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Sino-US Relations: 'Pacific Dream' or Global Nightmare?

Abstract

This paper will examine US-China relations through the lens of the 'Pacific Dream' thesis put forward by Patrick Mendis, who raises the question as to whether the future century of Sino-American relations will be defined by an 'American,' 'Chinese' or 'Pacific Dream'. The former are grounded in highly specific myths of national virtue that presents the respective homeland as an exceptional nation, charged with an ineluctable, unique destiny grounded in exclusionary visions of defining national characteristics. Mendis, argues that ultimately the history of both states as trading nations will win out over foreign policies visions grounded in senses of national uniqueness creating a 'Pacific Dream': a rational, economically liberal and highly interdependent order that will also serve to promote global peace and prosperity more broadly. However, this paper argues that Mendis's thesis is not borne out by an empirical analysis of the current state of Sino-US relations or the political and economic activities of either state and points out that numerous liberal predictions of a more pacific world order through global trade have repeatedly been proven catastrophically wrong. From a theoretical perspective, the paper adopts Eric Voegelin's concept of 'political Gnosticism' to critically analyse why Mendis' 'dreams' are inherently conflictual.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the 'Pacific Dream' thesis of Sri Lankan-American scholar Patrick Mendis, as it appears in his 2014 monograph *Peaceful War: How the Chinese Dream and the American Destiny Create a Pacific New World Order*. In this work, Mendis argues that, despite culturally-rooted senses of national virtue in the form of the 'Pacific Dream' and the 'American Dream' emphasising the exceptionality and unique mission of each state, the common interests of trade will ultimate lead to a harmonious East Asian, and ultimately world, order. In the 'Pacific Dream' a rational appreciation of common interests and mutual prosperity will prevail. After a brief outline of the main arguments in Mendis' book, the paper proceeds to some methodological comments on the understanding of 'civilisations' in International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) literature, before moving on to introduce the concept of 'political Gnosticism' developed by the political philosopher Eric Voegelin in the mid-twentieth century to explain why Mendis' determination to ground his concept of a harmonious Sino-American world order in notions

of cultural exceptionalism and national virtue is profoundly mistaken. After exploring the historical and empirical dimensions of Chinese and American foreign policy that appear to show considerable evidence of the relationship between national virtue and the exclusionary utopianism of political Gnosticism, the paper concludes with some brief words on the likelihood of the Sino-US relationship remaining peaceful.

Questions of national ‘virtue’ take on an important Asia-Pacific dimension in the question of future US-China relations. This has been most recently evident in the work of American-Sri Lankan Scholar Patrick Mendis concerning, who raises the question as to whether the future century of Sino-American relations will be defined by an ‘American,’ ‘Chinese’ or ‘Pacific Dream’. Defining the differing senses of culturally-specific national virtue, Mendis differentiates between an ‘American Dream’ anchored in Thomas Jefferson’s famous triptych of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,’ predicated on individual freedom, liberal capitalism and democratic republican forms of government, and a ‘Chinese Dream’ being increasingly articulated by Chinese Premier Xi Jinping. In contrast to the emphasis on the liberty of the individual in the ‘American Dream’ Mendis asserts that Xi’s narrative of national virtue involves a self-conscious revival of centuries-old Confucian culture and ethics, and a strong commitment to communalism over the individual, social harmony and national prosperity. The expressed purpose of this ‘China Dream’ is, according to Mendis, the desire to firmly establish an vision of China, both at home and abroad as a strong, culturally and politically distinct, state after a century and half of social, political, and economic upheaval often inflicted at the hands of others. The ‘American Dream’ and the ‘China Dream’ are thus senses of national virtue and self-understanding that have fundamentally different principles at their heart: the American Dream is one postulated around individual opportunity, freedom and enterprise, the Chinese Dream by contrast is centred on the proposition that economic prosperity is the foundation of a strong nationⁱ.

In the case of Mendis’s ‘Chinese Dream’ the importance of trade to the realisation of China’s domestic and foreign policy objectives is readily evident in the longstanding efforts by China to cultivate both extensive and intensive trading links with states in sub-Saharan Africa, in which it has utilised a discourse emphasising ‘South-South solidarity’ and stressing principles of non-interference in the affairs of those states with whom it does business, harmony of interests, multilateralism, and consensual decision-making. Simultaneously, China has offered considerable economic assistance to African states in the form of infrastructure construction, soft loans, and the training of professionals in exchange for stable supplies of primary commodities. These core principles of Chinese foreign policy have, moreover, been deliberately articulated as an alternative to what is cast in contrast as the perceived hypocrisy and arrogance of the West in its dealings with sub-Saharan African states. Emphasising its own historical experience as a victim of brutal acts of subordination and oppression at the hands of Western Imperialism, China has cleverly exploited the often justifiable senses of grievance felt by African states against the West to carve out economic relationships crucial to China’s continued economic expansion whilst simultaneously expanding its political influence and ‘soft power’ outside of its immediate geographical environsⁱⁱ.

It is the importance of trade to both China and the US that leads to Mendis to claim that the twenty-first century will be neither dominated by the American or the Chinese ‘Dream,’ but that the US and China as trading nations will ultimately overcome their increasing geopolitical rivalry in East Asia. Thus, the world order of the twenty-first century will be defined not by the growing sense of mistrust and geopolitical competition between the US as an established great power intent on the maintenance of the status quo and a China aspiring to great power that seeks to challenge it, but instead by what Mendis terms the ‘Pacific Dream’. In the Pacific Dream, conflictual understandings of national virtue and the visions of national destiny that they support are put aside for the sake of a common interest in the construction of a shared Sino-American vision facilitated through trade and commerce. The result will therefore be a prosperous, stable and highly interdependent Asia-Pacific region that is a ‘win-win’ for both the United States and China, and that will also serve to promote global peace and prosperity more broadlyⁱⁱⁱ.

Mendis arrives at these claims through a series of stages, each of which is intended to reinforce his central point that Sino-American relations are informed by common interests and a shared history that will ultimately see their mutual interests as trading nations win through over the growing animosities of the present. He first attempts to establish this premise through a cross-comparison of long history of Sino-American relations back to founding of US as an independent nation that has seen considerable inter-cultural exchange, even as both has been marked by a profound sense of its own cultural and political exceptionality. To make this point, Mendis points to the fascination of many of the Founding Fathers, especially with Benjamin Franklin with Chinese culture and the premises of Confucianism. In particular he points to the close analogues in Confucianism with the Deist belief in ‘nature’s god’ of many of Founding Fathers, together with Franklin’s fascination with and widespread dissemination of Confucian ethics via the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard Almanack* (50). From here, Mendis illustrates the considerable similarities in the manner of symbolisation of the notions of exceptionality, virtue and Divine mission of the Mandate of Heaven and the young American Republic through a very detailed exploration of the arcane symbolism used in the architectural layout of both the Forbidden City in Beijing and Washington DC^{iv}.

Having explored the arcane symbolisation of their respective conceptions of national exceptionality, Mendis moves onto explore the history of trading links between the US and China that date back to the earliest days of the American Republic. Here, Mendis discusses the significant imports of Chinese tea into the nascent US and exports of China of American Ginseng^v. Moreover, he alludes the crucial role of tea in the struggles of the American colonies against the British, arguing that in the Boston Tea Party remains a significant founding act in the notions of cultural and political exceptionalism that still inform the popular and political culture of the United States to the present day. Mendis draws on all of the above to assert and identify the common interests between the US and China in preserving a harmonious global trading system through a greater understanding of the philosophical and spiritual ties that bind them. These common interests Mendis ultimately summarises as the ‘Hamiltonian pursuit of Jeffersonian ends,’ referring to the different but

complementary methods and objectives that the respective Founding Fathers envisaged for the transformation of the post-Revolutionary US into a great power. In short, Mendis presents this as the development of economic power and prosperity (Hamiltonian) in order to realise a virtuous system of political order (Jefferson), both at home and ultimately abroad. It is argued that a similar process is underway in the China of the twenty-first century, though in the case the ‘Hamiltonian,’ economic route is ultimately in the service of a notion of a virtuous form of political order in keeping with the hierarchical, communally-focused understanding of political order and legitimate authority contained within Confucianism^{vi}.

Mendis then proceeds to a discussion of the possibility of a ‘Ménlúo Doctrine’: a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine that is based on the values that purportedly informed the voyages of Chinese Admiral Zheng He through the Indian Ocean and into the Arabian Sea during the Ming Dynasty. Rather than being a voyage of imperial conquest (though the armada that sailed with Zheng contained considerable military resources should they be needed) Zheng’s encounters with the peoples of the region he visited stressed mutual respect, reciprocity, consensus, non-interference, and harmony under the Mandate of Heaven, though they also required the payment of tribute to the Chinese Emperor in exchange for the right to trade with China. Mendis claims that He’s voyages laid the historical basis for a fundamentally pacifistic set of principles to guide Chinese foreign policy-making that continues into the present, and is readily visible in China’s growing engagement with the outside world, especially in South Asia, especially Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and sub-Saharan Africa. What particularly distinguished the voyages of Zheng from those later voyages of discovery by Western explorers, in addition to the far superior size and level of technological sophistication of Zheng’s armada was a distinct aversion to the use of Force, except as a very last resort and instead a considerable preference for the mutually beneficent gains to be made from trade^{vii}.

Mendis argues that Zheng’s voyages were reflective of a Chinese sense of ‘Manifest Destiny’ to expand the reach of Imperial China far beyond the shores of China itself during the period of the Ming Dynasty. Instead of simply being inspired by a mundane curiosity to explore the world beyond China’s shores, or solely being driven by material impulses to expand the trading relations of the Celestial Empire, Zheng’s voyages were divinely ordained as part of a fundamental duty on the part of the Emperor to draw foreign peoples into the realm of the ‘Mandate of Heaven,’ thereby confirming and demonstrating the superior virtue of the Confucian notion of order. It is argued that if modern China can develop sense of Manifest Destiny as it was displayed initially in the ideals that underpinned Zheng He’s voyages and the US promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 then it promises the realisation of the ‘Pacific Dream’. Mendis asserts that the idealisation of similar principles animated the Monroe Doctrine in the United States: non-interference; liberty; reciprocity through free trade and national self-determination over imperial subordination. All of the above contributed to the sense of the part of Americans that theirs was a superior form of civilisation to that of the monarchical tyrannies the colonists of the Atlantic Coast had left behind in Europe. These observations lead Mendis to postulate that, given China’s professed preference for trade and mutual respect over the use of violence, any future Ménlúo Doctrine’ should reflect the high

ideals, restraint and mutual respect that animated the United States during the period of the annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War from 1836-1850. Where Mendis admits that the Monroe was corrupted later in the nineteenth century by a distinctly imperialistic turn in US foreign policy, he nevertheless claims that by and large the history of the United States' behaviour in the Western Hemisphere has approximated much more to that of a 'Good Neighbour' (to use Franklin D. Roosevelt's term) than that of an imperial aggressor. Therefore, adherence to the common principles in Monroe and potential Ménlúo Doctrines not only reflects the preference of both China and the United States for trade over war and geopolitical manoeuvring, but also again suggests often overlooked commonalities in their respective historical evolutions^{viii}.

Crucial to these arguments are what Mendis sees as the role of the newly-agreed Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free-trade deal recently agreed between the US and 11 other states in the Asia-Pacific region, of which China is presently not a member. In this account, the TPP is presented as the gateway to an era of 'Mutually Assured Prosperity' (MAP); a symbiotic relationship between Washington and Beijing that emphasises mutual cooperation and prosperity through trade over geopolitical rivalry. Some lip service is paid to more critical accounts of the geopolitical aims of the TPP as a means by the United States to 'contain' a rising power that represents a fundamental threat to its continued political, military and economic predominance along the Pacific Rim^{ix}, but ultimately these are discarded in favour of an analysis that claims that the TPP will prove the framework that ultimately paves the way to the 'Pacific Dream' renaissance of 'Chimerica'; the win-win, Sino-American-dominated world order that is defined by mutual prosperity, social stability, and a full appreciation of the harmony of interests in preserving and sustaining this order on the part of Beijing and Washington; Rather than being a buffer on China's regional foreign policy ambitions, TPP might ironically represent the means by which China might realise them through encouraging China to engage in a process of thoroughgoing domestic economic liberalisation that Mendis presents as a means by which prosperity can be maximised^x.

In short, we are told that 'as pairs of exporters and importers, creditors and debtors, producers and consumers, and adopters and innovators, the Chinese and American people are organically employing Hamiltonian means towards Jeffersonian ends – a strategy with the potential to transform Sino-US relations for a new, mutually-enriching Pacific century. Rather than supplant Chinese ends, Washington's strategy could provide the means for China to realise its own Jeffersonian vision'^{xi}. In other words, that their history of mutual-exchange, both ideational and economic, of senses of divinely-inspired national and cultural exceptionalism, their deeply inter-twined and interdependent trade and financial affairs, and their shared interest in widening and deepening peace and stability in the international system in order to further the mutual benefits that both gain from their interactions, will win out over the present geopolitical differences and incompatible interests that serve to divide them. Moreover, the more that each side learns to appreciate the commonality of their historical experience in the rise to great power status, the greater it creates the potential to create a set of shared values, rooted in the notion of historical and cultural exceptionalism of each, that will serve to mitigate the potential for conflict in the future.

This paper advances two avenues of critique towards Mendis’ ‘Pacific Dream’ thesis. The first of these might be termed a ‘conventional’ International Relations and International Political Economy critique, and questions the (somewhat vague) theoretical and historical underpinnings on which Mendis bases his arguments. It argues that nothing fundamentally new is offered here, and indeed many of the assumptions, stripped of the attempts at cross-cultural analysis of the arcane and esoteric symbolism of the United States and Imperial China, have informed much liberal thinking on global politics and economics for decades – despite considerable historical evidence to the contrary. Moreover, it will question the rather ideologically selective and Panglossian interpretation that Mendis employs of some of his core concepts and historical themes. This critique will be advanced in this section of the paper. The second critique is somewhat more eclectic and uses the concept of ‘political Gnosticism,’ advanced by the anti-modernistic philosopher Eric Voegelin to problematise Mendis’ claims that the differing senses of civilisational (and hence political) exceptionalism that lie at the root of Chinese and American sense of identity can form the basis of a harmonious world order. Instead, using Voegelin’s understanding of modern political Gnosticism, it will argue that claims to civilisational exceptionalism have taken on a particular utopian and exclusionary form within modernity that are more likely to lead to forms of xenophobic cultural chauvinism that are more likely to lead to perpetual conflict and misunderstanding rather than perpetual peace.

Some Methodological Notes: Why this is Not the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ Thesis Again

The first point that needs to be made before moving forward to the substantive analysis that is presented in this paper is that it is expressly *not* intended to be yet *another* hackneyed rehashing of Huntingdon’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis^{xii}. The author neither assumes that conflict between the United States and China is inevitable nor desirable on the basis of some pre-conceived national security agenda on the part of either for this paper is intended to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, the primary focus of the paper is to show, through the work of Eric Voegelin, that an inter-civilisational dialogue, leading to the kind of harmony of interests that Mendis presupposes, *cannot* and indeed will not be secured through an appeal to senses of national virtue and cultural exceptionality. Instead, the paper advocates, but does not discuss in depth owing to space considerations, a rethinking of what is meant by ‘civilisations’ that adopts the definition developed by the neo-Gramscian political economist Robert Cox in the early years of the last decade.

Numerous problems are evident in Huntingdon’s thesis that makes it of questionable use to the understanding of contemporary international relations. Firstly, Huntingdon’s definition of what constitutes a ‘civilisation’ is both unacceptably vague and highly deterministic. He sees civilisations as little more than monolithic cultural and political blocs in thrall to a fixed essence that is incapable of adaptation, absorption of alien cultural practice and values, or peaceful coexistence with other cultural forms. Moreover, Huntingdon’s understanding of other ‘civilisations’ is drawn almost entirely from scholarship produced by Western scholars, writing about non-Western cultures from a highly Eurocentric perspective, and conditioned

by the biases and assumptions of the International Relations of the Cold War, which had a vested interest in perceiving future trajectories of conflict in a post-Cold War world where old certainties no longer prevailed. Huntingdon's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis could (and indeed, has) be perceived as an attempt to analytically 'freeze' an increasingly unpredictable post-Cold War world order in a manner that privileged and preserved existing relations of power and knowledge in both the academy and in policy-making circles over alternatives that departed from the Eurocentric (neo)Realist orthodoxy grounded in strategic rationality and great power politics^{xiii}.

Further, Huntingdon's definition of what constitutes a civilisation also tends towards an understanding that casts civilisations in predominantly *geographic* as well as cultural terms, allowing him to paint a picture of a world of competing civilisational 'blocs,' neatly dispersed across the globe as clearly identifiable, unambiguous entities. As a result, the possibility of a world of parallel, overlapping, interacting civilisations – even in the supposed 'core' of one civilisational bloc – with the concomitant hybrid identities that come from the experience of simultaneously existing in a number of civilisational inter-subjectivities is ignored for the sake of the International Relations theorist's love of 'parsimony' and 'analytical clarity'. However, one of the main claims of this paper, especially when it comes to Sino-American relations and the possibility of the 'Pacific Dream' is that such supposedly 'simple' and 'elegant' theorising obscures and ignores far more than it reveals^{xiv}.

This paper therefore wishes to challenge Huntingdon's static understanding of what constitutes a 'civilisation' by contrasting it with Robert W. Cox's conception of civilisation as a collection of culturally-derived inter-subjective understandings that are in fact highly fluid, and therefore subject to a constant process of becoming through their reproduction and transformation in the light of internal and external social, economic, political and cultural pressures. Moreover, derived from Cox's neo-Gramscian understanding of word orders, it is possible to 'put the agency back in' to an understanding of the manner of civilisational transformation through Cox's concern with the reciprocal relationship between social forces, forms of state and configurations of world order and the mutually dependent interactions of ideas, institutions and material capabilities of different actors across all three. Thus, by adopting such a multi-dimensional understanding of how civilisational inter-subjectivities are produced and reproduced, concerns about the relationship between structure and agency, in particular how structures of knowledge and power in the global political economy conditions and influence actors choices and possibilities, whilst the actions of differing social forces serve to transform structures to reflect new priorities and emergent power relations, can be accounted for. Above all, Huntingdon's understanding of 'civilisation' in which the core determinants of what constitutes a civilisation is regarded as simply being *present* – immanent, eternal and seemingly beyond human agency in either its creation or possible transformation – is successfully avoided^{xv}.

The understanding of 'civilisations' as being the result of a constant process of becoming is of considerable importance when engaging in a critical analysis of the possible future trajectories of Sino-US relations. Most notably, it avoids the automatic assumption that flows from Huntingdon's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis that assumes that inter-civilisational

encounters can only ever be conflictive, due their implacable cultural incompatibility. Of course, one must not dismiss the possibility that inter-civilisational encounters *can be* and indeed *are* conducive to the product of often deeply-entrenched and intractable conflicts, as witnessed by the growth of Islamic and other forms of political extremism that embrace reactionary forms of rejectionism grounded in highly conservative and exclusionist forms of identity. Nevertheless, the paper rejects the assumption *a priori* that inter-civilisational encounters are necessarily conflictual in favour of a hermeneutic, critical theoretical approach which intends to subject *actually existing* inter-civilisational encounters, in this case in the form of Sino-US relations, to a rigorous critical analysis that attempts to identify the possible trajectories of change in the twenty-first century, in order to suggest possible courses of action that will serve to minimise the potential for conflict going forward. This will be, moreover above all else, a sympathetic study of the relationship between civilisations and international politics that maintains a strong normative commitment to the possibility of the peaceful development of relations between China and the United States, but which also excludes the frequent (and often implicit) Eurocentric bias present in much Western scholarship that unreflexively assigns the moral high ground to the West in general and the US in particular^{xvi}.

Similarly, a critical theoretical approach to the questions of civilisations and world orders avoids another deep-seated flaw in Huntingdon's approach; the adoption of a moncausal and highly reductive reading of the reasons behind twenty-first century global conflict and instability that remains locked into the geopolitical assumptions of the Cold War. It is the contention of this paper that such assumptions that such processes of reduction are simply not acceptable to the understanding of a world that is much more complex and rich in political possibilities than the bipolar world of Soviet-US competition, even taking into account that its primary focus is the nature of the future relationship between established superpower in the form of the United States and rising power in the form of China. In particular, it takes on board Cox's arguments that the reducing of future world conflict to questions of 'civilisational' difference obscures the very real social dimensions to future US-Chinese conflict that have nothing to do with cultural irreconcilability. Thus, Huntingdon's insistence on the cultural basis of future conflict deliberately masks alternative explanations for economic and ethnic conflicts that are not only much more plausible, but which also clearly expose the role of the countries in the developed world in both their cause and their perpetuation^{xvii}.

Adopting a critical, hermeneutic approach of the neo-Gramscian kind advocated by Cox to Sino-US relations therefore avoids the pitfalls of assuming that civilisational identities are immanent, given and essentialist in nature. Moreover, it also draws the observer's attention to the possibility that civilisational identities may not be organic products of diachronic intersubjective processes at all, but may instead, as in the case of Xi's 'China Dream' may be *deliberately fabricated political instruments*, intended to give a sense of emotional and historical legitimacy to political papers of social transformation and power consolidation. Reflecting this possibility, part of the paper's task will be to critically assess how competing, contradictory social forces within China and the US are attempting to shape the relationship

between the two states to suit their own interests, and how these emergent social forces are themselves both expressive and constitutive of new forms of state and world orders in the 21st century. Additionally, the paper will remain alive to what Cox defines the ‘internal dialectic of a civilisation’^{xviii}, the very organic processes of change and evolution that are themselves reflective of transformations of the relations of power within the global political economy, that papers such as the ‘American’ and ‘China’ dreams may be deliberately invoked to distract attention away from.

Moreover, a critical hermeneutic approach avoids another pitfall that Mendis’ ‘Pacific Dream’ potentially falls into. This is the possibility of simply swapping one utopian paper for another that better reflects the ideological proclivities of the scholar. In the case of Mendis’ ‘Pacific Dream,’ the assumption that ultimately a form of liberal economic cosmopolitanism will win out over entrenched and increasingly antagonistic geopolitical and cultural rivalries looks suspiciously like a form of ‘vulgar Marxism’ that assumes that it is ultimately economic relations that determine the superstructures of thought and institutions in the contemporary global political economy^{xix}. One of the key questions that the paper will ask therefore, is that, in contrast to the arguments of Mendis, is it that very liberal economic cosmopolitanism that for Mendis underpins the ‘Pacific Dream’ that is in fact driving each state into a forms of cultural particularity that is exacerbating geopolitical rivalry? By adopting this approach, the paper acknowledges the existence of civilisational rivalry between the US and China without essentialising it. Equally, however, it avoids responding by advocating utopian solutions cast from a form of liberal economic cosmopolitanism that may be more part of the problem than any possible solution. The result may be something approaching Mendis’s ‘Pacific Dream,’ but again this should not assumed *a priori* in a climate where the present tenor of Sino-US relations is far from harmonious.

The ‘Pacific Dream’ and Political Gnosticism: Sino-American Relations and the ‘Clash of Utopias’

At this point it is perhaps necessary to recap the core arguments being made in this paper: Patrick Mendis assumes that a harmony of interests can be arrived at through the commonalities subsumed in two actually very different senses of exceptionalism. This is highly problematic both on the pragmatic and the philosophical level, and these two dimensions of the problem are intimately related and intertwined. However, the principal problem is the philosophical one; Mendis’ chosen grounding of the ‘Pacific Dream’ in a synthesis of two, competing senses of civilisational exceptionalism and virtue in the form of the ‘American Dream’ and the ‘China Dream’. Whilst there may be a common, materialist element linking the two, the fact remains that they rest on fundamentally different notions of cultural and political order that display a considerable degree of incompatibility and incommensurability. This becomes distinctly problematic if one accepts the position, most commonly associated with social Constructivism, that senses of national, cultural and political exceptionalism and virtue influence both knowledge of the other and the action informed by it – in other words how ‘I’ see ‘you’ and then how my knowledge of ‘you’ then conditions my actions towards ‘you’ and how ‘I’ perceive ‘your’ actions^{xx}.

Evidence of this is abundantly clear in the current highly ambivalent relationship between China and the United States, especially over issues such as the South China Sea and the role of each state in East Asia and in the global trading system. However, the philosophical side of this problem is possibly the most illuminating as to why Mendis’ ‘Pacific Dream’ remains a highly unlikely outcome of the present Sino-US rivalry, and the concept of ‘political Gnosticism’ advanced by Eric Voegelin is one that is particularly helpful in understanding the problems and contradictions of placing hopes that senses of national virtue will create the basis for peaceful future Sin-American relations. In particular, the assumed ‘liberal peace dividend’ that is a core aspect of Mendis’ ‘Pacific Dream’ begins to look suspiciously like yet another utopian project superimposed on two that already have mutually incompatible interests and designs for world order. However, it should be qualified that, even taking into account the somewhat pessimistic tone of this paper, there is no presumption that the US and China are somehow ‘destined’ to fall into conflict at some point, along the lines of a ‘1914 replayed/Thucydides Trap’ scenario that claims that history shows that conflict between the established hegemon and a rising power is unavoidable^{xxi}. Nevertheless, Voegelin’s philosophy does suggest is that, rather than mitigating the possibility for conflict, what are fundamentally *competing* senses of virtue and exceptionalism create the potential for a particularly explosive form of conflict in the future, and make it more likely than not within certain scenarios. It is to Voegelin’s concept of ‘political Gnosticism’ that we now turn to understand why this might be the case.

Eric Voegelin and ‘Political Gnosticism’

Born to a Catholic family in Austria in 1909, Eric Voegelin was one of that generation of German intellectuals who found themselves exiled to the United States in the aftermath of the rise of National Socialism in Germany and Austria. Along with figures such as Karl Löwith and Hannah Arendt, to name but two, Voegelin found himself engaging in an intense debate as to how the catastrophe of National Socialism could have been allowed to unfold, and above all whether something similar could happen in a liberal polity such as that of the United States. Voegelin’s answer was potentially that it could, under certain circumstances, and he advanced the concept of political Gnosticism to explain why^{xxii}.

Explained briefly, ‘political Gnosticism’ arises out of Voegelin’s understanding of modernity and was also instrumental in the formation of his philosophy of consciousness, which is far beyond the scope of this paper to explain. In short, however, Voegelin outlines a neo-Platonic understanding of the nature of Being, which equates political order and its symbolisation with spiritual order in the sense of the individual soul attuned to what he termed the ‘true’ nature of reality: the dialogue and tensions between embodied existence and the Divine, immortal presence. In its reckless destruction of the ability of Christian metaphysics to symbolise the existence-immortality dialogue, modernity had fundamentally ruptured the basis of political order that had characterised the European Middle Ages, and moreover, in the form of the Enlightenment’s evangelism for the liberating power of human reason over traditional forms of belief, had further served to undermine those belief systems of non-Western civilisations that had served symbolise reality in the non-Western world^{xxiii}.

One of the consequences of the triumph of the belief in the liberating power of human reason was the conviction that it could serve as the lynchpin and guide for the liberation of humanity from the sufferings of history. In other words, it was possible to think of a notion of ‘progress’ in which both individual men and whole human societies could be perfected by the application of particular kinds of knowledge to the human condition. For moderns, therefore, the Christian notion of salvation in the afterlife was in fact perfectly possible here on earth. Terming this ‘corruption’ of Scholastic metaphysics the ‘immanentisation of the Eschaton,’ Voegelin argued that this belief the humanity was indeed perfectible represented a monstrous act of hubris on the part of moderns, the consequences of which could only be destructive. The principal consequence of the acceptance that history could be brought to a conclusion in a millennial, paradisiacal age of perfection was the procession of utopian schemes for perfecting men and society that modernity had produced, each with its own vision of ‘progress’ and with growing degrees of apocalyptic violence accompanying them as competing social forces had sought to realise their dreams of perfection. Comte, Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Hitler, etc. had, as ‘activist dreamers’ each articulated a vision of society perfected in which each combined a remarkably reductive vision of the reason for the suffering of either humanity as a whole, or one small, elect section of it, with the promise of an equally simplistic solution and miraculous deliverance. In each case a form of esoteric knowledge ‘Gnosis’ concerning the key to the understanding of the true nature of history formed the crucial mechanism for redemption, and it was that elect body who currently occupied a position in which their true destiny was presently repressed – the class, the race, the nation –

who were destined to be the agents of an irresistible historical change. Such utopian visions, Voegelin argued, were not the key to political order, which lay in the symbolisation of humility in the face of the unknown mystery that reflected the true nature of reality. Instead they could only result in modernity, whatever its undoubted material and technological advances, being an age of permanent disorder and dislocation as long as the Gnostic utopian urge continued to predominate^{xxiv}.

Whether one shares Voegelin's quasi-theological convictions about consciousness and reality, or his stridently anti-modernistic worldview (and this author most emphatically does not), he nevertheless makes some highly valuable points about the nature of modernity and the persistence of the urge to utopianism that are of considerable relevance to the thesis put forward by Mendis. Moreover, Voegelin's disquiet about modern utopianism raises significant concerns about precisely the kind of cultural exceptionalism, understood here as a form of political 'Gnosis,' that Mendis puts forward as the anchoring point for the 'Pacific Dream.' Furthermore, Voegelin's concerns should be of renewed interest to scholars of International Relations and International Political Economy as they have recently been revived by figures such as British public intellectual John Gray in response to the contradictory condition growing disorder in international politics and the intractability of multiple crises in the international system, even as the world is materially far richer than it has ever been in the history of human civilisation^{xxv}. It is to these that the paper now turns before looking at the discourses of both Chinese and American notions of national virtue and exceptionalism, and how these are influencing the actual conduct of Sino-American relations.

The first problem that must be addressed is the very term that Mendis uses to describe the sense of divinely-ordained mission that he claims has animated both American and Chinese cultures, and their engagement with the wider world for centuries: *exceptionalism*: by its very nature a sense of exceptionalism must be *exclusive*, it must allude to a unique set of virtues possessed by those deemed virtuous, otherwise it has no meaning. As unique gateways to liberation from history, incontrovertible forms of 'objective truth,' doctrines of exceptionalism are simply unable to harmoniously coexist in an increasingly interdependent global system – especially in the American case where one of its predominant features (that Mendis acknowledges) is its proselytising universalism^{xxvi}. These senses of national virtue and exceptionalism that Mendis outlines can be understood as precisely that kind of 'Gnostic' knowledge that Voegelin refers to: they create narratives – political myths – about an exclusive proportion of humanity (in this case in cultural-national terms) and paints them as being uniquely charged with being the agents of redemption – something on which Mendis directly touches, especially in the case of the United States. Thus, a notion of exceptionalism, of being amongst that elect portion of humanity whose destiny it is to inherit the earth, practices (however unconsciously) what Jack Derrida termed 'logocentric division'; a deliberate 'sideration of truth' as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy described such polarising discourse, separating 'good' from 'evil,' 'truth' from 'falsity,' 'legitimate' from 'illegitimate' that paints and increasingly Manichean worldview between an 'us' and a 'them' that will always privilege the interests of the elect over others, and present these interests as being fundamentally virtuous on the tautological grounds that they are the interests of those who are

blessed with virtue^{xxvii}. Having created this division in the name of ‘virtue,’ modern Gnosticism thus creates the ground in which *any* action that serves the purpose of redemption becomes both legitimate and necessary – especially in times of crisis and perceived threat. Moreover, for the exceptional, such acts are not only fundamentally *moral* they are both necessary and right in the pursuit of whatever (quasi)divinely-ordained mission which the exceptional declare as theirs. . As Fred Dallmayr points out, ‘Imperialist ventures have invariably been accompanied by ambitious moral and civilizational claims seeking to vindicate these ventures’ and as such have served as the rallying cries of imperial conquerors throughout history in asserting their ‘moral imperative’ to act^{xxviii}.

Exceptionalism, Virtue and US Foreign Policy

In his superb dissection of the foreign policy of the United States under the administration of George W. Bush, Michael C. Williams notes that American neoconservatives especially articulated an understanding of national virtue that placed a ‘virtuous’ foreign policy at the heart of the ability of the United States to remain a virtuous nation, but in many respects the neoconservatives simply articulated a more strident version of a set of self-understandings that have long informed the sense of identity of the United States and as a result the manner of its dealing with others^{xxix}. This sense of exceptional mission has been a feature of US foreign policy since the inception of the Republic, and continues to be a significant fact in the debates about whom and what US foreign policy is for. However, the evangelical nature of US foreign policy is itself reflective of a deeply-held set of myths concerning the exceptionality of the United States that form the core components of the notion of the United States as a ‘virtuous’ nation that, in turn, must and does act virtuously abroad. Theologian Richard T. Hughes outlines these key tenets and that argues taken together make up what he terms the ‘American Creed’. Hughes states that, even though it is often highly ideologically-selective in its narrative, this creed is not a complete divorce from accurate historical accounts of the foundation and evolution of the United States and indeed helps reproduce important civic values and moral codes that allow the United States to function as a liberal democracy. Nevertheless, he nevertheless points to the manner in which the self-mythologisation of the United States too often in history become ‘absolutised’; transformed into a hard, exclusionary narratives that present their account of US history as incontrovertible fact. Identifying five core themes, Hughes argues that the ‘American Creed’ posits:

1. The belief in the ‘exceptionality’ of the United States as a nation. The United States, due to the manner of its founding, represents a unique form of society, one that serves to act as an exemplar to others around the world.
2. The belief in the United States as a ‘Millennial nation’, one with a divinely-ordained destiny to lead the world into a paradisiacal age of peace, prosperity and ‘certainty’.
3. A deep belief in the tenets of Social Darwinism. This belief posits that nations, as with individuals, are the products of their own efforts. Thus the predominant position of the United States within global politics provides self-evident proof of its greatness and its fitness to ‘lead’ the world. The unchallengeable might of the United States

also contributes to the sense of exceptionality as the self-evident proof that the US and its people has been uniquely ‘chosen’ by God.

4. The belief that American forms of capitalism are universally beneficial, and therefore should be globalised in the name of universal prosperity.
5. The belief in the United States as the perpetually ‘innocent’ nation, one that would prefer to stand aside from world affairs, but which has been repeatedly and reluctantly drawn in to act as a force for good in times of crisis. Thus, even when the United States commits acts of aggression against others, it is only doing so out of ‘necessity’ and in the name of a greater good^{xxx}.

Moreover, as Mark Rupert observes, this self-identity has long had racial, in addition to religious, dimension that is inseparable from rationalisations of American imperialism^{xxxi}. The internal racism of American society, an ideology that was central to the internal expansion of the white settlement across the North American continent, has been increasingly projected outwards since the turn of the nineteenth century, perhaps most famously by figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan in the twentieth century, and George W. Bush in the twenty-first. In practice, numerous commentators have argued that this projection has rarely been distinguishable from the ruthless pursuit of the needs of US capital^{xxxii}. Doctrines of Social Darwinism, meanwhile were essential to legitimating this state of affairs by advocating that those on the lowest strata of socio-economic wellbeing, men and women of colour, were deserving of their position. Indeed, it created a form of tautological reasoning by arguing that the low social status of people of colour provided self-evident proof of their deserving of it. Historically, even the most seemingly liberal-progressivist of US visions of World Order have been buttressed by such assumptions. Even those members of the US elite that subscribed to visions of World Order that were anything other than highly exploitative, such as Woodrow Wilson, viewed as entirely desirable the maintenance of a ‘British-American colonial stewardship in which the two leading Anglo-Saxon nations would dutifully “moderate the process [of the formation of a liberal-capitalist form of World Order] in the interests of liberty”’,^{xxxiii}.

Michael H. Hunt argues that the ‘white racism of the American elite [constituted] one of only three principles that have motivated American foreign policy from the beginning’^{xxxiv}.

Racism and Social Darwinism, together with the deep structural belief in the myth of American exceptionalism, therefore provide a means by which the complexities of the world in which the foreign policy-making elite find themselves are reduced to a few basic premises^{xxxv}. Thus simplified, the world is made more easily amenable to the aspirations of the US foreign-policy making elite, and policy made more easily legitimated to the public at large. However, the first two of these doctrines has become increasingly *implicit* within US foreign policy following the civil rights ‘revolution’ within the US itself during the 1950s and 1960s, but arguably is still well in evidence in the discourse of the United towards East Asia in the present time.

All of the above makes Mendis’ interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine especially deeply problematic. His distinctly idealistic interpretation of what the Monroe Doctrine represented, even at the time of its enunciation, seems based on a highly selective interpretation of a

proclamation that, far from being an expression of pure idealism, typifies the interchangeability of lofty goals and cynical *realpolitik* that has been evident in American foreign policy since Republic's foundation. The Monroe Doctrine provided one of strategies and legitimations (in US eyes at least) for the extension of US hegemony across the Western Hemisphere, and, especially from the Roosevelt Corollary added to the Doctrine in 1904, became the bedrock for some of the most historically barbarous and self-interested acts of US intervention (especially in the US near abroad during the era of Gunboat Diplomacy and the Cold War) as well as its most noble^{xxxvi}. Thus, for every 14 Points, Marshall Plan, 'Good Neighbour,' pledge, Bretton Woods system, etc. that expressed the highest ideals and virtue of US foreign policy (even if the motives behind such actions were not always or even mostly altruistic), there has been a Vietnam, a Nicaragua, El Salvador, or 'War on Terror.' One of the consequences of these latter acts has been to make US's claims to be a nation incapable of acting without virtue appear to be little more than hollow rhetoric; intended to camouflage and legitimate self-interested power politics, as long has been argued by neorealists such as John Mearsheimer^{xxxvii}.

The ambiguity of its wording has, moreover, contributed to a cyclic trend in US foreign policy behaviour, especially towards its neighbours in the southern part of the Western Hemisphere, from periods of intense engagement with the outside world towards greater isolationism and back again, depending on Presidential administration, relative balances of domestic and foreign political strength, considerations of geopolitical interest and economic importance^{xxxviii}. However, each successive wave of intervention and disengagement, including Secretary of State John Kerry's renunciation of the Monroe Doctrine at a meeting of the Organisation of American States in November 2013 – an occasion pregnant with deep symbolic significance – has been justified with appeal to the same ideals and historical myths about what the US epitomises in global order^{xxxix}. To argue that there is therefore some clear 'original intent' that can be neatly extracted from the sheer messiness of the history of the Monroe Doctrine and its uses seems more than a little disingenuous and self-deceptive.

The treatment by Mendis of the idea of 'Manifest Destiny' is similarly partial in its depiction of US idealism and nobility of conduct during the annexation of Texas and the US-Mexican War of 1846-8. Wholly glossed over, for example are levels of violence meted out to Mexican civilians by the US Army that repulsed even their own commander^{xl}, whilst the doctrine of Manifest Destiny would subsequently become the driving force of, and chief justification for, the deliberate genocide of entire Native American nations as the United States extended its control across the north American Continental landmass. Throughout this discussion, Mendis seems to be asserting that there is a clear 'original intent' behind its text that has been forgotten and corrupted by successive generations that needs to be rediscovered if the nobility and high idealism of US foreign policy is to be restored and similar virtues identified in a rising China in the creation of the 'Pacific Dream'. In many senses, this is a laudable aim, but it is also, in this author's view a considerable misunderstanding of the nature of the Monroe Doctrine itself. As a guiding principle of US foreign policy, the Monroe Doctrine from its inception expressed a highly ambiguous relationship between idealism and brute force in American political thought, and their frequently interchangeability

was legitimised by the very sense of cultural exceptionalism that Mendis makes the cornerstone of the ‘Pacific Dream’^{xli}

Throughout this argument, Mendis seems blind to the contradiction that Voegelin located at the heart of modern Gnosticism and that has been a constant in the application of the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere especially: that if with exceptionality comes an equally virtuous moral imperative to realise the universal redemption of humanity, it then follows that those who would seek to resist it are *de facto* immoral. There cannot be order, therefore until those who threaten the realisation of the dream (which is, after all, a Divinely-ordained work) have been converted, swept aside and/or reduced to the point where they no longer threaten the realisation of the Gnostic’s dream. Which choice is exercised will depend on the relative power strengths of the antagonists as they attempt to make their dreams of perfection a reality. It is hard, therefore, to see how any Sinic version of the Monroe Doctrine, a ‘Ménlúo Doctrine,’ that employed a similar sense of exceptionalism and unique virtue from a Chinese perspective would contribute to peaceful future relations between the US and China.

In terms of a ‘Gnostic’ form of cultural exceptionalism built on unshakeable, and often unreflected upon, convictions of national virtue, much of the American writing on China is riven through with this thinking; much American writing on Sino-American relations, especially in ‘establishment’ foreign policy journals such as *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, is underpinned not by a firm conviction in the United States’ *right* to lead the liberal global international order, but thanks to its exceptional position in the international system and the historic nature of its international mission to promulgate a set of liberal political and economic values that are deemed to be universal in scope and applicability, it has a fundamental *duty* to lead^{xlii}. Moreover, part of that duty to lead has containing, co-opting or defeating those threats to that liberal international order that is a fundamental manifestation of the ‘American Dream’ and the United States’ historical mission. This thinking is reflected in the fundamental *purpose* of the TPP, which is specifically intended to both contain China’s continued economic expansion, to redistribute relative gains from trade firmly in favour of the United States and its allies, to lock in the US’s allies in the Asia-Pacific region to a set of neoliberal, market fundamentalist reforms that not only disproportionately benefit US MNCs, but also reflect a triumphal strain of market fundamentalism that represents one of the core doctrines of US exceptionalism: the superiority of its highly pro-market form of capitalism, something which had lost a considerable degree of its lustre in the wake of the 2008-present global financial crisis^{xliii}.

There is a general assumption in much of the literature, especially that written by American Scholars, that the United States provides the *best* form of leadership in the global political economy, and that the cultural and political values of the United States, of liberal markets, representative democracy and individualistic notions of liberty, are universal values that the United States, either directly, by example, or by persuasion has an absolute duty to universalise. Moreover, even where it fails temporarily, for example in the disastrous military interventions and abrogations of international law in the Middle East as part of the ‘War on Terror,’ the United States must not abandon its mission, nor do its failures undermine the fundamental virtues of its ideals and institutions. Thus, discussion of foreign

policy failures in the United States, both at the elite and especially the popular level, tends to revolve around questions of implementation as opposed to the moral and ethical dimensions of a particular set of policy choices. As Hughes makes clear in his discussion of the ‘American Creed,’ the almost universally held myths of the US as innocent, Millennial and exceptional nation make this a virtual impossibility^{xliv}.

Thus, the rise of China to something approaching great power status is almost universally perceived in American IR and IPE literature as a ‘threat.’ Questions are posed concerning the extent to which a resurgent China represents a fundamental end to the American-led global order, or whether it is a temporary, 20-30 year anomaly that will ultimately undone by a ticking Chinese demographic timebomb that will see China grow old before it gets rich (in GDP per capita terms). In the latter case the debate is conducted in terms of what the US needs to do to confront and contain any threat from China until nature runs its course^{xlv}.

Other debates revolve around the capacity of China, militarily, culturally and economically to indeed threaten the US-led order, its need to bolster its allies, both within and without the Asia-Pacific region against intimidation from China and/or being drawn into its orbit; how to contain the threat to US interests and the ability of the US to maintain its hegemonic position given that China holds over \$1trillion of US debt and another \$1 trillion as part of its foreign exchange reserves^{xlvii}; the extent to which the rise of China reflects the decline of US power and how to reverse this state of affairs, and whether indeed China is increasingly too powerful as an emerging regional hegemon to be contained by the US any longer. What is *not* evident in these debates is any questioning of the beneficent US role in the world (even in those writings that argue that the United States is potentially in irreversible decline, this is usually portrayed as a bad thing), of the absolute good of the continuation of the *pax Americana*, or of the degree to which continued US hegemony is either necessary or desirable, given that many states in the Global South are appearing to reject many of the strictures of both American politics and capitalism, post the 2008 financial crisis.

Such debates, rooted as they are in the conviction of American virtue, exceptionalism and its universal applicability to take no account of the possibility that deeply-rooted senses of national virtue, originating in very different forms of intersubjective understanding of the relationship between society, individual, economy and state, are potentially just as likely to act as highly problematic *barriers* to the forming of better relations and common interests between the US and China as they are a means of achieving a conciliatory and mutually-beneficial relationships. Perhaps most significantly the existence of substantially different modes of understanding of both the self and others is problematic for the manner in which actions and intentions of the other are perceived by each state, given their radically different understandings of both themselves and the world. Questions are therefore raised as the extent to which any future challenge to US geopolitical interests and standing in East Asia by China will prove to be regarded as intolerable for a nation that fundamentally regards itself as an exceptional nation with a destiny to lead those it regards as fundamentally ‘below’ it. Similarly, China’s own distinctly Confucian worldview has led to a profound suspicion of both the actions and the intentions of the United States towards China itself.

This suspicion is not helped by the often highly self-aggrandising rhetoric of senior US leaders when expressing their understanding of the place of the US in world, which frequently lapses into quasi-mystical rhetoric derived directly from deeply-ingrained notions of the US as a uniquely virtuous actor on the world stage. For the vast majority of the US foreign-policy making establishment, the US presence in East Asia reflects its role as a fundamentally virtuous provider of leadership to a region of the world that has often been characterised by profound crisis and instability. Moreover, as an exceptional nation with a unique historic mission to universalise its values, which it argues are in fact that values of all people everywhere (including East Asia), the US is the only nation that is capable of providing that leadership going forward into the 21st century. In a now famous article for *Foreign Policy* magazine, addressing the US's 'pivot' to East Asia then-US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton articulated the following that stressed both the myths of US exceptionality and indispensability of the US as both a regional leader in East Asia and as the sole ultimate guardian of a stable, prosperous world order:

'The region [East Asia] is eager for our leadership and our business – perhaps more so than at any time in modern history. We [the US] are the only power with a network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good. Along with our allies, we have underwritten regional security for decades – patrolling Asia's sea lanes and preserving stability – and that in turn has helped create the conditions for growth. We have helped integrate billions of people across the region into the global economy by spurring economic productivity, social empowerment, and greater people-to-people links. We are a major trade and investment partner, a source of innovation that benefits workers and businesses on both sides of the Pacific, a host to 350,000 Asian students every year, a champion of markets, and an advocate for universal human rights^{xlvii}.

Reflecting a widespread view amongst the US foreign-policy making elites, Clinton sees continued US leadership as being essential to, and inseparable from, the continued prosperity and stability of East Asia. This continued leadership moreover requires a fundamental deepening of the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region, the much-debated US 'pivot to Asia' in a multitude of different issue areas: security; diplomacy; multilateral institutions; trade and investment; military; democracy and human right. Moreover, given the self-evident good sense that such an multidimensional engagement with East Asia represents, Clinton again reflects a common attitude amongst US policy makers that what is good for the US must *de facto* therefore be good for China. As she further argues: 'The fact is that a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America. We both have much more to gain from cooperation than conflict. But you cannot build a relationship on aspirations alone... We also have to be honest about our differences. We will address them firmly and decisively as we pursue the urgent work we have to do together. And we have to avoid unrealistic expectations'.^{xlviii}.

Mendis is at least to be praised for trying to problematize the sterility and rigidity of the debate over Sino-American relations in much mainstream International Relations and International Political Economy scholarship. Indeed, the whole point of his 'Pacific Dream' thesis is to identify the common interests between the US and China that ultimately will break through the present impasse towards and comprehensive understanding of common Sino-American interests through trade. Mendis in fact draws attention to the manner in

which the Sino-American relationship is in fact marked not necessarily by outright hostility, but by a deep ambivalence towards one another. For the United States in particular, Mendis argues that, depending on how it is perceived, and across differing issue areas, China represents both a potential threat to US interests and future US strategic partner in preserving peace, stability and prosperity in global order. This ambiguity of perception is reflected in both Clinton's words and the fact that both powers have also engaged in dialogue at the highest level in attempts to smooth relations and build mechanisms for collaboration. One example of this is the US-China Strategic-Economic Dialogue ‘the most intensive and expansive talks between our governments’ multi-agency discussions concerning the most strategically vital bilateral issues to both states, covers everything from security to energy and human rights issues^{xlix}. Such dialogues, on the surface at least, show that China has been prepared to cooperate with the US when it feels it has mutual interests in doing so, and that it is indeed possible for both sides to move beyond discourses of national exceptionality when there is a common interest in doing so.

However, even when problematising the dichotomous, borderline Manichean view of China presented in much of the mainstream IR/IPE literature on Sino-American relations, Mendis falls into the Gnostic trap. Grounding his notion of the ‘Pacific Dream’ in the liberal, Kantian notion that greater interdependence through trade leads to a greater harmony of interests between otherwise antagonistic states, Mendis asserts the third of a three-pronged strategy that Augelli and Murphy argues has been at the centre of US foreign policy grand strategy for its entire history; where rivals cannot or will not be contained or defeated by United States, they must instead be co-opted and ultimately assimilated into the already-existing world order, thereby being subordinated to the interests of the United States as a junior partner in the preservation of the *status quo*^l. The most conspicuous way of achieving this is to further integrate China into the liberal system of global trade, production and finance, as Mendis advocates with respect to the TPP. However, a much more subtle, and arguably much more irrevocable means of assimilating China into the *Pax Americana* is through the appeal of the ‘soft power’ – the power to persuade to attract and to influence without having to resort to coercion or bribery – of American popular, intellectual and consumer culture^{li}. Mendis claims that in the ‘Pacific Dream’ China will be an economically at least liberal trading state, grounded in a strong sense of identity produced by a confident revival of its Confucian Culture as it reaches great power status. However, this is not what he actually advocates in his discussion of China and soft-power, which instead looks distinctly like a Gnostic reading of the universal applicability of American liberal virtue.

Instead of reflecting on what a China dominated by a nationalistic reading of Confucian culture under the actually-existing Chinese Communist Party might look like, Mendis argues that as China opens up to the world extensive political and cultural change towards some form of potentially liberal democratic practice is inevitable and ultimately irresistible. As an increasing proportion of China’s wealthy elite is educated and travels abroad, the ability of the CCP to insulate Chinese society from foreign influence has become increasingly difficult. Therefore an increasingly open and globally-integrated China is likely to come under increasing pressures from below for political and cultural change. Mendis quite directly

suggests that as China grows wealthier and absorbs a growing number of influences from the outside world, its accompanying assimilation into the global political economy will mean that ever-greater numbers of its population will be less and less willing to tolerate the lack of political freedoms regarded as commonplace in the US^{lii}.

Thus, in the Mendis thesis as dissatisfaction with the domestic *status quo* grows in China, public demands will increase for political as well as popular culture to become more democratic, participatory and most likely closer to that of Western, liberal democratic states – to the point where the Chinese Communist Party will no longer be able to maintain the present authoritarian, single-party system. There is a distinctly teleological dimension to this argument that, in addition to the surreptitiously-inserted assumptions of the superior virtues and universal applicability of American democracy, revives all of the undercurrents of a quasi-divinely ordained process towards social perfection that that so disturbed Voegelin about the political Gnostics in his own time. A perhaps more troubling point is that it increasingly bears no resemblance to the actual political trajectory of China under Xi Jinping, which is grounded in the very notion of Confucian virtue that Mendis claims will serve as the agent of China's 'progressive' transformation. It is to this that the paper now turns.

Confucian Virtue and National Chauvinism: The Reality of the 'China Dream'?

In order to understand why Mendis' predictions concerning the 'Pacific Dream' increasingly fail to correspond with developments in both Chinese domestic and foreign policy we must first remind ourselves that Mendis despicts this 'clash of exceptionalisms' as being between an Evangelical (US) vs. Cultural (China) senses of exceptionalism: one expansive the other introspectively focused. However, even at this very basic level, one would have to question the degree to which this is necessarily accurate, especially when the resurgent nationalism being promoted under the Presidency of Xi Jinping is filtered through Voegelinian lenses. For one thing, Modern China's Confucianism is *not* the Confucianism of the Celestial Empire that Mendis examines so exhaustively in *Peaceful War*. Rather, it is the product of a deliberate contemporary revival of Confucian culture by the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping, the content of which reflects the perceived needs of contemporary China as it strives towards great power status and faces multiple economic, political, demographic and economic crises – many of which are direct results of the methods used by China to industrialise since it first began to liberalise its economy in 1979. Not mentioned at all by Mendis in *Peaceful War* is the fact that, even though a residual degree of Confucian philosophy and ethics has survived the turmoil of the twentieth century, much of China's ancient legacy of Confucianism was discarded during the turmoil of the early twentieth century, and was deliberately suppressed during the Maoist era, especially during the periods of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Any revival of Confucianism in China in the present must therefore be considered within that historical context and judged accordingly.

Similarly omitted from Mendis' account of contemporary China is that it has been shaped far more extensively by currents of political thought that owe their origins to the Western Enlightenment than by the legacy of Confucianism. Specifically, the two ideological

doctrines that play the most significant role in Chinese culture, politics and economics in the present day are a dying legacy of the Revolutionary Marxism of the Maoist era and, most notably an distinctly authoritarian form of liberal capitalism that permits a certain degree of economic freedom for a growing entrepreneurial and corporate class whilst also preserving a considerable degree of state control and ownership of the means of production. Moreover, the continued economic liberalisation of China could be said to rest on a tacit bargain between the Chinese Communist Party and people: as long as the CCP continue to deliver growing levels of economic prosperity to an increasing proportion of the population at large then the people will in return not demand political reform that threatens the absolute grip on power of the CCP. Marxist geographer David Harvey, in his own critical exegesis of China's political economy termed this mixed economic model and the political doctrines that underpin it 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'^{livi} Whilst the present configuration of Chinese political and economic relations undoubtedly reflect Enlightenment political thinking filtered through the experience of Chinese concrete political and historical situations (and undoubtedly reflecting a degree of Confucian cultural legacy) it would be a fundamental mistake to exaggerate the similarity between the political institutions of the present and those of the Celestial Empire.

Moreover, in the field of International Relations, no theoretical doctrine has found a more willing audience amongst Chinese academics and policy makers than neo-Realism, which has the notion of the international system as zero-sum competition at its heart. Indeed, neorealism has been describe as 'America's most successful import into China, and has fundamentally influenced the manner in which many Chinese scholars of International Relations theory and policy makers see the West in general and the United States in particular'^{liv}. It is similarly not coincidental that neorealism's postulates concerning survival, self-help and an exclusionary, atomised and sacrosanct notion of sovereignty dovetail very neatly with a growing sense of self-identity that stresses China's growing sense of exceptionalism and right to exert its great power status in its foreign policy over more cooperative, non-hierarchical understandings of global politics and economics. Therefore Voegelin's concerns with the dangers of Gnosticism may be applied here, especially as the introspective sense of cultural exceptionalism of the Mandate of Heaven and the Celestial Empire that was grounded in a sense of hierarchical Confucian order is increasingly being recast as a form of cultural chauvinism and militant nationalism by the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping.

This instrumental process of identity formation for political purposes raises serious questions about Mendis' understanding of the political dynamics currently underway in China. Indeed, the conscious revival of Confucianism under Xi Jinping can be seen as a direct reaction *against* what is seen as the corrosion of Chinese national virtue by the increasing influence of Western popular and political culture. Moreover, it certainly appears to be a conscious expression of a desire on the part of the CCP to build a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity that is essential to the firm establishment of China as a great power and fundamentally differentiates China as a nation from its Western rivals. Central to this process of identity (re)formation has been the efforts of the CCP to further entrench its unchallenged

political authority, a process which has had the concomitant attempt to centralise authority in the figure of Xi Jinping himself. Perhaps one of the most alarming manifestation of this process has been the growing, and evidently deliberate creation of a quasi-Maoist cult of personality around Xi Jinping in the form of ‘Xi Dada,’ which roughly translates as ‘Big Daddy Xi’ or ‘Uncle Xi’). Indeed, such has been the scale of the propaganda campaign in China concerning the attempts to personalise political power in the figure of Xi Jinping, it has led to some Western commentators especially to suggest that Xi is increasingly casting himself as a modern version of the Celestial Emperor^{lv} (*Guardian*). Domestically, therefore, there is little in CCP policies to suggest that Mendis’s ‘China Dream’ is a likelihood – indeed there is much to suggest that the very appeal to instil a popular sense of national virtue and exceptionalism in the Chinese people by the present government will produce exactly the opposite outcome: a deliberately-engineered deepening of the mistrust between Beijing and Washington that has competing visions of social perfection at its heart.

There is plenty of evidence in contemporary China to suggest why this might be the case. For example, Xi’s ‘anti-corruption’ drive, the expressed intention of which has been to root out one of the major sources of popular dissatisfaction with the CCP and to convince the outside world that China is increasingly a country of the rule of law rather than the exercise of arbitrary power, has been subject to a considerable degree of critical scrutiny from outside of China. It has been alleged, for example, that Xi’s campaign against corruption is little more than a top-down process in which accountability, transparency, and a procedural adherence to the rule of law is conspicuous by its absence. At least one suspect detained as part of the anti-corruption drive (Yu Qiyi, who had been a senior engineer at a state-owned enterprise) died in detention from injuries sustained under torture in 2013, whilst another, Zhou Wenbin, who had before arrest been president of Nanchang University, claimed to also have been tortured by the authorities in 2015. Serious questions remain, therefore as to the true purpose of the anti-corruption campaign. Certainly, at least one commentator has argued that in fact it is little more than a vehicle for Xi to remove political opponents whilst strengthening his own charismatic authority, and actually has more in common with Maoist ‘rectification’ campaigns that its stated purpose of eradicating corruption in the CCP and the wider economy^{lvi}.

In addition to the questions over the purpose and efficacy of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, the fact remains that at present China is becoming *less* rather than more political liberal. The years since Xi’s accession to the position of General Secretary of CCP and President of China have been marked by a huge, and intensifying, clamping down on public dissent that has included a growing censorship of the press. Moreover Xi has repeatedly expressed China’s determination to maintain the ‘Great Firewall of China,’ the censorship and blockage of access to certain sites of the internet (most notably social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter), that included attempts in January 2015 to block the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) such as Asdrill that are regularly used to bypass China’s Great Firewall and are vital for many Chinese firms to conduct business abroad. Indeed, so severe has been the degree of repression of dissent and sites of debate outside of the CCP that it was summarised by the

British newspaper *The Guardian* as a ‘deliberate attempt to destroy civil society’ by Xi since his rise to the apex of power in China^{lvii}.

Further evidence of the restriction of the freedom of speech and China, and increasingly it would appear the freedom of thought, too, is provided by the growing number of top-down edicts regulating everything from appropriate speech acts. In April 2013 the Chinese Communist Party released ‘Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere’ that, along with its May 2014 update, outlined what have become known as the ‘Seven No-Speaks’ that were prohibited from debates concerning China’s political and economic future as they represented ‘mistaken thing, trends, standpoints and activities that merit attention’. These seven prohibited areas of speaking and thinking involved any attempt to question either the social and political legitimacy of Party rule, including in the figure of the leadership, the promotion of notions of civil society and ‘universal values’ that failed to confirm with the views of the CCP, the promotion of neoliberalism and the criticism of the present Chinese economic system, criticism of media censorship and the careful management by the CCP of the Chinese media, and any attempt to challenge either the CCP’s version of the history of modern China and the role of the CCP within it, and the present program of reform (described as ‘the Socialist nature of Socialism with Chinese characteristics’)^{lviii}.

The seven no-speaks precisely identifies those areas that would need to be strengthened if China was to move along the pathway Mendis assigns for it in the ‘Pacific Dream’ thesis, and illustrate the degree to which the CCP under Xi Jinping regards such political, social and economic developments as anathema and also as an existential threat to its one priority over all others – the maintenance of the absolute power of the CCP within China. Moreover, the suppression of dissent has more recently expanded to incorporate and ever-growing range of social, cultural and economic activity in China, including the outlawing of architecture that was deemed ‘Xenocentric’ and not in keeping with Confucian cultural norms (as defined by Beijing)^{lix}. Most recently, the CCP announced the banning of the depiction of homosexuality on Chinese television, on the grounds that it ‘exaggerates the dark side of society,’ and is one aspect of a greater crackdown on what the CCP regards as being a growing problem of ‘vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content’ that it directly associates with the growing influence of ‘Western values’. Questions need to be asked therefore about the extent to which this decision is part of a more concerted moral backlash on the part of the CCP at the extent to which Chinese society, especially amongst the young has grown significantly more sexually liberal in the past two decades, and which has now come under significant political scrutiny. Previously, the CCP had remained largely tolerant of (if not indifferent to) changing sexual habits in China, but it would now appear that this is yet one more area in which the Party’s attitudes are becoming significantly more draconian^{lx}.

Furthermore, the past four years have seen the mass detentions of critics of CCP policies, from human rights lawyers at one extreme, to the (alleged) kidnapping of booksellers planning on publishing book on Xi Jinping’s private life from Hong Kong. The determination to destroy any form of political and cultural debate outside of the official permitted parameters has also witnessed growing repression of minorities in areas such as

Xinjiang and Tibet, the former of which is contributing to the rise of Islamic extremist movements within China itself, plus increasingly petulant reaction to foreign criticism of Chinese government's conduct in those areas. Moreover, on the economic front, Xi's anti-corruption and anti-monopoly campaigns have led to growing harassment of foreign multinational corporations working in China, including both the purging of Chinese executives working for companies such as Volkswagen, to the levying of huge fines for alleged corrupt and monopolistic practices.

In foreign policy, meanwhile, China seems to have largely abandoned the policy of 'Peaceful Rise' that guided its engagement with the outside world before 2008. The same tone of increasingly xenophobic nationalism is becoming evident in foreign policy as it is in domestic politics, as witnessed by Xi Jinping's advocacy of a vision of 'Asia for the Asians,' spelled out in a speech at the Fourth Conference of the Summit on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA) in Shanghai in May 2014, which some commentators have compared to the foreign policy of Imperial Japan in the run-up to its entry into the Second World War. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the change in tone of Chinese foreign policy is the PRC's increasing belligerence in the South China Sea over island chains such as the Spratleys, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands that reflect the territorial disputes it has with its immediate regional neighbours, most notably the Philippines and Vietnam. Since 2008, China has pursued an increasingly aggressive approach to its claims to the area in the South China Sea encompassed by its self-proclaimed 'Nine-Dash Line' that incorporates almost the entirety of this resource-rich region.

Most recently, China's determination to annex this region has incorporated the building and militarisation of artificial islands in such locations as Fiery Cross Reef and then claiming territorial rights to the surrounding waters in accordance with the Provisions of the UN's Charter on the International Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (to which China is a signatory and the US is not. This is despite the fact that the UNCLOS charter specifically excludes artificial islands from its provisions. It would appear that the growing Chinese construction activity forms a central part of a deliberate strategy to make the geographical claims of China to the vast majority of the South China Sea region a *de facto* reality that would be virtually impossible to reverse. Accompanying its growing determination to secure its holding over the area marked by the 'Nine Dash Line' has been a petulant response that other states are 'interfering in China's internal affairs' when its activities are challenged. A core part of this discourse, moreover, has been a self-justificatory narrative in which China is depicted as the victim of the aggression, hypocrisy and militarism of others – usually the US, which is constantly accused of 'double standards' in its own behaviour over the South China Sea. Further, China has engaged in acts that appear to be a deliberate provoking of its neighbours who also have territorial claims to these Islands (ramming and detaining of third party fishing boats, for example) and potential pursuit of 'kill the fox to scare the chickens' strategy. This seems to be a tactical ploy to lure one of the more powerful of China's neighbours in the region into a rash act of violence against the Chinese presence in order that any potential conflict would result in an easy military victory for China. The reasoning here is that such a cheap victory would discourage other, less powerful states from then challenging China's

claims, and would likely compel them to rapidly reach a settlement that would overwhelmingly be in Beijing's favour. It reflects a calculation of risk on the part of Beijing that Washington, despite having renewed its military partnerships with states in the region such as the Philippines and its growing military rapprochement with Vietnam, has been so weakened by a decade of conflict in the Middle East and the after-effects of the 2008-present financial crisis that it would not intervene.

Further evidence of the hardening of attitudes in Beijing towards the South China Sea dispute has been its refusal to engage in multilateral negotiations that would serve to internationalise the South China Sea dispute beyond the region itself. Beijing would prefer to either seek a bilateral solution with each of its neighbours, or to pursue a multilateral strategy through regional bodies such as the ASEAN, in which differentials in power mean that it will always have the upper hand. Beijing has also refused to recognise, or be bound by the decisions of, the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration's investigation and attempts to seek a solution to the conflicting claims of the Philippines and China over the Spratley Island and Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Island). In addition, it is clear that the significant increases to defence spending in China over recent years have been at least partly directed towards the development of weapons systems specifically intended to challenge US naval and air power in the region, including fourth and fifth generation jet fighters such as the Chengdu J-20 and the Shenyang J-31 and perhaps most notably the DF-21D 'carrier killer' missile system that would present a significant impediment to the ability of the US to deploy naval power in the restricted waters pf the South China Sea. Moreover, the fact that the DF-21D was first displayed to the world at China's Beijing parade to celebrate 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two was likely a very deliberately orchestrated piece of political theatre aimed at the outside world in general and the US in particular to demonstrate China's determination to resolve the various South China Sea disputes on its terms.

All of the above reflects a deep suspicion (often justified) on the part of China of the outside world in general and the United States in particular that it is seeking to contain – militarily, politically, economically and geographically – its rise to great power status, and also a continued sense of inferiority towards, and hence threat from, the West that is fanned by the historical memory of China's treatment at the hands of the European imperial powers and Japan in the twentieth century: something that has been deliberately mythologised in popular media in a highly-ideologically selective fashion by the CCP, especially under Xi Jinping. Similarly, the voyages of Zheng He (the accounts of which Mendis notes were deliberately suppressed by Imperial court officials as part of an internal power struggle that saw China progressively isolated from the world at large) are being revived as part of the 'China Dream' doctrine as part of a historical justification for China re-establishing its presence as at least a regional maritime power, and as a great power in the GPE more generally. Accompanying this greater engagement with the world beyond China's borders has been the articulation of alternative developmental and economic discourse to the neoliberal, 'free-market' dictums contained in the Washington Consensus' that has remained the dominant economic paradigm in the US-dominated institutions of global governance, such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organisation, for the last three decades.

Stressing notions of ‘South-South Solidarity’ that casts China as the victim of colonial aggression in much the same way as many of the other states in the Global South, Beijing’s growing economic involvement in sub-Saharan Africa especially perhaps best reflects the ideals of Zheng He’s voyages and have become encapsulated in the ‘five principles of peaceful co-existence’ that Beijing claims are the fundamental guide to its diplomatic and economic dealings with others. These principles stress mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in states’ internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. Moreover, in exchange for access to natural resources, China has been willing to engage in extensive projects of infrastructure building in the Global South whilst refusing to lecture recipient states about their lack of democratic accountability and demanding they reform their structures of governance in return for development aid. Even here, however, whilst undeniably less hypocritical, exploitative and bloody than the West’s history of relations with its former colonial possessions, significant questions have been raised about the extent to which China is cynically exploiting its position as a rising power to establish new relationships of dependence that serve to legitimate and cement the position of ruthless dictatorships under principles of ‘non-interference’ and ‘south-south solidarity’. At the moment, China’s discourse concerning non-interference, harmony of interests and mutual benefit suits both its foreign policy interests and its actual capabilities to realise them. The change in tone and action in the South China Sea, however, raises significant questions as to whether that will continue to remain the case as its power, capabilities and global reach continue to expand.

In particular, it is difficult to see how China’s current behaviour towards its neighbours in South East Asia, or its increasingly confrontational attitude towards Japan (which is admittedly not being helped by the equally nationalistic tenor of the Abe government, especially over issues such as Japan’s behaviour in China during the Second World War) reflects the Confucian Values of the Celestial Empire during the period of Zheng He’s voyages. Moreover, the current Confucian revival under Xi Jinping in China displays many of the core aspects of Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism: it is highly centrally organised and tightly controlled from the top-down. Further, it is centred on the rearticulation and restriction of linguistic and cultural practices to suit the political requirements of a charismatic leader (‘activist dreamers,’ as Voegelin termed them) who has made the moral rejuvenation of a society depicted as being increasingly corrupted a central tenet of the project of social transformation. Moreover, a core part of this transformative project has been the centralisation of power in the figure of the leader who demands absolute obedience in exchange for the deliverance of society from the travails of history. A corollary of this demand for political (and increasingly cultural) conformity is the very real threat of violence against those who express dissent or exercise resistance against them. Social redemption, moreover, has been cloaked in a narrative of history that links imagined glorious past with promised glorious future that clearly distinguishes between the virtuous and the corrupt. In so doing, the ‘China Dream’ advances an account of history that articulates both the reasons for the purgatory of the present and who is responsible for it and what must be done to defeat those who prevent China’s realisation of its historic mission, whether at home or abroad.

It is not coincidental that the emergence of a much more strident form of militant nationalism, bordering on a form of increasingly strident cultural chauvinism and aggressive xenophobia has emerged and been encouraged at a time when China faces multiple crises that, despite the resolve apparent in the ‘China Dream’ narrative it is not clear that the Communist Party knows how to contain and resolve. At present, China is facing deep and growing economic, financial, demographic, developmental, environmental, social and cultural problems that are virtually all the result of its rapid process of industrialisation and the desire to slow population increase via the ‘one child’ policy. The scapegoating, intolerance of dissent and the construction of a narrative that deliberately obscures role of governing class in perpetuating the present crises, and indeed makes that governing class the agent of redemption, are all key components of Gnostic political thinking and practice, as is the appeal to a sense of mission, divinely-ordained or otherwise. It is also a practice of deception of both the self and others: eventually becomes a rhetorical prison from which ‘activist dreamers’ find it increasingly difficult to escape.

One of the questions that Voegelin raises on one of his most extensive ruminations on modern Gnosticism, *Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme* is the extent to which political Gnostics believe in their own social visions: does the growing gulf between reality and fantasy see them sink ever further into delusion, and thus perpetuate ever-greater cycles of violence and repression in response to the failure of the dream? These questions are of considerable importance to the political economy of China’s relations with the world in general, and the United States in particular going forward into the 21st century, even if the realisation of the ‘Pacific Dream’ is highly unlikely. At present, China’s relations with the US are not wholly conflictual: China and the US cooperate on a range of issues in global politics from military issues such as combating piracy through economic, environmental and security issues. Here, one might hope that recent history will provide a pathway through the present growing Sino-American *impasse*. In the late 1990s, and culminating in its 2001 accession, China made enormous efforts to join the WTO (a process in which the US played no small part). Moreover, Beijing continues to be a very active member of the IMF and World Bank. Indeed, China has been particularly vociferous in demanding significant reform of the IMF especially to reflect its growing importance to its operation. These reforms have included the incorporation of the Yuan into the basket of currencies that are used as part of the Special Drawing Rights of member states and the reforms of the governance procedures of the IMF to reflect China’s much more significant role in the organisation.

Moreover, when there are uniting common interests, China and the US have repeatedly shown themselves capable of forging genuinely groundbreaking bilateral agreements that providing the groundwork and inspiration for broader multilateral agreements. Perhaps the best example of this has been in the combat against global climate change, where the Sino-American deal to cut emissions announced at the APEC summit in Beijing in November arguably removed one of the core obstacles to the conclusion of a multilateral agreement at the UN Paris Climate Change Conference in November-December 2015. This ability to work towards the successful realisation of mutual interests lends credence to suggestion that far from wishing to radically overthrow the liberal system of international trade that the US has

constructed since the end of WWI, China wishes to work within it and to secure reforms that contribute to the equalisation of power between the established, mostly Western states of the global political economy's core and itself as a rising world power.

However, the contradictions in the relations between China and the US cannot be ignored, and it is difficult to see how the notions of cultural exceptionalism that predominate on both sides are contributing to an improvement in their approach to one another, never mind leading to the 'Pacific Dream' thesis that Mendis makes the centre piece of his vision of the future of the global political economy. The question is not, however, whether a future conflict between the US and China is 'inevitable' but whether notions of cultural exceptionalism provide a successful medium by which often significant differences of interests, indeed even outright incompatibility, can provide a successful platform to construct an international order that can manage the tensions that result. Whether such differences can indeed be managed in an increasingly fractious international system will be one of the defining issues of International Relations and International Political Economy in the twenty-first century.

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