In this article I examine the changes in China’s foreign policy thinking and how they have influenced China’s international behavior. I reveal how the leadership’s beliefs guided and drove the Chinese state’s behavior. When leaders believed that the world was in a “war and revolution” age, China was inclined to overlook the actual international order and institutions and backed revolutionary movements or armed struggles in other countries. The cognitive shift to “peace and development” in the 1980s, which was consolidated in the 1990s through two major debates, was fundamental in terms of strategically reshaping China’s behavior, turning it from a revolutionary state into a quasi–status quo state. Besides embracing international institutions, China has also joined neighboring countries in creating new regional institutions and norms in East Asia. I argue that ideas, and not only perceptions, guide China’s policymaking and international behavior. Keywords: China’s foreign policy, Chinese strategy, East Asia peace.

Peace has reigned in East Asia since 1979, and there are different explanations for it (Kivimaki 2014; Tonnesson 2009; Weismann 2012). I argue that the East Asian peace cannot be sufficiently understood without a study of China’s shifting worldviews, which have determined its international behavior over the last three decades or so. I examine why China’s ideational changes matter for the East Asian peace.

International peace has largely been maintained in East Asia since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war. Despite a number of disputes between countries, an active international military conflict in the foreseeable future seems unlikely. For Robert Ross, “Since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, East Asia has been peaceful both at sea and on land. Yet the source of the mainland peace has not
been U.S. power but rather Chinese power” (Ross 2009, 76). How is this conclusion related to internal developments in China?

The history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 1949 falls neatly into two periods, one marked by recurrent conflict both internally and internationally and the other by rapid economic growth and opening up to the outside world. During the first period, China was engaged in a “continuous revolution” both at home and abroad. The reform period by contrast coincides with what has been coined the long East Asian peace period. Do developments in China affect the East Asian peace? Specifically, do ideational changes matter?

Ideas and Foreign Policy Making

Theory

These questions involve the role of ideas in shaping foreign policy. International relations scholars have long debated the enduring and decisive elements that influence state behavior. Power appears not to always be the most important factor. Neither pursuit of power nor power balancing can explain China’s adoption of a strategy to simultaneously confront the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers, throughout the 1960s. Without careful consideration of the collectively held ideas of the leadership, realist theory tells us only what states could do to secure or enhance their power in the international system, not about the main driving forces behind specific behaviors. Having studied US policies toward China during the Eisenhower administration, for example, diplomatic historian Nancy Bernkopf Tucker concludes that “individuals matter” when it comes to the institutional and systemic constraints on policymaking. “Their mindsets, values, emotions, and experience influenced their thoughts and actions, limiting or broadening what they understood about events, behavior, and potential outcomes” (Tucker 2012, xi). Researchers have to look at the collective ideas of national leaders to find these driving forces for major policies. After all, “There is peace in East Asia despite the absence of effective international organizations,
common political and economic systems, soft power, and cultural affinity” (Ross 2009, 86).

Some recent scholarship has shed light on the question of how ideas affect state behavior. According to Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, “Ideas help to order the world. By ordering the world, ideas may shape agendas, which can profoundly shape outcomes” (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 12).¹ They define ideas as beliefs held by individuals and go on to distinguish three types of beliefs: worldviews, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs. Ideas have their broadest impact on human action when they take the form of worldviews. Principled beliefs consist of normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust. Causal beliefs concern cause-and-effect relationships that derive authority from the shared consensus of recognized elites. Causal beliefs provide guides for individuals on how to achieve their objectives. Goldstein and Keohane also argue there are three causal pathways by which ideas can affect policy: by providing principled or causal road maps, affecting strategies, and becoming embedded in institutions.

For Jeffrey W. Legro, foreign policy ideas (1) are collectively held; (2) involve beliefs about effective means; and (3) refer specifically to national conceptions about international society (Legro 2005). Constructivist scholarship has explored the role of social ideas at both the systemic level (the influence of international norms, for example) and the national and subnational levels, such as strategic and organizational culture. Changes in national ideas about how to interact in the international arena often seem to be the instigators of the reformulation of national identities and interests (Legro 2005). States often rely on the guiding influence of dominant ideas in managing their affairs. These ideas play coordinating and legitimizing functions and are difficult to manipulate for short-term strategic purposes. Collective ideas, therefore, offer clues to the likely behavioral patterns of a state.

As is often the case, ideas—both in terms of the nature of the dominant orthodoxy and the replacement concepts that opponents offer—fluctuate. Legro (2005) argues that change in collective ideas involves two analytically separate stages. The first stage
involves the collapse of the reigning orthodoxy, when it loses legitimacy and agitation to replace it becomes widespread. In the second stage, the consolidation of a new orthodoxy occurs, inviting coordination and cooperation problems. The collapse of an extant orthodoxy is driven by the interaction of social expectation and the experienced consequences of critical events. Collective ideas generate a set of prescriptions about how states should behave and what they might expect as a result. Consolidation is shaped in part by two types of factors: the number of prominent ideas in a society that might serve as a replacement for the dominant orthodoxy, and the perceived initial results of such new ideas. When a prominent replacement idea exists and appears to demonstrate desirable outcomes, consolidation is more likely.

The China Case

In some societies, the ideas and perceptions of decisionmakers are particularly important because they “structure their environment for choice, inform their consideration of various courses of action, and provide rationalization for the choices that are made” (Zhang 1998, 102). In China, ideas are often inflated to a prominent place, and embodied in orthodox phrases such as “ideas are the guide for actions,” and—especially in the revolutionary age—“without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary action.” A major ideational change can result in a huge shift in policy and action. As I will show later, the choice between “war and revolution” and “peace and development” proved to be fateful. In China’s case, probably more so than many other states, these ideas to a great extent determined the trajectories of its post-1949 relations with the outside world. There are two reasons for this. Ideology played an exceptionally prominent role in post-1949 domestic politics and foreign affairs. And the pervasive top-down party-state system was inhospitable to and even exclusive of any different, let alone dissenting, views. Their advocates often alienated people who held diverging ideas.

Two major changes, both ideational, can be discerned with regard to China. One occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the other in early 1980s. Both of these ideational shifts pro-
foundly impacted the direction of China’s national strategy and policy decisions. They involved fundamental cognition of the world situation at the highest level of political leadership, particularly judgments on and anticipation of war, revolution, and peace. The decisions and policies that were made as well as their consequences suggest how significant such shifts can be to a nation’s fate.

In the rest of this article I explore how China underwent those two major ideational changes and why they are relevant for peace in East Asia. That peace was disrupted in the late 1950s and early 1960s when a relatively moderate foreign policy became radicalized, lasting throughout the 1970s. The peace was enhanced in the early 1980s and has prevailed ever since. “Peace and development” thinking was consolidated through debates and culminated in the peaceful development doctrine.

**Peaceful Coexistence as the Beginning**

*The Five Principles*

As is well known, after the founding of the PRC, China decided to “lean to one side” and formed an alliance with the Soviet Union in the early Cold War period. Driven by a revolutionary commitment and national security considerations, China entered the Korean War merely a year after its founding; the war lasted for three years. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, China’s overall posture tended to be mostly a moderate one. The dominant theme of foreign policy at the time was peaceful coexistence, which was seen as a desirable and possible objective. In August 1954, Mao met with a British Labor Party delegation in Beijing. When asked whether China could coexist with British-style “socialism,” Mao replied that his China could coexist not only with that kind of socialism, but also with other, nonsocialist elements, listing “capitalism, imperialism, feudal kingdoms” (Mao 1994, 160). The only condition was that both sides were willing to coexist, because “we think different systems can coexist” (Mao 1994, 160). Moreover, Mao stated that a peaceful environment was
needed for a few decades to turn China from an agrarian society into an industrialized country (Mao 1994). For him, peace and commerce were the lowest common denominators.

From 1953 to 1954, together with Burma and India, China came up with the five principles of peaceful coexistence for state-to-state relations, namely, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. These five principles were first proposed during negotiations from December 1953 to April 1954 between China and India on questions concerning their relations in the Tibet region of China. Soon after, they were written into a bilateral agreement on trade and intercourse.

Moreover, in Premier Zhou Enlai’s respective joint statements with the prime ministers of India and Burma during his visits to those countries in June 1954, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were formally proposed and adopted as the norms governing their international relations (Han 1990). That year China, as one of the five major powers, attended the Geneva Conference, which brought the first Indochina war to an end. According to Sophie Richardson, “Westerners have tended to dismiss the Five Principles as empty rhetoric rather than seeing them as a clear Chinese articulation of its expectations about and obligations to international relations” (Richardson 2010, 12). Yet the principles can be seen in China’s ties with other states over many years, except when it became a radical state in favor of “world revolution.”

**Peace and Noninterference for Development**

In October 1954 Mao met with India’s prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, not long after the Korean War armistice. Knowing well that a war would swallow an enormous amount of national resources, Mao stressed that China needed decades of peace in order to promote domestic production and improve people’s living standards. In Mao’s words, “We do not want to fight. It would be very nice if such an environment could be created. We would cooperate with anyone who is in favor of this objective” (Mao
1994, 168). On the contrary, he said, if there were a war, plans for economic and cultural development would have to grind to a halt and give way to a war plan, and this would delay China’s industrialization process. The conclusion reached was that countries should together make efforts to prevent war and strive for lasting peace. “As long as there are fifty years of peace, we can carry out ten five-year plans” (Mao 1994, 173–174).

Mao even explained the principle of noninterference in domestic affairs to the visiting Burmese prime minister U Nu, saying that it means a domestic dispute within a country is up to that country itself to resolve. Other countries should not intervene or take advantage of the dispute to serve their own interests (Mao 1994). U Nu admitted that Burma used to be fearful of China as a major power on its borders, but that Premier Zhou’s visits had helped dissipate the fears (Mao 1994). In 1960, the two countries eventually solved their border issues by successfully signing a formal agreement. By contrast, Thailand, a US ally at the time, was not very friendly toward China. Mao was humble enough to ask the Indian and Burmese leaders to help China improve its relationship with Thailand. Thailand was worried that China would invade it, and Mao wanted to assure them that that would not happen. The two countries might together release a declaration of nonaggression and peaceful coexistence in line with the five principles, Mao suggested (Mao 1994, 180).

In the mid-1950s, China also reached agreements with Burma and Indonesia regarding overseas Chinese residing in those countries, abandoning China’s practice of allowing dual citizenship. While the wish of those overseas Chinese for dual citizenship was understandable, the status was a source of skepticism and even fear on the part of Southeast Asian governments. China decided to adopt a position of ceasing to allow dual nationality. Chinese residents abroad would have to renounce their Chinese nationality when acquiring the nationality of their country of residence. The Chinese government hoped that overseas Chinese would choose the nationality of their country of residence and acquire its citizenship (Han 1990). This policy to a large extent helped settle the question of dual nationality between China and neighboring countries.
Independence from Moscow

Before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been a follower of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the international communist movement. This situation continued through the 1950s, and the Soviet Union continued to be regarded as the head of the socialist camp, but at the cost of undermining its foreign policy independence. The Yugoslavia affair demonstrated this cost. After Moscow and Belgrade clashed and Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform, in accordance with the will of Moscow, the CCP followed suit and did not develop any relationship with Yugoslavia, even though Yugoslavia recognized the PRC early on. China accused Yugoslavia of being “revisionist.”

Only when the USSR improved relations with Belgrade did China, in 1955, establish diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia. However, that was very short-lived. As the Sino-Soviet rift grew and their ideological differences went public, Beijing-Belgrade ties quickly deteriorated. China publicly denounced Yugoslav revisionism and its leader, Marshal Josip Broz Tito. Nonetheless, the impact was partial and did not affect China’s overall foreign relations.

Before the Great Leap Forward was launched in 1958 and failed within a few years, China on the whole looked to be in good shape. In November 1957 Mao delivered a speech at the USSR Supreme Soviet’s commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, in which he stated, “We resolutely propose that there should be a peaceful competition between socialist and capitalist countries. Their internal affairs are up to the will of their own people” (Mao 1957, n.p.). He reiterated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It would have done China much good if this had persisted. Unfortunately, this situation did not last long before China’s approach to foreign affairs was reversed and went radical. According to Allen S. Whiting (1989), Mao waged his attack against revisionism as early as 1958, initially masked as Yugoslav revisionism but later explicitly cast as Soviet revisionism when the polemic became public in the 1960s. In fact, China abandoned its own guidelines and
moved away from the five principles that it had advocated. In the process, China became more and more radicalized in terms of foreign policy ideas.

**Radicalization: The Emergence of a Revolutionary State and Diplomacy**

*The Impact of Khrushchev’s De-Stalinization*

In the case of China, a revolutionary zeal had been inherited from the pre-1949 revolutionary war period. It manifested in the practice of supporting the international communist movement and armed struggles elsewhere by the “suppressed classes,” which aimed at seizing political power. In the 1950s this phenomenon again displayed itself in China’s foreign policy ideas.

The change originated in 1956 when the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU was held in February. Toward the end of the congress, Nikita Khrushchev, the new CPSU general secretary after Stalin’s death in March 1953, delivered a secret speech in which he vehemently condemned Stalin and comprehensively revealed the serious mistakes Stalin had made. This started the process of “de-Stalinization.”

Khrushchev’s secret report shocked the Chinese leaders. On April 5, based on discussions at an expanded politburo meeting and in the name of the *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily) editorial office, the Chinese leadership published a major article “On the Historical Lessons of the Proletarian Dictatorship.” It was followed, after the Polish and Hungarian crises, by another commentary on December 29. The two articles, while acknowledging that Stalin had made major mistakes, defended him by stating that “Stalin is a great Marxist-Leninist, a Marxist-Leninist who made a few serious mistakes while not being aware of them” (*Renmin Ribao* 1956b, 12). This theme was reiterated in the December article: “Stalin’s mistakes, compared to his achievements, were only secondary” (*Renmin Ribao* 1956a, 26).

Neither of the articles mentioned the name of Khrushchev, though. They claimed that the Soviet Union “has been the center
of the international Communist movement" (Renmin Ribao 1956a, 36); that “the nationalist inclination in the smaller countries has to be overcome” (Renmin Ribao 1956a, 36); and that “the international solidarity of the proletariats with the Soviet Union at the center should be strengthened” (Renmin Ribao 1956a, 39). However, Khrushchev’s renunciation of Stalin cast a shadow, which later proved to be long and profound, and this prompted the radicalization of the beliefs held by the Chinese leaders. According to Zhu Liang, former director of the Foreign Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee, among the theoretical viewpoints Khrushchev newly put forward, Beijing paid special attention to his argument that violence and civil war should not be regarded as the only means of socialist revolution, since it was possible to gain political power through winning a “stable parliamentary majority.” Later on, the CCP repeatedly denounced this as a revisionist theory of “peaceful transition” (Zhu 2010, 9). 4

On the ideological front, the battle continued. On April 22, 1960, on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Lenin’s birth, the CCP published a lengthy article entitled “Long Live Leninism!” in the leading party journal Hongqi (Red Flag), signaling the start of a radical upward spiral. Referring to Lenin, the article claimed, “So long as capitalist imperialism exists in the world, the sources and possibility of war will remain” (Editorial Department of Hongqi 1960, 8). It went on to say, “It is a great new epoch that we are facing, and its main characteristic is that the forces of socialism have surpassed those of imperialism, that the forces of the awakening people of the world have surpassed those of reaction” (1960, 9). The article reaffirmed that “our epoch is the epoch of imperialism and proletarian revolution” (1960, 9).

This radicalization was not without critics. No serious challenges appeared, only more moderately dissenting voices expressing different views. Prominent among them were those of Zhang Wentian, former CCP General Secretary, and Wang Jiaxiang, then director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Liaison Department. But they were quickly and easily overwhelmed and marginalized within the rigid top-down system under Mao. Mao accused Wang’s proposed policies of “three reconciliations and one reduction” (san he yi shao), namely, to be conciliatory toward imperi-
alists, revisionists, and international reactionaries, and to reduce support to those countries and peoples fighting against the imperialists. By contrast, his policy was to fight against the imperialists, revisionists, and reactionaries in all countries and, at the same time, to assist more with revolutionary political parties and groups abroad (san dou yi duo) (Chen 2001). While Zhang had already been dismissed in 1958 during an interparty battle at the Lushan Conference, Wang and others soon gave up their efforts and, when they had been criticized, admitted that they “made mistakes” (Chen 2001, 83).

Radicalization at Home, Radicalization Abroad

Domestically, after the three-year period (1958–1961) of extreme economic hardship resulting from the failed Great Leap Forward movement, Mao once again brought up and emphasized the importance of class struggle. Consequently, class struggle occupied an increasingly prominent place on the leadership’s agenda. In February 1963, Liu Shaoqi delivered a report on antirevisionism to the party’s Central Work Meeting. An important question raised in the report was “how we should prevent the development of revisionist ideas in our country” (Xu 2006, 372).

Internally stressing class struggle and externally opposing the so-called revisionism mutually reinforced each other. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization act posed a key question whether there were such figures in the CCP and China as well, and this highlighted the task of maintaining vigilance over the prospect of revisionism in China. As far as revisionism is concerned, the term was used vaguely and broadly, potentially referring to anything that was believed different from the orthodoxy. It became a powerful and fateful label and symbol to beat people who were doubtful of any of the orthodox ideas and practices at the time. The domestic campaign for class struggle and against revisionism further pushed the radicalization of the CCP’s doctrine and its policies toward “(US) imperialism, (Soviet) revisionism, and (Indian and other) reactionaries.”

On June 14, 1963, the CCP released an even lengthier document, “A Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement,” which was a response to the CPSU’s
letter of March 30. The carefully drafted Chinese document consisted of twenty-five parts. In it, the CCP strongly opposed using “peaceful coexistence,” “peaceful competition,” and “peaceful transition” as the general line of the international communist movement. It did set exceptions to peaceful coexistence, arguing that the concept applies only to a relationship between countries with different social systems and should never be extended to “relations between oppressed and oppressor nations, between oppressed and oppressor countries or between oppressed and oppressor classes” (*Peking Review* 1963, 19).

The proposal stressed two viewpoints in particular. First, “peaceful coexistence cannot replace the revolutionary struggles of the people. The transition from capitalism to socialism in any country can only be brought about through the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat in that country” (*Peking Review* 1963, 19). Second, “in the application of the policy of peaceful coexistence, struggles between the socialist and imperialist countries are unavoidable in the political, economic and ideological spheres, and it is absolutely impossible to have ‘all-round cooperation’” (*Peking Review* 1963, 19).

On the eve of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), this approach to foreign affairs became further radicalized. According to Lin Biao, at one time Mao’s designated successor, “Ours is the epoch in which world capitalism and imperialism are heading for their doom, and socialism and communism are marching to victory” (Lin 1967, 87). “Taking the entire globe, if North America and Western Europe can be called ‘the cities of the world,’ then Asia, Africa, and Latin America constitute ‘the rural areas of the world.’ Since World War II, the proletarian revolutionary movement has for various reasons been temporarily held back in the North American and Western European countries, while the people’s revolutionary movement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America has been growing vigorously. In a sense, the contemporary world revolution also presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas” (Lin 1967, 85). As for revolutionary wars, “we invariably give them firm support and active aid” (Lin 1967, 87).

Back in September 1956, when meeting with Yugoslavian Communist League visitors, Mao criticized himself over the
CCP’s 1948 articles criticizing Yugoslavia. Actually, he said, this form should not have been adopted and consultation should have happened, as successful examples of criticizing foreign political parties in the newspapers are rare (Mao 1994). Now, in the 1960s, that this view no longer held, Mao threw away his own words. “Criticism” turned into “attack” and fierce public attacks such as never seen before were conducted. The polemics, nine commentaries (jiu ping) in all, demonstrated how the ideas and beliefs of the Chinese leadership, dominated by Mao, had been shaped. Mao’s ideas always prevailed and became the collective thinking of the Chinese leadership, while any different views or suggestions were easily crushed.

Mao’s domination continued into the 1970s, during which the “war and revolution era” beliefs remained intact. The breakout of a large-scale war was believed to be likely, and the USSR was seen as the most dangerous enemy. There was a strategic shift in the early 1970s, including rapprochement with the United States. However, this was out of the need for an improved security environment and for jointly confronting the USSR, not because of a fundamental ideational shift.

One example of how Mao indulged in the idea of revolution was revealing. As is well known, the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, which resulted from Richard Nixon’s icebreaking visit to China, was a unique document in which the two governments stated their respective positions on various issues. At a later stage of the negotiations, Henry Kissinger, the chief US negotiator, suggested to the Chinese side that they turn the phrase “people want revolution” out of their mantra, “countries want independence, nations want liberation, and people want revolution,” into “peoples want progress.” Zhou Enlai, China’s chief negotiator, initially was willing to make a concession, since in the Chinese constitution such a phrase about human progress also existed. But when the draft was sent to Mao, he insisted the word “revolution” be left in (Pang and Jin 2003, 1639). It can be seen that revolution was regarded as a lofty ideal. Since the Soviet Union had taken a revisionist path, the “center of world revolution” now shifted to China, and logically Mao himself became the leader of this world revolution.
Thus in practice Beijing, while accusing the USSR of becoming revisionist, self-identified as the “center of the world revolution” and decided to bear this burden. It adopted radical policies of opposing imperialism and revisionism, preparing for war, and exporting revolution. As Ishwer C. Ojha explains, “A revolutionary regime . . . wants to change the rules of the system, and therefore may be perceived by all actors of the system, haves and have-nots, as a threat. It must and will support similar revolutions abroad. The threat perception of a revolutionary regime, therefore, is universal” (Ojha 1971, 218).

At one time in the 1950s, Beijing had advised some communist parties in Southeast Asia to start peaceful negotiations with their respective ruling authorities. Yet by the 1960s, Beijing shifted to supporting their armed struggle in order to seize political power, as in Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia, by providing them with weapons, food, and uniforms. According to He Fang, a senior foreign policy specialist and adviser, one direct move was dispatching troops to help the Burmese Communist Party create a few bases inside Burma and organize military forces. The needed provisions, from food and uniforms to weapons, were all delivered from China. To support world revolution, Beijing continually increased its foreign assistance. As a result, its foreign aid peaked in 1973, occupying 7 percent of the nation’s entire fiscal expenditure (He 2012).10 Apparently, exporting revolution inevitably would interfere with other countries’ internal affairs, a drastic deviation from the five principles that China itself once enthusiastically espoused.11

The Negation of Negation

Changing Ideas About War and Peace

As I have shown, Chinese thinking on war and peace has greatly impacted both China’s domestic agenda and foreign policy orientation. Analysis and assessment of the world situation, particularly concerning issues of war, revolution, and peace, have been at the heart of China’s strategic domestic and foreign policymaking. If
leaders believed that a major war was inevitable and pending, concentrating on domestic economic development would not be possible. All the more so if they wanted to pursue “world revolution.” In the 1960s, given their assessment that a major war was imminent, China’s leaders decided to build “three fronts” (da sanxian) ranging from the coast to inland areas. Part of the three fronts strategy involved moving key industries and factories into the interior, a strategic move that later became a lasting problem for adjustments in the Chinese national economy.

China’s thinking on war, revolution, and peace has been related to China’s identification of the era (shidai). In the early years of reform, a fundamental transformation occurred in China’s understanding, moving from war and revolution to peace and development. In the words of then foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan, this shift “laid a theoretical foundation [lilun jichu] for China’s building a new foreign strategy in a new period” (Tang 1999, 279). However, the shift of foreign policy ideas did not happen suddenly, but rather took a few years to become explicit, and its consolidation took even longer.

In December 1978, the CCP’s Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee was held. The plenum’s communiqué marked the beginning of a new historical period. It no longer emphasized the inevitability of a new world war and softened the official view of the war issue. Yet it continued to argue that “the danger of war still seriously exists. We must strengthen national defense and be prepared to beat the aggressors from anywhere at any time” (Ren 2010). The CCP still believed it was in an era of war and revolution, with a high probability that a major war would break out.

Thereafter, when the country’s focus shifted to economic modernization, the Chinese leadership became more pragmatic. A peaceful international environment now was considered a must if a country wanted to concentrate on economic development. Entering the 1980s, the Chinese view on the issue of war and peace gradually shifted to the view that the danger of war still existed, but that forces constraining war and power for peace were growing. However, different thinking was brewing at the time. As early as 1980, Li Yimang, director of the Foreign Liaison Department
of the CCP Central Committee, argued that peace was sustainable and Mao’s three worlds theory was seriously flawed. Contrary to Mao’s view that the Soviet Union was guilty of social imperialism, Li said the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries were socialist countries and that China’s relationships with them should be resumed (Song 2009). Today, this is nothing special. But back then, when the USSR invaded Afghanistan and Chinese perceptions that the Soviets and the United States were equally dangerous enemies remained unchanged, suggestions such as Li Yimang’s were courageous and influential.

Refocusing on Developing Countries and the Prospects for a Stable Peace

For Yongjin Zhang, “The ‘three worlds theory,’ representative of China’s outlook on the world order, advocated almost revolutionary changes in the existing international system” (Zhang 1998, 103). After Mao’s death and the end of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, official mention of the theory began to recede and was later abandoned, although the term Third World continued to be used. In the 1990s, however, Third World was replaced by reference to developing countries. But that change allowed for a different notion of three worlds, exemplified in various government documents as well as in a famous sentence composed in the late 1990s by then vice premier Qian Qichen, the doyen of China’s foreign policy, who stated that “neighboring areas are primary, major powers are the key, and developing countries are the basis.”

This shift changed China’s relationship with foreign revolutionary movements. In October 1978, Singapore’s prime minister Lee Kuan Yew had suggested to Deng Xiaoping, who was visiting, that China should stop radio broadcasts and propaganda supporting communist insurgents in Malaysia and Indonesia. Such support had made these countries perceive China as a greater threat to the region than the Soviet Union or Vietnam even in the context of Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978 (Lee 2000). Lee’s comment certainly influenced China’s policy change, though what mattered most was China’s strategic shift toward economic modernization and the necessity of a peaceful interna-
tional environment in which to pursue modernization. During the 1980s, China gradually reduced and eventually stopped its support for communist parties in Southeast Asia. Having lost backing from Beijing, they collapsed and disappeared from the horizon. Lasting peace returned to Southeast Asia.

The Twelfth Party Congress held in 1982 was particularly significant in the early period of economic reform. The conference proposed that a major war could be postponed and peace could be sustained. For the first time, an “independent foreign policy for peace” was put forward as China’s foreign policy guideline. It was explicitly emphasized that “revolution cannot be exported” (Chinese Communist Party 1982, 45). The CCP eventually said farewell to terms such as proletarian internationalism and supporting the world revolution. In effect they were overwhelmed by global realities.

The next stage in China’s thinking came in March 1985 when Deng Xiaoping, China’s paramount leader in the reform era, stated that peace and development are the two major issues in the world. Since then, the wording has undergone a few subtle changes. The Thirteenth Party Congress of 1987 claimed that peace and development were the main global trend, while the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Congresses, held in 1992 and 1997, respectively, declared that peace and development were the “feature of the current times” or “theme of the times.” Overall, the wording became more and more tangible and clear-cut, and this has had profound implications. For if peace and development are the key feature of today’s world and economic development is the priority, there is no reason for a nation not to be committed to safeguarding peace and pursuing development.

Two Tests

However, this idea has its challengers. Every time major events occur at home or abroad, vocal criticisms of the peace and development doctrine arise (He 2000). The major judgment that we have entered the peace and development era has undergone at least two serious tests. The first was during 1989–1991. Following the 1989 Tiananmen turbulence, the United States and other Western powers imposed various sanctions on China. Soon after, dramatic political
changes swept over Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, culminating in the December 1991 collapse of the USSR. The end of the Cold War left many uncertainties, raising a big question mark about the official judgment of the peace and development era.

The other major test came in 1999, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervened in the Kosovo war and the Chinese embassy in Belgrade suffered a savage air attack that killed three Chinese embassy staff and journalists. This unexpected and “barbarous” attack (as put in official media) angered everybody in China and was perceived by many people as a deliberate act. “Peace and development” was once again questioned.

Writing in 1999 amidst the newly emerging debate, He Fang, who was involved in such debates before, once again offered his insights. For him, based on the experience and trend of the previous decade, the consensus on the peace and development era should actually gain in acceptance. There would be fewer people insisting on outdated views of imperialism, the proletarian revolution era, or the era of transition from capitalism to socialism (He 2000). This was precisely what happened and was reaffirmed by the political reports of subsequent CCP congresses, which convene every five years.

Thus, according to the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, “peace and development is the theme of the current era. . . . The trends of world multipolarization and economic globalization have brought about opportunities and favorable conditions for world peace and development. . . . It is possible to achieve a relatively long period of peaceful international environment and benign neighboring environment” (Jiang 2002, 46–47). The Seventeenth Party Congress of 2007 reaffirmed this assessment, declaring that “peace and development is still the epochal theme. Striving for peace, seeking development, and promoting cooperation have become the unstoppable trend of the times (shidai chaoliu). . . . The international balance of power is changing in the direction favorable to world peace. The overall international situation is stable” (Hu 2007, 46).

In this way, China reaffirmed that peace was the main international current, while development was the widely sought-after goal. Since peace and development are prevailing, the logical con-
clusion is that people have to conform (shun ying) to the main current. As Sun Yet-sen once famously put it, “the trend of the times is exceedingly great. Those who go along with it prosper; those who are against it perish.” This is still a guideline today, as evidenced by a speech President Xi Jinping made in January 2013, for example (Xi 2013). For today’s China, peace and development is the epochal trend.

The Debate over “Peaceful Rise”

As China was continuing to rise to great power status, a new debate occurred in the early 2000s about a “peaceful rise” and whether this could be adopted as a guiding principle for future Chinese foreign policy. The debate was hot and lasted for a few years. As a result, the theory of peaceful rise, far from facing its demise as some US analysts claim (Glaser and Medeiros 2007), was moderated and changed to “peaceful development.” The core ideas include the following: a rising power’s clash with a status quo power is not inevitable. History does not repeat itself in a sheer form, and the paths that were taken by Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union in the first or second half of the twentieth century, respectively, can be avoided. China should take a new path of peaceful rise/peaceful development, and this would be in the best interest of the Chinese nation and people.

The peaceful rise/peaceful development discourse and the debate over the emerging philosophy of Chinese domestic and foreign policies culminated in the October 2007 Seventeenth Party Congress Report, in which a whole section was devoted to “unswervingly take the path of peaceful development” (Hu 2007). Although the thesis had been reiterated and elaborated previously, the inclusion of the formulation in a Party Congress Report was of particular importance. In fact, the inclusion of the phrase peaceful development illustrates the consensus of China’s leadership on the term. Though disagreements remain, they are more rhetorical than substantive.

As a result, peace as a value is being established and gradually consolidated. Taking a path of peaceful development became
the theme of the first collective study of the Xi-Li leadership in 2013, and the third since it replaced the Hu-Wen leadership the previous year. This “path” (dao lu) was once again emphasized and was deemed a correct strategic choice on the basis of China’s fundamental interests. Believing that an emerging power and a status quo power do not inevitably clash, Beijing began to probe for a “new type of great power relationship,” particularly with the United States. In the meantime, the challenges facing China are how it will handle the territorial and sea disputes that have reemerged in the East Asian region. Those are all enduring disputes that have been there for many years. China drew a red line to avoid armed conflict with the neighboring countries over the disputed islands. China, as Xi Jinping put it, hopes to play the role of “practitioner of peaceful development, promoter of common development, maintainer of the multilateral trade regime, and participant in global economic governance” (Xi 2013, 1).

As China is increasingly becoming a pluralistic society, many voices are uttered and various opinions are expressed. For the outside world, what is China’s thinking becomes a question that needs to be addressed. To demonstrate that the Chinese leadership was far from the stated nationalism, in December 2010, State Councilor Dai Bingguo (the highest-ranking official overseeing China’s foreign policy) clarified the guidelines in his article “Persist in Taking the Path of Peaceful Development” (Dai 2010). Peaceful development, Dai argues, is neither a ruse by which China “hides its brightness and bides its time” (as some non-Chinese suspect) nor a naïve delusion that forfeits China’s advantages (as some within China charge). It is China’s genuine and enduring policy because it best serves Chinese interests and comports with the international strategic situation (Kissinger 2011). For Henry Kissinger, “Dai’s is a powerful and eloquent statement. Having spent many hours over a decade with this thoughtful and responsible leader, I do not question his sincerity or intent” (Kissinger 2011, 512).

In practice, when a serious crisis with Japan broke out in 2012 over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, observers were worried that a military conflict might ensue. However, Beijing set the bottom line to avoid a military clash with Japan. This, together with the
restraint shown on the Japanese side, largely helped maintain peace on the East China Sea. More broadly, over many years China has solved a number of territorial disputes with neighboring countries with which it shares borders. If China had wanted open conflict, those disputes could have been a convenient excuse for China to stir up the situation. But the reverse is true. The most difficult land dispute, the one with India, remains. Nonetheless, as of March 2015, China has held eighteen high-level talks with India over their territorial dispute in efforts to find a peaceful way out.

Conclusion

My investigation reveals that beliefs held by the leadership guided the Chinese state’s behavior. When the leadership was committed to peaceful coexistence, its international behavior tended to be reasonable and careful. By contrast, when it believed that the world was in a “war and revolution” era, China was inclined to overlook the existing international order and institutions and backed revolutionary movements or armed struggles in other countries. China at one point even self-identified as the “center of world revolution,” when it firmly believed that the USSR had turned revisionist and violated the teachings of Marx and Lenin. The violent revolution and armed struggle Beijing espoused were simply an extension of the experience of the Chinese revolution.

The cognitive shift to peace and development in the 1980s, which was consolidated in the 1990s through two major debates, was profound in terms of strategically reshaping China’s behavior. China turned from a revolutionary state into a quasi–status quo state that accepted and integrated into the existing international order. Besides embracing international institutions, China has also joined neighboring countries in creating new regional institutions and norms in East Asia. Without ideational change and “purpose transition” (Legro 2008), none of these changes could have happened. They show that not only perceptions condition policy, but so do ideas.

The significance and positive implications of the current doctrine of peaceful development should not be neglected, although
that does not guarantee a peaceful China in the future because peace also depends on events outside China. For the East Asian peace to be continually sustained, this positive transformation has to be encouraged by the “other” (outside world) and internalized by the “self” (China).

Foreign policy ideas and changes of ideas matter a great deal. Having studied the agency role of norm-takers in Asian regionalism, Amitav Acharya (2009) concludes that ideational forces were generated from within the region. A similar phenomenon can be discerned in the case of China. I have stressed the impact of the key debates within the international communist movement on the radicalization of China’s foreign policy ideas. However, the real issue at stake is how the Chinese leadership looked at the world as well as its own responsibility. This kind of cognitive crafting grew indigenously, and involved a number of factors at different levels, including the CCP’s relations with the CPSU throughout history at the international level, China’s domestic commitment to class struggle and to opposing revisionism, and leaders’ individual experience and psychology. Given that “the political and psychological proclivities of different decision-makers render possible many alternatives of action and reaction” (Taylor 1976, 383), what mattered included Mao’s personality (his “struggle” philosophy in particular) and other leaders’ similar “left-leaning” (radical) tendencies. In the reform era, China’s trajectory cannot be explained without an understanding of Deng Xiaoping’s experience and thought (Vogel 2011). For Deng, a cat is a good one as long as it catches mice, and the most important mouse to catch was national development!

Having examined the relevant theoretical explorations, I find what is less well explained is where an ideational change comes from and how it comes about. The dynamics need to be introduced, since they constitute a social process. When ideas are put into practice, they have consequences and thus will inevitably be tested. People judge the usefulness of ideas from their consequences. In China, the disastrous decade of the Cultural Revolution taught serious lessons. “Continual revolution,” “class struggle,” “new world war inevitable,” and “world revolution” were all proved wrong. The realization that it’s impossible to conduct economic construction behind a closed door linked domestic devel-
opment with foreign relations. In this context, the notion that “peace is possible and sustainable,” which is seemingly nothing special, in China’s case signaled a key policy shift. Ideas changed, and the changes had a fundamental value as well as implications for China’s international behavior.

In conclusion, social practice and social existence determine the formation of ideas and their eventual sustainability, leading to their maintenance or abandonment. For China, the practice of being committed to world revolution, and efforts to oppose and prevent revisionism during the Cultural Revolution, proved illusory, expensive, and counterproductive. They also had disastrous consequences. As a result, China paid a high price and experienced lost decades. Recognizing such consequences raises crucial questions and doubts about previous judgments or practices. Outsiders might have difficulty understanding why the post-Mao debate on whether “practice is the sole criterion of truth” was significant. In reality, a new theoretical guide emerged from the debate and helped solve a huge question: whether what Mao said and did previously should be upheld or altered, considering the consequences. The resulting cognition paved the way for the shift to a new path of peace and development.

Notes

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1. For recent Chinese scholarship, see Zhu and Zhao (2008) and Ren (2009).

2. For a detailed analysis, see Chen (2001, ch. 6).

3. It is titled “Another Discussion of the Historical Lessons of the Proletarian Dictatorship” and appeared in Renmin Ribao as well.

4. Later in January 1964, Mao said to the foreign guests who were visiting Beijing, “Ever since the CPSU’s 20th Congress we had felt
Khrushchev was deviating (*bu dui tou*). But until the first half of 1958, we adopted an attitude of helping him, because we thought that it was a big thing for the people of the Soviet Union to find a new leader” (Mao 1994, 515).

5. See also Zhu (2010). Zhu was director of the Foreign Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee from 1985 to 1993.

6. Another example of mutual reinforcement is that Mao even wrongly drew a lesson from Khrushchev’s downfall in 1964, believing that it was probably due to Khrushchev’s lack of personality cult. As Mao said to Edgar Snow, the famous US journalist, in January 1965, logically it was necessary for “some” personality cult around him as China’s paramount leader.

7. For its process of preparation, see Pang and Jin (2003).

8. The article was published in all major Chinese newspapers on September 3, 1965.


10. Twenty years later, in 1993, the percentage decreased to 0.36 percent.

11. As a result, China’s external environment deteriorated. “The positions of the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and since 1965 Indonesia, together with the recurring perturbations of Burma and Cambodia—even under Sihanouk—testify to the strength of this image of China as a subversive power that seeks the overthrow of existing governments by insurgent means” (Whiting 1976, v).

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