**The Dignity-Freedom Nexus**

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The period from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century was a difficult era for China, known as the “Century of Humiliation.” In 1839, Great Britain imposed the First Opium War on China to secure rights to the opium trade. As a result of this three-year war, Britain captured Hong Kong and many Chinese ports. Fifteen years later, a similar war occurred, involving France as well.

China faced further humiliation. In 1894, neighbouring Japan invaded and seized Taiwan. Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Japan divided China into pieces. In the last years of the 19th century, a rebellion against Christian missionaries erupted, which the Allies crushed. The 1911 revolution established the Qing Dynasty, but it was weak. In the third decade of the 20th century, Japan attacked China twice, resulting in brutal domination. The local population suffered greatly during World War II.

The term “Century of Humiliation” encapsulates a period of profound national trauma and resentment towards foreign powers, playing a pivotal role in shaping modern Chinese nationalism. This era, marked by military defeats, territorial losses, and forced treaties, deeply scarred the Chinese psyche. The frequent reference to this period in Chinese political rhetoric serves to underscore the imperative of maintaining national sovereignty, strength, and unity. The collective memory of humiliation galvanized the revolutionary movement led by Mao Zedong, culminating in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Since then, China’s leadership has remained resolutely committed to ensuring that such a period of subjugation and degradation is never repeated. This historical consciousness drives China’s contemporary policies and its vigorous pursuit of economic, military, and geopolitical strength, reinforcing a national resolve to safeguard against external domination and preserve its hard-won autonomy and dignity.

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John Mearsheimer, a prominent American political scientist and professor at the University of Chicago, has offered a detailed and nuanced analysis of China’s rise in his influential book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” Mearsheimer predicted in the early 21st century that as China advances economically and militarily, it will soon seek to dominate Asia in much the same way that the United States has historically sought to dominate the Western Hemisphere.

Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism posits that great powers are inherently driven to achieve regional hegemony to ensure their survival in an anarchic international system. He argues that China’s growing power will inevitably lead to increased tensions and rivalry with the United States, as both nations seek to maximize their security and strategic advantages.

According to Mearsheimer, states naturally strive to enhance their military capabilities and influence when conditions allow, aiming to become regional powers. Nationalism, in his view, is a critical and natural component of state survival, fuelling the drive for autonomy and dominance. He emphasizes that China’s historical memory of the “Century of Humiliation” has instilled a strong sense of dignity and a desire to never again be subjugated by foreign powers. This deeply ingrained historical trauma makes China particularly sensitive to issues of sovereignty and external interference.

Mearsheimer advises American leadership to recognize and respect this aspect of Chinese nationalism. He suggests that the United States should pursue a path of reconciliation and accommodation with China, rather than confrontation, to avoid exacerbating tensions. He warns against the American tendency to impose its model of democracy and capitalism on other nations, arguing that such efforts often backfire and lead to increased hostility.

Mearsheimer also critiques the notion that economic integration and engagement will inevitably lead to political liberalization and democratization in China. He points out that China has continued to grow and strengthen its global influence without adopting Western democratic norms or capitalist practices, challenging the belief that economic development will naturally bring about political change.

Time has indeed vindicated Mearsheimer’s argument. The U.S. and its Western allies pursued a strategy of integrating Russia and China into the global trade system, hoping that economic engagement would eventually lead to democratic reforms. Meanwhile, their approach towards the rest of the world involved forcibly removing dictatorships and bolstering emerging democracies. However, this strategy backfired spectacularly. The Middle East became a battleground, with Afghanistan bearing the brunt of devastation. Pakistan was touted as a beacon of democracy in the Muslim world under the guise of economic reforms, yet it now struggles with economic crises and crippling debt. While Russia regained its strength, China emerged as a formidable global power. The attempt to impose Western democratic norms and capitalist practices has not only failed but has also exacerbated tensions and instability in various regions, underscoring the complexities of international relations and the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach.

The concept of dignity holds paramount importance in the context of a nation’s progress and preservation of freedom and honour. It serves as the definitive boundary between national sovereignty and subjugation, embodying the essence of a nation’s spirit of liberty. Considered as an inviolable red line, dignity forms the bedrock upon which a country’s constitutional and legal framework is constructed.

Violation of this dignity is deemed treacherous, warranting severe repercussions, as the demise of dignity signals the downfall of the nation itself. Therefore, maintaining this red line is imperative for the very survival of a nation. Upholding dignity is essential for national security and global standing, encompassing adherence to the rule of law, currency stability, freedom of expression, judicial integrity, and the resolute character of national leadership.

In essence, the preservation of dignity serves as a fundamental pillar for the sustenance and prosperity of a nation, underscoring its commitment to upholding principles of justice, freedom, and sovereignty.

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