in the US Department of Homeland Security’s ‘Visa Waiver Program’</td>
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<td>Department of Homeland Security website</td>
<td><a href="https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/WebHelp/ESTA_Screen-Level_Online_Help_1.htm#WP3">https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/WebHelp/ESTA_Screen-Level_Online_Help_1.htm#WP3</a></td>
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<td>Designated by the US as a ‘Major Non-NATO Ally’</td>
<td>Enhanced military ally</td>
<td>Database of Export Controls, University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td><a href="http://www.upenn.edu/researchservices/exportcontrols/pages/listofcountries.htm">http://www.upenn.edu/researchservices/exportcontrols/pages/listofcountries.htm</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/inscr.htm">http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/inscr.htm</a></td>
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