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Testimony of Dr. Christopher A. Ford
Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

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Hearing on "China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy"

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's deliberations.

I am a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute here in Washington, D.C., a think tank founded by the seminal nuclear strategist and futurist Herman Kahn, and that this year celebrates its 50th year of scholarship on the interplay among culture, demography, technology, markets, and political leadership in addressing the challenges of the future. I am grateful for the chance to discuss Chinese narratives regarding national security policy.

I. *China's Narrative of China*

The precise nature and implications of China's role in the emerging 21st Century world is one of the most important questions for global politics and U.S. policy. It is very hard, however, for outsiders and Chinese alike, to know quite where Chinese policy is going. For one thing, it is not a given that the current Chinese government – or even China's present territorial unity, based upon the historically idiosyncratic high-water mark of Qing Dynasty conquest – will actually *last* as long in the 21st Century as it did in the 20th.

This is a question that study of China's long history certainly highlights, since by some accounts it has existed as a unitary *and Chinese* entity for perhaps only *half* of the entire period since the fall of the Han Dynasty some 1,800 years ago. There have been too many long and tumultuous periods of *disunity* in Chinese history for us to ignore the possibility of there being more. Nor is it by any means a law of history that the current government's attempt to combine state-managed capitalism with heavy-handed political authoritarianism will remain a viable response to the aspirations of China's people – particularly as new demographic challenges materialize or the government fails to provide the economic growth rates upon which it has staked its legitimacy since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. One of China's most persistent and pervasive narratives of itself over the last 2,500 years has been that there *is* a "China" the natural state of which is in some form of unified rule. Over the centuries, however, this has sometimes been as much an aspirational statement as a descriptive one.

But even within the landscape of alternative Chinese futures involving continued unity – and especially futures that involve linear projections from China's recent rates of growth and its continued rise as a global power – there is still much uncertainty about what its role in world will or should be. Outsiders are divided about what to make of China's rise, policymakers are divided about what to do in response, and as my Hudson Institute colleague Charles Horner has written, even the Chinese themselves seem to be in the middle of an ongoing and sharply contested process of imagining and reimagining

themselves. It is possible, in fact, that Chinese leaders do not themselves have or agree upon answers to these questions. (They are said to *try* to think deeply about long-term strategy, but the outside world has so far gotten little window upon whatever thinking has taken place, and it is not possible to say too much about either its seriousness or the degree to which Beijing's leadership is *itself* divided between competing approaches.) There seem to be, in other words, *many* narratives of China and its rise, and much hangs upon which of them ends up approximating its evolving reality.

Today, this very *uncertainty* about where China is going and what this will mean is *itself* emerging as a major factor in Beijing's geopolitical relations. Whether with respect to strategic force limits or the issue of non-strategic weapons, for instance, nuclear arms control between the United States and Russia seems to be nearing the asymptote of what can be achieved on a purely bilateral basis, because both powers fret increasingly about China's trajectory and the implications of *its* strategic nuclear modernization. Particularly in the context of Beijing's growing willingness to throw its weight around in regional and even global affairs in ways that are sometimes notably undiplomatic, China's neighbors also worry about the implications of its rise – a dynamic which could, of course, affect other countries' strategic policy, alliance relationships, military spending and procurement, and even nonproliferation choices. Beijing, however, still remains resolutely uninterested in arms control or in strategic dialogue or transparency of the sort that could help allay concerns if indeed China's intentions are indeed as good, and its emerging role as benign, as its leaders have claimed.

As China and the world around it struggle to find narratives with which to understand China's rise and role in the world, let me draw attention to what I think may be an enduring element in China's encounters with the outside world that bears upon these questions. In my recent book, *The Mind of Empire: China's History and Modern Foreign Relations* (University Press of Kentucky, 2010), I try to trace themes of what one might call moralist Sinic universalism over the past couple of thousand years.

One of the most interesting aspects of this ideology is that it conceives of the world in essentially hierarchical terms. I it is a discourse in which political authority is in a sense "secreted" by a virtuous leader, as order and harmony naturally and inevitably *self-organize* around him in concentric circles. Within what we might call China itself, of course, this is the basis of "Mandate of Heaven" theory, by which rulers rule according to their virtue, and in which *defects* in political order can be read backwards, as it were, as *indictments* of the virtue and thus the legitimacy of a leader.

More broadly, however, this virtue-hierarchic conception can also be seen as the anchor of a distinctive conception of global order. Such ostensibly virtue-based authority is without inherent geographical limit, and is proportionate to the extent of a leader's virtue: a perfectly virtuous leader will see the entire world pay homage to him in awestruck submissiveness. Through this prism, China was viewed as the civilizational monopole of the human community, naturally existing in a hierarchical relationship with the rest of the known world because of the axiomatic virtue of its leaders. There was essentially no space, within this schema, for the Western notion – so important to modern international

law – of separate and coequal sovereign powers existing legitimately and indefinitely alongside each other. Among other things, my book tries to chronicle the clash of these competing conceptions of order from the mid-19th Century to the present day.

In my view, a critical question for 21st-Century geopolitics is the degree to which the ancient hierarchic notion of order still influences Chinese elites, and whether it will thus help shape Beijing's behavior in the years ahead. I do not know the answer to this question, and perhaps no one really does – but we'd be remiss not to ask it.

There are certainly those who argue that China has come to internalize nonhierarchic coequal-sovereignty notions – that is, what one might call the Westphalian conception of global order – to such a degree that they have now become the dominant framework for interaction with the non-Chinese world. This has long been, in effect, the public position of the Chinese government itself. (For years, Beijing has tried to forestall foreign moves that might imperil its return to global prominence by claiming that its rise is benign and offers the West in general – and the United States in particular – only positive-sum, "win-win" opportunities.) By this view, one might say, China is *not* civilizationally exceptional in any way that should convey special global influence or authority, or elicit special foreign deference or respect, beyond whatever is due to sheer size.

Others, however, suspect that hierarchic themes have not entirely evaporated, and that as China's relative power grows it will be increasingly inclined to nudge the global system into a more hierarchic and Sinocentric form of order of the sort that its history and ancient conceptual frameworks encourage it to desire and expect. Such thinkers do *not* necessarily expect some Chinese drive for direct control, conquest, or any other kind of *formal* hegemony too much beyond its present borders. (Historically, Chinese rulers have often been fairly pragmatic about how far to extend their bureaucratic reach, and have sometimes been willing to treat non-Chinese as *functional* equals when left with no alternative.) The more interesting question may be what sort of informal, political, or even merely symbolic deference China may come to expect or choose to demand.

When I wrote my book, my feeling was that this issue of *what China will do as its power grows and it feels itself to have more freedom of action* was a vital but still largely unanswered question. Since then, one may be forgiven for suspecting, on the basis of Beijing's recent resurgence of interest in muscle-flexing, sphere-of-influence approaches to East Asia, that the pessimists are getting the better of the argument. History is not destiny, of course, and nothing preordains that ancient hierarchic reflexes will determine future Chinese behavior in rigid ways, or at all. Nevertheless, there is cause for concern.

II. *China's Narrative of America*

In light of this, let me say a word about the narrative of China's relationship with the United States. How we are viewed in China, of course, is important to how China approaches a range of issues where its interests may rub up against ours in the years ahead. My impression is that what America looks like through the Chinese lens is *also* a work in progress, and this question would certainly reward much more study.

There was a period in the late 1990s when Chinese military and strategic writers, at least, looked at U.S. power through a distinctly unhappy lens, seeing in our post-Cold War "unipolar moment" a great threat to China's rise, fearing possible American-led efforts to check Chinese power, feeling alarm at the rise of a "China threat" literature here in the United States, and interpreting events such as NATO's Kosovo campaign in the worst possible light. These fears seem to have subsided somewhat after we became distracted by our relationship with the Islamic world in the early 2000s, and have been replaced more recently – with the advent of U.S. economic problems, catastrophic federal deficits, and domestic political preoccupations – with an attitude that sees opportunity for China in a new era in which the American global sun is felt to be well on the way to setting.

Let me stress, however, that there is no simple or automatic connection between broad Chinese perceptions of the United States and Beijing's foreign and security policy choices. There is a school of thought which regards the nature of the Sino-American geopolitical relationship as being so conceptually and politically fragile that for us to prepare for China-related contingencies – or even to *talk* about the possibility of a serious clash of interests – is likely to help make such things come true. Chinese views are entirely up for grabs, the reasoning seems to be, and any such U.S. hedging would "prove" our hostility and help *make* China into an enemy. To such thinkers, therefore, the best response to China's rise is essentially to offer *no* response.

While I would agree that it is imperative to avoid undue provocation, I think the "no-response" analysis relies upon an oversimplified view of China's narrative of the United States and overmakes the case for passivity in potentially dangerous ways. It certainly matters whether Beijing views us as fundamentally hostile, and I hope we can forestall this, because we aren't. Another critical variable, however, is the degree to which Chinese leaders view the United States as being interested in – and capable of – remaining a key player in East Asian and indeed global geopolitics over the long term.

To put it another way, the issue is perhaps less whether we are actually *liked* than how Chinese leaders perceive it to be in China's interest to treat us, our friends, and other states within the system of global order. Years ago, Deng Xiaoping famously admonished his colleagues not to "stick your head out" before China was ready to handle any consequences that such boldness might elicit. As this suggests, Beijing clearly has a well-developed capacity to temper the long-term pursuit of its ideal preferences in light of the geopolitical realities of the moment. Indeed, the whole debate over whether or not China has internalized Westphalian notions of global order and been "socialized" to contemporary international norms to some degree presupposes that Beijing at least *began* to honor nonhierarchic norms for merely instrumental and tactical reasons.

This is why I'm skeptical of the deceptively simple syllogism of "never do anything that might provoke China." It might be, for instance, that the apparently intense Chinese threat perceptions of the late 1990s actually contributed to Beijing's geopolitical *moderation* – insofar as the unwelcome perception that the United States remained a tremendously powerful hyperpower hegemon may have encouraged China to maintain a

less provocative and lower-profile international role in keeping with Deng's cautionary dictum. By the same token, *current* perceptions that we are a weakening and declining power are arguably contributing to Beijing's growing regional and global truculence. It is not always the case, in other words, that "strong" policies are destabilizing.

The future, of course, is notoriously hard to predict. It might yet be that being entirely welcoming and non-provocative remains the best response to China's rise, in the hope of eliciting benign behavior from an emerging titan whose interests fundamentally do *not* clash in any significant way with our own, and from whom such warmness will induce reciprocity. I emphasize, however, that even if one rejects – as I do – approaches to China that assume a deep, inherent, and irreducible hostility between our two countries, there still exists a plausible counter-narrative of how to approach Sino-American dynamics. This narrative is one that does not take utter congruence of interest for granted, and while it tries to avoid unnecessary provocation, it nonetheless aims to persuade Beijing that it is *not* yet – and may *never* be – an appropriate time for China to "stick out its head" in particularly problematic ways. This need not entail insisting upon U.S. global "hegemony," nor any disrespect for the ancient, rich, and sophisticated civilization of China. But neither would it be an entirely non-confrontational approach.

Clearly our approaches to China and to the region will powerfully shape – though by no means entirely or even directly determine – the dominant narrative in Beijing about *us* and *our* future role in the world. It is our challenge to posture ourselves in ways that are firm enough to discourage arrogance, opportunism, and the resurgence of some neo-imperial proprietary interest in East Asia – yet not so reckless that we "confirm" the worst suspicions of those in the Chinese system inclined to see us as a threat against which Chinese policy should ever more directly be focused.

One might even suggest that it is our challenge to make it clear that we have no particular problem with growing Chinese power *per se*, but that we care greatly about its *behavior* and its *role* in the region and the world, its relationships with its neighbors, and its commitment to global norms such as freedom of the seas, freedom of access to outer space, nuclear nonproliferation, and respect for human rights and democracy. I don't believe America has much problem with any other country's power in and of itself, or even with the notion that someone might someday replace us at the top of the geopolitical totem pole. We do, however, care about how the possessor of such power behaves, and about what this would mean for global order. Many years ago, a declining Britain did not *too* much mind its role as a provider of global public security goods being taken over by a kindred democracy committed to similar international goals, but it was clearly willing to take up arms in order to forestall such a key global role being seized by a predatory dictatorship. Perhaps planners in Beijing can learn something from this history.

America's global decline has been periodically forecast for many years, but such prior prognostications have proven false. Nor it is preordained that if we do decline, China will be in a position to replace us. (Beijing, after all, faces domestic challenges that are in some ways *more* formidable than ours.) We shall simply have to see. Precisely because this future is murky, however, we need to be testing our approaches against a broad range

of possible futures. Between the various competing narratives of Sino-American relations, my instinct is that a policy of principled firmness offers the best balance of risk and reward across the landscape of possibilities.

III. *China's Conception of "Core Interests"*

I understand that the Commission is interested in China's conception of its "core interests." If I am right to suspect a continuing salience for Confucian-infused notions of Sinic universalism, I'd wager that territorial unity is considered such an interest.

Despite the ancient roots of the Chinese empire, China *as a nation-state* is a relatively recent idea. In centuries past, after all, Imperial influence was exercised in core regions directly and bureaucratically, in other areas through vaguely defined buffer regions, and further afield through complicated tributary relationships. China's development of an attitude more akin to Western – and indeed specifically European – conceptions of the nation-state as an indissoluble conjunction of a people, its associated territory, and that land's administration largely dates from the late 19th or early 20th Century.

Nevertheless, China's modern narrative of itself has seized upon the idea that China is and must remain a single, unified state under centralized administration – and that the extent of its territory must in its key respects be coextensive with the extent of empire at the height of the Qing. There is no reason why this *has* to be the case, of course, and in some sense such a conclusion is quite ironic, for the Qing was a dynasty imposed by "barbarian" outsiders who *conquered* China: the Manchus. (Basing regional territorial claims upon Qing precedents, therefore – or upon those of the earlier Yuan Dynasty, which was similarly imposed by foreign "barbarians," this time by the Mongols – thus seems a bit like France claiming Belgium because both were at one point conquered by Germany.) Regardless of its idiosyncrasy as applied to areas outside the traditional ethnically Han core of the empire, however, this concept of Qing-keyed territorialism seems to have become a powerful part of the modern Chinese regime's self-identity.

At any rate, whatever the extent of the "natural" unity this schema assumes, it seems pretty clear that unity *itself* is sacrosanct – a feeling that I think is strongly encouraged by ancient attitudes toward political authority. In the old Confucian conception, as I noted earlier, political authority is the outgrowth of moral authority, or virtue. In modern times, a marriage has been arranged between a territorialist nation-state conception of "China" and the ancient ethic of political authority grounded in assumed virtue.

This marriage has potentially significant implications. In years past, the empire could acquire, or slough off, sizeable territories without any necessary peril to its legitimating ideology. With respect to barbarian or semi-barbarian areas – and to some extent even with respect to the ethno-cultural core of China, which Zhou-era precedents suggest *could* in principle exist as multiple semi-independent feudatory proto-states, so long as all offered at least notional homage to the center – more important than direct bureaucratic control was the notion of civilizational hierarchy, which insisted that everyone still pay respects to the notional monopole in at least moral and symbolic terms. Even when

China found itself weaker than outside barbarians – which it hated being, but sometimes could not avoid – trouble was taken to ensure the proper gradient of *theoretical* status wherever possible. Actual control, *per se*, was sometimes almost a secondary consideration; old China, one might say, conceived of itself as a cultural and civilizational empire as much (or more) than as a specifically territorial one.

One corollary of today's marriage of Chinese virtuocracy and European "national" territorialism, however, is that questioning *any* aspect of political authority over *any* particular part of what has been declared to be "naturally" a part of China is gravely subversive of government legitimacy. Chinese elites have long had a profound phobia of disunity, a fear of situations in which there is more than one claimant to supreme politico-moral authority within whatever territory is deemed civilizationally Chinese. With these attitudes now entangled with an expansive and rigid "national" territorialism, questioning the government's right to rule the full extent of the territory China has come to imagine for itself is taken inherently to undermine the regime's right to rule *anywhere*.

This, I think, helps explain the intensity of the government's defensiveness about continued control of Tibet and Xinjiang, the "naturalness" of Beijing's possession of which is, interestingly, rooted primarily in the precedents of *non*-Chinese conquest under the Yuan and Qing. It also helps one understand Beijing's peculiar neuralgia about Taiwan – a territory with the temerity to be civilizationally Chinese, beyond Beijing's control, prosperous, *and* democratic all at the same time, thus by its very existence calling into question the Communist government's legitimacy in multiple respects. Modern China's entanglement of virtuocratic political theory with territorialism also gives special reason to worry about its increasing interest in identifying far-flung islands and great expanses of nearby ocean as intrinsic parts of China's territorial birthright.

IV. *The Cast of Characters*

I can offer you no particular insight when it comes modern Chinese analogues to the arcane Cold War discipline of "Kremlinology," but one hears it said in policy analytical circles – and privately from U.S. government officials – that there does indeed seem to be a profound debate underway in Chinese leadership circles over how to approach relations with the rest of the world, and with the United States in particular.

On one side, it is said, are those who are more inclined to adhere, for now at least, to Deng's "don't stick your head out" philosophy, content to continue pursuing growth and development behind as seemingly placid a geopolitical veneer as can be arranged. On the other side are those more inclined toward assertive and nationalistic approaches, perhaps reasoning that the time has now finally come for China to stick out its head.

The military is reportedly to be increasingly of the latter view, which is said generally to be gaining ground, with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) steadily becoming more influential in policymaking circles. Many analysts seem also to believe that China's air force and naval staffs are on the ascendant *within* the PLA, at the expense – both with regard to resources and policy influence – of the ground forces. (This development, if

true, would certainly be consistent with Beijing's increased emphasis upon high-technology warfare and regional power projection.)

It is also widely believed that the government in Beijing is increasingly influenced by the views of a new generation of chauvinistic Chinese nationalists – fire-breathers whom it has indulged to bolster its political legitimacy now that Communist ideology is so thoroughly discredited, but whose enthusiasms are proving easier to inflame than control.

The well-informed people with whom I have spoken see the overall direction of China's approach to the United States as being sharply contested in Chinese leadership circles, with more assertive and confrontational elements gaining strength in recent years.

V. *China's Message*

Perhaps as a result of such shifts, the message China is sending to the world has evolved significantly. Once, China's perception management effort focused upon promoting what might be called the "benign rise" thesis. This was an approach probably rooted in Deng's "don't stick your head out" maxim, and it was powerfully consonant with ancient statecraft writings warning that other states will tend to form countervailing alliances against a rising power, as well as with venerable virtuocratic notions pursuant to which the ruler cannot admit to moral defect without calling into question his own mandate to rule. (How could such a leader concede his ascendancy to be anything *but* "benign"?)

Today, however, China seems more openly assertive. The narrative promoted by Beijing seems now to be one of power by birthright: the assertion of special prerogatives in East Asia, coupled with an ostentatious show of emerging military capabilities focused upon denying U.S. military forces access to the region, thereby deterring our intervention in whatever future conflicts might erupt there involving China.

On the heels of the recent global financial crisis, Chinese officials were quick to begin speaking in terms suggestive of a definitive U.S. eclipse, and perhaps indeed our replacement by China as the hub of the international system. Officials in Beijing have mused publicly about replacing the U.S. dollar as the benchmark global currency, and seem to have seen the crisis as offering an "historic opportunity" for Beijing to increase its strategic influence – apparently trying, as *The Economist* put it, to turn the financial collapse into "a kind of induction ceremony for China as a world power."

China's security posture also seems to be shifting, particularly in the messages it has been sending. Having demonstrated an emergent space-denial capability in 2007 by testing an anti-satellite weapon, China is also expanding and upgrading its submarine fleet – not to mention showing it off in visible forward deployments of attack boats to places such as Hainan Island – and has kept rumors bubbling for years about developing the classic tool (and symbol) of modern power projection, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. China has also reveled in media coverage of a new ballistic missile variant designed to target *American* carriers, and released photographs of a new "stealthy" aircraft earlier this year just as the U.S. Defense Secretary visited Beijing.

China is also believed to be the source of significant cyber-espionage activity, and seems to be developing advanced cyber-attack capabilities. Among other things, the PLA has formed special information warfare units, and some of its officials have spoken of "information deterrence" as acquiring a status comparable to that of *nuclear* deterrence. China seems to be making a big show of cyber power as part of what one report prepared for your Commission has described as a "sweeping military modernization program that has fundamentally transformed [China's] ability to fight high tech wars."

After years of quiet and relatively non-provocative deployments that some commentators labeled merely "minimal deterrence," moreover, Beijing is today steadily increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal – the only nuclear weapons state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to be doing so. Recent media reports suggest that China has rebuffed U.S. efforts to engender strategic dialogue and reciprocal nuclear transparency, with senior PLA officers replying that such tension-ameliorative transparency is "impossible," that the growth of Beijing's nuclear force is an "objective reality," and that China will accept "no limit" on its technical progress.

All in all, therefore, there seems indeed to be a shift in messaging strategy. One may suspect that the reality of China's effective military power vis-à-vis the United States is still somewhat – and perhaps significantly – behind the appearance it now seems keen to project, but Beijing's intended *political* and *strategic* signaling seems clear enough.

We are being offered a narrative in which it is becoming untenably dangerous for us to maintain air and naval freedom of action in the Western Pacific. China apparently aims to convince us and our friends that a serious forward military presence in the region is unsustainable, thereby deterring our involvement in future conflicts and convincing our allies that if push really came to shove, we wouldn't be there for them. A cynic might suspect, perhaps, that the groundwork is thus being laid – in East Asia, at any rate – for some possible future return to a more psychologically, politically, and symbolically hierarchic and Sinocentric approach to international order. What is less clear is precisely what counter-narrative the United States will now choose to offer.

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Dr. Ford is a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C. He previously served as a Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, U.S. Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation, and General Counsel to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. A reserve intelligence officer in the U.S Navy, contributing editor to The New Atlantis *magazine, and ordained lay chaplain in the Zen Peacemaker Order, Ford also writes for the* ***New Paradigms Forum*** *website (www.NewParadigmsForum.com).*