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ARTICLE

Best Practices and Elite Belief: International Competition and State Modernization in Qing China and Meiji Japan

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Abstract
Why did Meiji Japan succeed in modernizing its state apparatus while Qing China failed? According to neorealists, states respond to threats by balancing. Successful balancing requires an efficient bureaucracy to extract enough resources from society to sustain a formidable military. Yet not all states are equal when it comes to modernizing. We argue that a state's ability to adopt best practices depends on its past position in the international system. States suffering from a longstanding material weakness will tend to adopt new practices from abroad more quickly than states that have enjoyed a dominant position for a long time. Embeddedness decides whether or not the state perceives its model's crisis. Therefore, we propose a theory of neorealist imitation success or failure that counts three variables: embeddedness as the independent variable, political leadership's willingness to adopt best practices, and elite cohesion as intervening variables.

Keywords: best practices; elite cohesion; embeddedness; Meiji Japan; neorealism; Qing China

Introduction

Why do some states successfully adapt to a changing security environment while others fail to reform and fall behind? Baseline neorealism expects states to emulate each other and converge toward best practices seamlessly. If state A introduces a more efficient strategy to generate power, state B will rapidly imitate it to prevent a power gap from forming. Once B successfully assimilates A's strategy, it will try to create new strategies of its own to outdo A, which A will imitate in turn. Comparing international politics to economics, neorealists expect this competitive feedback loop to quickly diffuse best practices throughout the state system (Tong 2024; Waltz 1979).

However, even a cursory overview of international history shows that convergence does not always happen smoothly. Some states barely react to the appearance of new best practices, even if they possess sufficient latent power to adopt them and improve

their position in the system. For instance, nineteenth-century Qing China inherited a large, populous, and wealthy country harboring all the building blocks necessary to build a formidable great power. It also benefited from centuries of efficient imperial bureaucracy while some European states were only just throwing off feudalism's last remnants. Despite this strong starting position, China quickly declined relative to European great powers and Japan during the late nineteenth century, and the central government collapsed in the early twentieth.

Conversely, until 1868 Japan's central authorities had limited actual control over its territory and population. Yet, in a few decades, they underwent in-depth reform and joined the ranks of the great powers, even decisively defeating Russia in 1905. Why Japan succeeded and China failed is all the more puzzling when considering both states' starting conditions. The Chinese state penetrated its society far more deeply than Japan, which was more feudal in many regards (Downing 1988, 11; Taliaferro 2009, 194–95). Why did Japan, a medieval-like state on its last leg, succeed while China attempted only half-heartedly?

In this study, we concur with neorealist scholarship that structural incentives pushed China and Japan to reform and adopt best practices. Realist scholars have long argued that a shift in the balance of power translates into new thinking once leaders acknowledge the power shift (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000; Wohlforth 1993). However, a realist-compatible explanation of why some states takes longer than others to perceive power shifts remains lacking. Hence, we propose a novel two-step explanation of states' failure to adopt best practices. Our primary independent variable is embeddedness—how solidly former practices are embedded within a state. Embeddedness is manifested through two intervening variables: leadership beliefs and elite cohesion.

First, the political leadership needs to acknowledge the need for reforms before any change can happen. Second, the elites tasked with implementing reforms must agree with the leadership's diagnosis and unite behind it. Both leadership and elites must support reforms for best practices to be adopted quickly. Any other combination will lead to only weak reforms, no reform at all, or even total state failure. In the case study, we show that embeddedness influenced China and Japan's domestic politics, explaining the time lag between structural incentives and actual balancing.

Our approach resembles neoclassical realism, which adds intervening domestic variables to the distribution of power to explain what the structure alone cannot (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Our work corresponds to 'Type I' neoclassical realism, which aims to explain away empirical anomalies. Types II and III pose logical problems, as they contradict the core neorealist assumption that states share the same preferences and are solely distinguished by their relative capabilities. If preferences are allowed to vary, the explanatory power of the structure is critically crippled. Neorealist theory's predictions become indeterminate, and the theory is thus unfalsifiable (Narizny 2017; also Quinn 2013; Rathbun 2008; Sears 2017).

Some neoclassical realists have touched upon the same puzzle as ours (Taliaferro 2009, 194–95) but a systematic discussion remains lacking. Too often, neoclassical realists use ad hoc domestic variables without thinking further about a possible causal linkage between international structure and domestic politics. Yet if one posits that the distribution of power is the primary cause of state behavior, it must also have a significant impact on domestic politics. Their international environment will deeply influence states' internal makeup (Gourevitch 1978; also, Polansky 2016).

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Traditional neoclassical realists like Schweller (2004, 2006) place structural incentives on one side and 'purely' domestic variables like leadership and elite cohesion on the other, thus ignoring a potential preexisting relationship between them (Fordham 2009). In a neorealist worldview, domestic pathologies impeding balancing should dissipate quickly in the face of structural incentives and major threats; "most intellectual biases do not last that long, especially those that have extremely problematic empirics" (Zhang 2022, 22). In this research, we propose embeddedness as the missing causal link between international structure and a state's domestic willingness to balance through adaptation.

Although resembling arguments have been made elsewhere (notably, Schweller 2004), we go one step further by explaining why some states will feel more acutely the urgency of reforms. We add embeddedness as the main variable behind success and failure to adapt. A state that remained at the top of the power pyramid for decades or even centuries will see its existing model deeply embedded at all levels of politics, making it less responsive to structural incentives. Conversely, a longstanding weak state will likely want to escape its predicament and will more readily reform to increase its capabilities.

Embeddedness resembles the concept of path dependence (Page 2006) to an extent, but it differs in that it is not linked to the initial choices of a few individuals, and its direction is deterministic. The international system imprinted on a dominant great power that its practices are superior, while it did not do this with lesser powers. However, as the dominant power declines, it will slowly but surely come to the realization that its model is decrepit, or the model will disappear. Embeddedness could also look like the concept of cultural inertia (Wuthnow 2005), but is not necessarily related to culture. Culture may evolve while the political and military practices remain the same. Also, inertia may endure forever, but the strength of embeddedness varies with the distribution of power.

The research closest to ours is Wojciuk (2021). Like us, she noticed that the Japanese elite understood the changing balance of power far more quickly than the Chinese did, due to Japan's longstanding weakness while China remained cloaked in a complex of superiority. Focusing on leadership beliefs, Wojciuk finds that it took until 1900 for the Chinese to react. Although we agree, this does not explain why Chinese balancing failed even after the leadership acknowledged the new distribution of power. Consequently, our two-step argument combining institutional embeddedness with leadership belief and state cohesion offers more explanatory power.

Beyond solving the research puzzle at hand, this article matters for larger international relations debates. Neorealists believe their insights apply to any historical era or region as long as anarchy is an international system's ordering principle. The specifics of local culture and domestic politics do not alter the texture of international politics (Mearsheimer 2018, 270n52; Waltz 1979, 66–67, 89). Yet, neorealist scholarship has remained focused on the contemporary Western experience, despite a growing trend of engaging with world history (for instance, Copeland 1996; Eckstein 2006; Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007; Motin 2022a; Yankey-Wayne 2017). This article adds to this literature and refines neorealism's explanatory power by explaining the cases of nineteenth-century China and Japan. Moreover, beyond international relations, this discussion should also interest state theorists (for example, Cederman et al. 2023; Gourevitch 1978; Porter 1994; Tilly 1990).

This article is organized as follows. In the second part, we propose an explanation of why states succeed or fail in adopting best practices. In part three, we test our

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theoretical claims on the case of Meiji Japan and Qing China. We conclude by laying out the implications for other cases and suggest avenues for further research.

International competition and domestic consensus

Neorealism expects states to tend toward sameness. As Posen writes (1993, 82), "in any competitive system, successful practices will be imitated. Those who fail to imitate are unlikely to survive." Like the market forces companies to adopt the most efficient practices, international competition compels great powers to either adopt other states' best practices or innovate.[1] Great powers should adopt practices that maximize their military power (Parent and Rosato 2015; Resende-Santos 1996; Waltz 1979, 127–28). To build a formidable military, one needs strong resource-extracting capabilities (Zakaria 1998). It requires an efficient taxation system supported by an administration favoring—and not impeding—economic growth. As Poggi (1990, 66) put it, "a bigger, busier, more productive, better educated, happier population would yield greater revenues, and thus indirectly increase the state's military might." Therefore, best practice is defined as the imitation or innovation by a government of a practice *perceived* as maximizing the state's power.

Historically, "what stood in the way of identical emulation was existing domestic processes that appeared to have successfully obtained survival in the past" (Sterling-Folker 1997, 19). Previous research emphasizes the importance of effective leadership and domestic political unity for successfully adopting (or not) best practices (Taliaferro 2009; McDonald 2011). For instance, for most of the nineteenth century, the United States was already a major economic power but lacked a strong central government able to mobilize it for power politics (Zakaria 1998). Diving deep into domestic politics to explain underbalancing, Schweller (2004, 169) proposes a basic model of how states respond to structural incentives:

> Changes in relative power → elite consensus about the nature of the threat and the degree of elite cohesion → mobilization hurdles as a function of regime vulnerability and social cohesion → continuity or change in foreign policy.

We build on Schweller's insights to explain why states successfully adopt best practices or fail to. Identifying best practices may not always be straightforward. State leadership may fail to see a new practice as superior due to a lack of data, especially in ancient eras when information about other states was scarce. One may also fail to acknowledge best practices due to a lack of interest, sheer incompetence, or disdain for said practice or the state employing it (Ito 2023; Johnson 2004). Yet, leadership consensus on best practices does not always translate smoothly into policy. The state machinery may fail to implement reforms due to the weight of bureaucratic habits (Allison and Zelikow 1999) or nefarious private interests (Snyder 1991). Economic and intellectual elites favoring the status quo can also intervene to sabotage the leadership's plans (Schweller 2004). However, we move beyond Schweller's work by returning to the international structure to understand why some states find it difficult to adopt best practices. To come back to Waltz's economic analogy, firms, too, do not always adapt painlessly to best practices. For instance, despite intense competition from Japanese companies, long-time dominant US auto companies like General Motors and Ford had a hard time changing their ways and required many years to adapt to the rise of Toyotism during the 1980s (Scherrer 1991).

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We argue that the embeddedness of failing practices (or, more trivially, stickiness) will depend on a state's past position in the international system. In neorealist reasoning, the survival of the leading great powers is at less at risk than that of lesser powers. Since "states placed in especially challenging international environments will be 'shaped and shoved' quite powerfully" (Walt 2018, 6), one should expect weaker states to be particularly reactive or even innovative. Conversely, states at the pinnacle of power should feel less urge to adapt and reform.

We hypothesize that the longer a state remains a successful leading great power, the harder it will be for it to reform. The leadership will be reluctant to adopt new practices since existing practices have seemingly worked for a long time. Someone needs to realize there is a decline in the first place (Ralston 2022). Even if the leadership perceives other models as potentially superior, it will likely still hope that this situation is only temporary, and proven 'good old' ways will ultimately outlast foreign fancies. Similarly, the elites will probably take great pride in the ancestral ways, and the failing practices will be deeply embedded in their worldview (Horowitz 2010). Long-time stable and successful regimes tend to have strong, well-established special-interest groups that will want to defend the status quo and avoid reforms upsetting an economic or military order beneficial to them. Conversely, a state recently exiting crisis is less likely to see interest groups crystalized enough to block reforms (Olson 1982). As Desch (1996, 237) noticed, a low "external threat environment may reduce the scope and cohesion of many states." Qing China, long hegemonic in Asia, falls into that category. Indeed, there is simply no point in balance-of-power politics anymore once a state possesses an overwhelming power advantage—typically, 50 percent of the power resources of the system (Fiammenghi 2011; Mearsheimer 2014).

The reverse applies to a potential great power that long remained in a weak position. The leadership will be seeking ways to strengthen the central government and escape its enduring weakness. Decision-makers will likely understand that existing practices put them at a disadvantage in the international arena. Similarly, the elites will resist reforms less since they know that national security depends on their success (Mouritzen and Olesen 2010). Patriotic bureaucrats and opinion leaders should be enthusiastic about adopting best practices to address their homeland's historical weakness and thus support reforms. Japan was the epitome of a weak power, having lived in China's shadow since at least the Imjin War.

Testing our two-step model entails the following.[2] First, one wants to know whether the state in need of reforms was previously among the dominant great powers of a specific system or not. A state long dominant will have its model deeply embedded; both decision-makers and elites will be more likely to resist change. Conversely, a longstanding weaker state should be more willing to shed its former practices to adopt new ones; both the leadership and the elites will be more receptive to novelty. Although one cannot ignore purely domestic factors and private interests that are likely to play an independent role, model embeddedness will have a major influence on both. Second, one must check how quickly the leadership understands the need for reforms and how cohesive around the reform agenda the state elites are (Table 1). The theory's scope must be restrained to the great powers, and the large states possessing the latent potential to become great powers. Indeed, a large state can reasonably hope that adopting best practices will allow it to compete with great powers. Meanwhile, weaker states (like late Joseon) may face a different set of

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Table 1. Explanatory model

Intervening variables		Elite cohesion: yes	Elite cohesion: no
Leadership's belief in best practices	yes	adoption of best practices	limited reforms or non-adoption
	no	limited reforms or non-adoption	decline or state collapse

incentives, as reforms may not generate enough power to survive international competition regardless (Motin 2022b).

Since embeddedness influences both leadership beliefs and elite cohesion at the same times, we believe it is close to impossible to disentangle them. Model embeddedness affects not only the beliefs of the leadership, but that of the elites, too. If the elites have experienced unease and fear for many years about their country's weakness, they will be eager to implement reforms and change. Conversely, if the existing ideas and institutions are deeply embedded within elite consciousness, they will not feel the need to change anything (Legro 2005). If the leadership tries to implement reforms, they may question why their leaders would want to alter their country's venerable and tested system for a leap into the unknown. That is why we do not propose a three-step, sequential model but one where embeddedness influences leadership beliefs and elite cohesion at the same time.

Embeddedness becomes apparent through leader and elite resistance to adopting new practices useful for power competition (better resource extraction, decision-making quality, military reforms). Therefore, a model's embeddedness has ended when the leadership is resolute in adopting new practices it perceives as an improvement and when the majority of the state elite accepts that new practices should replace traditional ones. Embedded models will fade away when they encounter on a regular basis new practices that are more efficient at generating military power with the same amount of input (typically, when a new great power with a different regime rises or an extra-regional power enters the scene). The power position of the concerned state before encountering the new practices predicts the time it takes for embeddedness to disappear. The weaker the state, the quicker it dissipates. The stronger it was, the longer embeddedness drags.

Leadership entails the foreign policy executive (FPE). The FPE comprises the small numbers of individuals involved in foreign and defense policy-making. Therefore, the FPE is the transmission belt between systemic incentives and actual foreign policy. The head of state or government, the minister of foreign affairs and defense, and national security advisers are the typical members of the FPE (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016). The state elite mostly corresponds to high-level public servants and power brokers between the leadership and the on-the-ground agents. The military and security apparatus, too, can help or hinder reforms. A military with political leverage over the ruler may derail reforms to safeguard its parochial interests (Kadercan, 2022).[3]

When should we expect structural incentives to have weighed on Chinese and Japanese decision-makers? When did the Eurocentric international system become definitively entangled with the East Asian one? European powers' presence became sustained and durable during the mid-nineteenth century. The American Perry

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Expedition shook Japan in 1853. Meanwhile, during the Crimean War (1853–1856), British and French ships attacked targets in the Russian Far East, making it clear that European chancelleries now considered East Asia as part of a single, unified system. The French colonization of Vietnam after 1858 and the Second Opium War (1856–1860) left little doubt that European and Asian politics were now intermingled. Hence, by 1860, it should have been clear to East Asian states that they were now part of a larger international system (Motin 2022b, 138). Logically, we should see adaptation to the new distribution of power after that.[4]

Our case selection offers several benefits. First, China and Japan had a level of shared cultural background, thus helping control for the civilizational variable. Second, there is between-case variation alongside within-case variation. This allows us to test several of our theoretical claims. Third, both China and Japan had sufficient initial latent power to potentially become great powers. Therefore, one could not counterargue that adopting best practices would have been pointless anyway.

Our modified neorealist framework would expect Japan to adopt new best practices more quickly than China, which indeed happened. In that sense, it does a better job of predicting the two powers' behavior than more obvious factors, such as raw resources and geopolitics. If resource availability was the key factor, one would expect China to prove more adept at adapting to the situation, and ultimately to succeed. It had, at least initially, significantly more people, wealth, and military forces than Japan. On the other hand, Japan should have collapsed or been colonized by a foreign power. If one thinks in terms of geopolitics, China should have felt more threatened and thus should have been more able to reform. China is a continental power with massive borders to defend. In its south, it had direct borders with the British and French empires. In the north, it faced the expanding Russian Empire. Meanwhile, Japan was an insular state benefitting from the security offered by large bodies of water. It "possessed a level of national security unattainable for a continental power, whose contiguous neighbors could suddenly invade" (Paine 2017, 105). According to a purely geopolitical explanation, Japan should have wanted to avoid reform and enjoy seclusion, while China should have been the most anxious to prepare for confrontation with expanding foreign powers.

What kind of evidence would support or contradict our argument? If we are correct, we should see in the Chinese case leaders downplaying the need for reforms for decades. They should remain convinced that the 'good old ways' still provide a useful framework. Similarly, we should expect state elites to show no interest in reforms and oppose the ones coming from the top on the grounds that China's traditional practices remain superior. Conversely, we should see no such resistance in Japan, where both leaders and elites should have taken only a few years to process the situation and enact fundamental reforms to address their weakness. Thinking counterfactually, without embeddedness, China should have applied large reforms around the same time as Japan. First, Beijing should have created a strong-wasteless tax extraction system. It should quickly have written a constitution establishing each actor's role and built an all-encompassing bureaucracy able to translate leadership policies into action at will. This bureaucracy should then have worked hard to modernize the country's infrastructure and education as a means to produce more taxes. Beijing should have lost no time emulating foreign militaries, and invested large amounts of money into establishing a top-notch defense industry.

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The rise of Meiji Japan

Japan disappeared from the list of great powers in 1600 and remained a negligible power until the second half of the nineteenth century (Motin 2022a).[5] At the beginning of the century, Japan was a fragmented country on the territorial, administrative, and political levels. The Tokugawa shogunate dominated local feudal lords, or *daimyo*, with some control over resources and a fealty relationship. But each one of the 260 domains enjoyed relative administrative and military autonomy (Jansen 1989a, 1). This weakness and fragmentation had obvious implications for Japan's international position. Although on a paper Japan had several advantages—notably a large population and the benefits of insularity (Paine 2017)—it lacked a strong, modern central military force, rendering it insignificant in international politics. Hence, Japan suffered from a longstanding weakness, but could possibly become a formidable power with the right policy and leaders. According to this article's claims, both Japanese leaders and elites should have been eager to find ways to improve their polity and exit this state of weakness.

Japan started a modernization process in the mid-1860s, notably after the Bunkyu reforms. The replacement of Tokugawa leaders by the Meiji regime helped the country to get rid of old decentralized institutions for a centralized, more cohesive decision-making body (Jansen 1989b). The bureaucracy played a crucial role in the early days of the Meiji Restoration by dominating the decision-making process. Even after 1900 and the arrival of political parties in the decision-making structure, high-ranking officials still played a significant role (Silberman 1970, 347).

Leadership beliefs

In the late eighteenth century, leading academics like Nakai Chikuzan advocated for centralization reforms to the Tokugawa rulers, calling for uniform educational, monetary, and political policies across their territory. However, these reforms never materialized (Mervart 2015, 554). Instead, the Japanese leadership only understood the need of fundamental reforms a half-century later. Japanese leaders realized the potential threat posed by foreign powers, especially after the defeat of China in the First Opium War (1838–1842). The main policy was to avoid any conflict with the victorious Western powers. However, the diversity of opinions from *daimyo* concerning fundamental policy changes vis-à-vis the foreign threat at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate did not allow a significant change in defense policies. Even though lines started to shift, economic difficulties allowed no tangible change before Perry's mission of 1853.

Reforms gained momentum at the turn of the 1860s. Both the domains of Satsuma and Chōshū directly experienced Western military superiority with the bombardment of Kagoshima in 1863 and battles at Shimonoseki in 1863–1864. The Bunkyu reforms of 1862 brought significant military evolutions. Military changes were possible through extensive cooperation with foreign powers (Jansen 1989b, 312–351). Western-trained infantry, cavalry, and artillery units started to emerge, mainly relying on people from the samurai class. French military instructors were dispatched to train recruits in 1866. However, the small scale of the training (only 250 students) and its lack of depth did not lead the Shogunate to see the fruits of the overall military modernization enterprise, and the Meiji Restoration started a few months later (Kublin 1949, 23–25).

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The Meiji Restoration set a new momentum in Japan's will to look for knowledge and know-how from the West. During the 1868 Charter Oath promulgation ceremony, the emperor himself announced that "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule" (The Charter Oath of 1868). The emperor's political and symbolic weight was significantly reduced during the Tokugawa shogunate. However, his newly restored importance is another indicator showing new ruling Meiji elites' willingness to establish a strong, centralized decision-making ability and acquire Western knowledge. In 1870, Japanese leaders increased the enrollment of excellent students from across Japan's domains at the University-South College *(Daigaku nankō*), which served as a center for propagating the "Western learning." Many of these students were subsequently sent abroad to study at prestigious universities, and began returning in the early 1880s to share their newly acquired expertise (Breen 1996, 410; Shimizu 2020, 46–67).

The Meiji elites decided to undergo major transformations of their institutions to achieve three goals: be able to militarily compete with Western powers, adopt a Western-style police and legal system to revise the unequal treaties, and modernize Japan overall (Botsman 2005, 140; Westney 1987, 18–19). This willingness to modernize—i.e., westernize—its institutions led the Constitution of 1890 to become nominatively democratic to impress Western powers (Fulcher 1988, 234). Japan's willingness to develop and modernize towards Western standards is apparent through Inoue Kaoru's words in 1887:

> What we must do is to transform our empire and our people, make the empire like the countries of Europe and our people like the peoples of Europe. To put it differently, we have to establish a new, European-style empire on the edge of Asia. (Quoted in Jansen 1984, 64)

Japan's adoption of Western practices to be part of this new international standards, or its "socialization," as Suzuki argues, coexisted with a deep mistrust of Western powers. Indeed, many members of the Meiji leadership believed that participation in that Western international system was not possible without a potent military force. They understood that to compete with Western powers, and not fall victim to them, they had to possess the physical capacities to do compete with them (Suzuki 2005, 152).

Elite cohesion

Politics and administration during the Tokugawa period were mostly one and the same. It was not merit but birth that determined access to specific positions. Moreover, the position of each *daimyo*'s lord in the Bakufu administration depended on the role he played during the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 in favor of the Tokugawa coalition. In the nineteenth century, conflicts emerged between lords over local and national administrative and financial policies. Feuds also appeared within each *daimyo*'s lower- and upper-level administrators and samurai. This phenomenon gained momentum in the 1850s with Japan's opening by Western powers (Silberman 1993, 162–165).

The Meiji Restoration began a harmonization process for the new Japanese elites. They became more coherent on the social, organizational, and ideological levels. This cohesion lasted even though the power shifted from different groups throughout the

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Restoration. Groups possessing decision- and policy-making power changed over time during the Meiji period. After 1868, the decision-making structure went from an undetermined 'oligarchy' right after the Restoration to the Genrō in 1889, then was ultimately shared between the bureaucracy and political parties after the early 1900s (Silberman 1970, 347).

The restoration movement came mostly from samurai. The primary cleavage during the Tokugawa period between military classes was between soldiers, *sotsu*, and samurai, *shi*, with almost no mobility between both classes. Although significant social and economic differences existed between lower and upper *shi*, the scale of the revolution was of such importance that it could not have involved only upper-class samurai, who represented merely one percent of all samurai. The new leaders comprised samurais from the middle and upper classes, such as Kido Kōin and Inoue Kaoru; the revolution clearly involved various strata of samurais (Craig 1959).

The Japanese bureaucracy played a significant role in the Restoration's ability to undertake quick institutional changes. The administration during the Tokugawa period was patrimonial. However, Perry's arrival in 1853 accelerated the momentum that led the shogunate to recruit officials based on merit (Silberman 1965, 529–537). The bureaucratization process of samurai started from the Tokugawa period. The literacy rate (35 percent) in early Meiji Japan was similar to the most developed Western Countries at that time, with samurai being literate as the norm. Such a phenomenon fostered the quick change from soldiers to officials. The samurai who could access those new positions came mostly from two regions: Satsuma and Chōshū (Jansen 1965, 325).

Japanese elites came from similar geographical and status backgrounds but also had common values: political loyalty as supreme virtue in Japanese Confucianism (Fulcher 1988, 233). Alongside its loss of importance, *daimyo*'s local authority in ninth-century Japan was questioned by samurai and other population strata, such as merchants and administrators. The re-emergence of the emperor as a central authority figure was a convenient substitute (Jansen 1965, 323).

Elites' ideological cohesion was at the crossroads of ethnic nationalism and imperial reverence, summarized by the slogan *Sonnō jōi* (Revere the Emperor, drive out the barbarians!). This proved the ideological matrix of the members of the Meiji Restoration. This loyalist group, often called *shishi*, were men of the sword. Most came from the Satsuma, Chōshū, Hizen, and Tosa domains. Among them were Itō Hirobumi, Inoue Kaoru, Sakamoto Ryōma, and Yoshida Shōin, who is often seen as the spiritual leader of the Restoration (Jansen 1989b, 320–325)

The emperor himself played a role in bringing more cohesion among decision-makers. The new ruling oligarchy faced legitimacy problems when it took power in early 1868. Although the new leaders scored a military victory against the Tokugawa forces in January 1868, the civil war continued during the following months. Opposition also came from within the newly established rulers. A faction was questioning the leaders coming from the Satsuma-Chōshū regions, such as Ōkubo Toshimichi and Kido Kōin. The Charter Oath of April 1868 was also made to solve internal dissent between new rulers, friendly daimyo, and court nobles and provide more cohesion to the group (Breen 1996; Shimizu 2020, 23).

The Imperial Oath was not just a manuscript encompassing Japan's broad course of action around five articles; it was a ceremony full of symbolism used to reassert the emperor's legitimacy and power. The rituals, such as the overall spatial disposition of the people who attended, were carefully prepared to demonstrate that the deities

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mandated the emperor to rule over the whole nation. The Oath was staged to grant more decision-making powers to Satsuma-Chōshū leaders Ōkubo and Kido and court noble Iwakura Tomomi. It would also deprive the *gijō*, or Senior Councilors who used to be in charge of all departments within the government, of all their power. Political disagreements existed between *gijō* and even more between them and the new Satsuma-Chōshū leaders. The new power relationship set by the Oath with the emperor on top and Ōkubo, Kido, and Iwakura directly influencing him helped settle political dissent within the government. Fractious *gijō* were now ideologically bound to the emperor's will (Breen 1996, 418–423).

The momentum set by the Chart Oath concerning the power relationship between the emperor and daimyo was later confirmed on an institutional level. First, all daimyo surrendered their domain registers to the emperor in 1869. This event, known as the *hanseki hōkan* (restitution of men and domains to the emperor), deconstructed the loyalty bonds between domain lords and their vassals. The *daimyo* title was no more, and they became officials working for the new government. The final blow to the domains started in 1871 with the prefectural reorganization from Han domains into prefectures. The process was finalized in 1878, from a delocalized, diffuse, and semi-autonomous structure to a specialized, centralized administrative mechanism of the central government (Silberman 1993, 178). Decentralization proved during the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate to have hindered the speed of new military policies toward Western imperial ambitions. The Meiji Restoration took that matter upfront.

However, political disagreements started to emerge within the new elite as well. In the first phase of the Restoration, cohesion on a policy level was confirmed after heated debates concerning which foreign policies should the new regime adopt, especially towards Korea. The *SeiKanRon*, or the advocacy for punishing Korea, was settled only after Saigō Takamori, a samurai from the Satsuma region who played a crucial role during the revolution, left the government. Saigō was willing to invade Korea, contrary to Ōkubo Toshimichi, who advocated for more restraint due to possible intervention from Western powers. The political strife ended with Saigō's departure from politics, alongside other samurais and high-ranking officials who agreed with his policy. Saigō's subsequent demise during the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion was the final blow to the strife between external expansion and internal development. This conflict was also the representative point of tension between traditional and Western knowledge (Jansen 2000, 361–364; Silberman 1967, 84–88).

Decision-making powers shifted at the end of the 1880s with the promulgation of the Constitution. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 made explicit the Emperor's powers, making him the "head of the Empire" with significant authority on the executive and legislative (Beasley 1989, 664). The *genrō*, a collegial group of seven individuals coming from the Satsuma and Chōshū domains, originally held major positions in the bureaucracy. As a result, the line between bureaucracy and the government was almost indistinguishable. Relying on an informal set of rules, they significantly impacted the direction of national policies (Silberman 1967, 82).

At the turn of the 1900s, the decision-making structure shifted from the *genrō* to upper civil servants and the Cabinet. High-ranking officials were now following a systematic and uniform education through the law faculty of Tokyo Imperial University, as most elites and high-ranking officials were graduates of the Tokyo University after 1894 (Koh 1989, 20; Silberman 1967, 93).

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Meiji's adoption of best practices

Japan could undergo fundamental institutional reorganization due to the new leadership's willingness to adopt best practices as a more coherent decision-making block. Institutional reorganization began in early January 1868 with the establishment of the *sanshoku* (the three offices), and continued with the creation of the *seitaisho*, the Constitution of 1868. These fundamental changes shaped an executive and administrative system that incorporated individuals from both samurai and noble backgrounds. Although Japan's political and administrative bodies would undergo various nominal and functional restructuring, these early reforms demonstrate how the new leadership sought to implement a more modern political structure from the outset (Shimizu 2020, 8–35; Wilson 1952). Organizations such as the postal system, the navy, the army, and the judicial system began to emulate Western practices in 1869 and continued in the 1870s. More than a mere imitation of the Western institutions, the new Japanese elites innovated each to make them fit with Japan's geographical, social, and organizational specificities (Westney 1987, 13).

However, it required money, and expenditure cuts or an increase of revenue through taxation had to be done. Concerning budget cuts, the new leaders were able to partially reduce their foreign debts through negotiations. The abolition of *daimyo* shifted fiscal responsibilities from the domains to the Meiji government. Samurai stipends decreased significantly in the early 1870s to the lowest level possible (Beasley 1972, 382).

The Meiji government quickly realized that a tax on land and agriculture would provide a stable source of income, especially since taxation of commerce and industry and foreign borrowings could impede Meiji's economic development and national security. Moreover, international trade was not an option due to the unequal treaties, leaving only a tiny tariff margin for the Japanese. The new tax system brought widespread backlash and resistance, but the ruling leaders quickly found various ways to contain them. First, the reform privatized land holding and reorganized the village unit. Village headmen had been essential in administering taxation and fostering discontent and revolts during Tokugawa. After the reform, the village unit-level disappeared, and taxation directly targeting individuals. This ended the traditional institution through which people used to contest the state's authority. Second, the land tax reforms provided a fairer and more rational tax assessment and took away the arbitrary aspect of the previous Tokugawa taxation system. As a result, most landholders benefited from this new system at the expense of small owners (Vlastos 1989, 373–378).

The military reforms gained a new momentum during the Restoration thanks to Vice-Minister of Military Affairs Ōmura Masujirō, a leading figure from Choshu. Ōmura was able to study in-depth Western military practices through Dutch learning. After his death in 1869, his successors continued his willingness to reform the whole military, leading to different groundbreaking reforms relying on Western experts. Japan modeled its army relying on the French and its navy on the British; a German conscription system was established to replace the samurai in 1873. Moreover, the abolition of *daimyo* for a centralized government led to the disbanding of clan armies for the benefit of the conscripted army. The victory over the samurai rebellion between 1874–1877 showed the potency of the new imperial army and the Western-style reform's efficiency (Kublin 1949, 27–32).

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Qing China in decline

China had been Asia's reigning hegemon since the collapse of unified Japan in 1600, and it had continuously been the strongest Asian state since its unification in the late thirteenth century (Motin 2022a; Wang 2020). China was the world's greatest economic power until the second half of the nineteenth century, and remained the most populous state by a large margin. No Asian state could have seriously defied the gigantic, well-organized, and well-funded Chinese military. Since Qing China reigned supreme for over 200 years, one should expect its leaders to be extremely confident in their existing institutions, profoundly embedded in both the leaders and elites.

Qing leaders did not fundamentally change China's administrative structure after they took power from the Ming. The administration was highly centralized, relying on governors appointed by the central government to rule all China's provinces efficiently. This resulted in a relatively peaceful and politically stable period, also known as the 'High Qing,' that lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. In Qing China, provincial governors were given more powers for both military and civilian matters. They were able to efficiently enforce central policies into more localized ones with rights to appoint and dismiss local officials, and manage local expenditures and military garrisons. As Guy explains, governors were "not only supervisors of territorial subordinates but also special emissaries of the emperor on the local level" (Guy 2013, 7).

Leadership beliefs

China had been in contact with Western knowledge since the sixteenth century through Jesuit missionaries. They imported scientific knowledge such as astronomy, mathematics, geography, and the calendar system, with its most salient example being the late Ming official Xu Guangqi, who translated scientific knowledge into Chinese. However, the impact was limited to a few fields like mathematics, as it faced strong backlash from conservative anti-Western scholars from both the Ming and Qing dynasties (Têng and Fairbank 1954, 12–15). Qing figures like Lin Zexu tried to introduce the Western legal system during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, that attempt was cut short by China's defeat in the Opium War (Yin 2016).

During the 1860s, the dominant conservative worldview held that China was strong enough to defeat European powers if it really wished to. China's defeats were explained by Beijing's restraint and the belief that the Europeans were relatively inoffensive traders unworthy of attention. Even after the Opium Wars, tributary relations between China and several Asian states continued. This now merely symbolic gesture nevertheless reinforced Chinese elites' belief that China's power position remained strong (Wojciuk 2021, 542–543).

This underlying theme of China not questioning its fundamental institutions can be seen throughout the first phase of the Self-Strengthening Movement. It was an attempt by a faction of reformers to modernize weaponry and the Chinese training system. However, it was never adopted as a national policy due to a strong backlash from conservative leaders. Moreover, the core content of the reforms did not aim to fundamentally change the military organization, as the military system in place was in line with the then-economic and administrative institutions. The modernization of the military also failed, due to the Qing government's more significant concern over

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internal stability than the foreign pressure from Western countries. Worse, with the Taiping Rebellion's defeat in 1864, Qing officials started to lose interest in deeply reforming the military (Smith 1976, 215–223).

The main character in the late Qing dynasty was Empress Dowager Cixi (1861–1908). Cixi realized during the 1860s that customs on international trade was an easy way to improve state finances. Even if Cixi could be open-minded, her entourage discouraged reforms, as they might ruin traditional China. She did invest in military modernization and weapon acquisition with foreign advisors. Still, these remained surface-level evolutions, and the xenophobic faction led a backlash against modernization at the turn of the 1870s. Her son's (Emperor Tongzhi) short reign (1873–1875) saw little initiative. After his demise in 1875, Cixi made additional efforts to emulate Japanese military progress. Industries and new technologies initially condemned were now being brought in. However, reforms remained sluggish, and she did not allow the development of railways until 1889 (Chang 2013, parts 2–3).

The discrepancy between Chinese leaders' newfound ambitions and their actual ability to implement reforms manifests clearly in their attempts to turn China into a constitutional monarchy. Although it wanted to create a parliament, the imperial regime paid little attention to people's representation. Instead, their main drive to form a parliament was to increase the state's effectiveness and China's power. The Chinese court considered since the mid-1870s the costs and benefits of a constitution and a parliament and started to study the Meiji model more closely. It realized that such a regime could bolster China's power and reverse its decline relative to Japan and European powers. The disastrous Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 increased the momentum for reforms. Emperor Guangxu, supported by liberal elites, announced (only) in 1898 extensive reforms, among which introducing a constitution, the so-called Hundred Days' Reform (Moniz Bandeira 2023).

Kang Youwei, a political reformer, was aware that the Western threat disrupted China's regional position. He also knew fundamental institutional changes had to be made, and he was looking at Meiji and Russian examples. According to him, a failure similar to the self-strengthening reforms was likely if only superficial institutional reforms were made. Kang was the first reformer to bring that argument to the imperial court, and later, during the Hundred Days' Reform, he became the Emperor's principal adviser. Similar to the Japanese example, he advocated for a parliamentary system and a constitutional monarchy relying on an emperor with strong powers. He was also convinced that establishing a modern-style education system teaching Western learning and industrialization through private ownership was critical for successful parliamentary institutions. However, this attempt was immediately cut short by a conservative coup in September 1898 (Wong 1992, 515–531).

The fall of Beijing to foreign armies in 1900 following the Boxer Rebellion gave new urgency to reforms, which Empress Dowager Cixi called for in January 1901 (Moniz Bandeira 2023). Indeed, the failure of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 marginalized conservatives and left the door open for reformists, and the Chinese court attempted more profound reforms thereafter. In 1901, the military was deeply reshuffled, generally on Western or Japanese lines (Wojciuk 2021, 544).

Shen Jiaben was a bureaucrat who pushed for reforms, as he knew that extraterritoriality would be removed if China were to adopt a Western-style legal system. After being appointed Commissioner for Revision of the Laws in 1902, he spent the next ten years trying to reform the legal system. Although the main leaders of the

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Hundred Days' Reforms were regarded as having been wrong, the late Qing reforms period were in essence a continuation of their work. Shen Jiaben had more bureaucratic experience than his reformist predecessor Kang Youwei, and thus could pull the right strings to achieve his reforms.

Shen was a proponent of learning from the Japanese model, which itself imitated Western institutions. The linguistic, cultural, and geographical proximity to China would lessen the costs of importing foreign institutions. Moreover, the stronger administration over the legislature and judiciary branches appealed to Qing leaders. As a result, Qing officials started to imitate the Meiji constitution and its overall legal framework. Moreover, from 1904, the government increased the dispatch of officials and students to foreign countries, mainly to Japan. The education system was overhauled as well. New schools were established, and foreign scholars teaching law and politics were brought to China (Hua 2013, 125–128). To summarize, the Chinese leadership was slow to conclude that its old practices needed an overhaul. Reforms in the late 1800s were incremental and limited in nature, and it took until the turn of the century for a sense of urgency to push more decisive reforms.

Elite cohesion

The mild post-1860 reforms failed to deeply shake the bureaucracy and the military. Indeed, China's bureaucracy had changed little since the seventh century. When reforms arrived, officials often ignored them and indulged in their old ways. Customary law and local practice often triumphed over formal law. Responsibilities were unclear, and the bureaucracy was deeply inefficient. Corruption was widespread in the state apparatus, and it was sometimes possible to purchase official posts. Powerful officials kept favoring their private interests over the state's, thus limiting the government's ability to reform. Even diplomats during high-level negotiations often placed their private interests over the state's. Since state elites' training was unchanged, it is relatively unsurprising that they saw reforms with doubt. The armed forces lacked loyalty to the central command and were still deeply corrupt. In wartime, the state remained unable to mobilize the society (Wojciuk 2021, 544–545; Zhang 2022, 5).

The Imperial Court's ability to impose its will over the elites steadily declined during the second half of the nineteenth century. The scale of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) forced Beijing to delegate military defense roles to local elites. This delegation of authority gave regional elites their own private armies and the ability to enforce their preferences. Since these militias did not rely on state money to exist, their sole allegiance was to their local leader (Wang 2022, chap. 8). During the first decades after the European encounter, Beijing did not feel the urge to fundamentally overhaul the military, instead coming up with a few ad hoc changes and hoping that the system would hold.

The inability of the central state to trust its elites is particularly apparent in its fiscal problems. The Chinese court was wary of reforming the fiscal system because it knew it would likely elicit revolts, and it feared that high taxation of the land would enable local bureaucracy to misuse the money and grow in power. China was extracting from the society around 30 million taels of silver per year in 1800, and this had barely increased by 1890. By the 1900s, most state revenues came from customs on domestic and foreign trade, which were less painful to the populace and could be centralized in

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Beijing, thus keeping it out of local bureaucrats' hands (Deng 2012, 342; Wong 2012). China's ability to make money out of customs was also due to its resistance to foreign commercial infiltration. Indeed, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Western countries failed to gain domestic market shares (Halsey 2015, 70–80). Although the Chinese leaders kept relatively tight control over their domestic taxation system, they did not make this an opportunity for fundamental reforms. The tax system was solidly embedded. This contrasts with Japan, which was able to impose an efficient fiscal system and increase tax revenue throughout the Meiji era (Nakabayashi 2012).

Some, like Huang Zunxian, saw the need to tax reforms; as he put it, China could "increase its revenue by five or six times, which would be more than enough to acquire all the tools of wealth and power, be it iron, modern weapons, steamboats, or railroads" (Zhang 2022, 302). However, most influential officials resisted the idea of tax reforms until the very end of the nineteenth century. Following the Taiping Rebellion, the states had increased taxes. However, provincial administrators used informal reductions to offset the surcharges, undermining the government's efforts. Even if opposition to higher taxes on agriculture softened after 1911, many provincial officials still opposed reforms (Zhang 2022, chap. 6).

The same goes for agricultural reforms. Some officials, like Ding Lijun and Sheng Yu, argued that China's unique circumstances made the European agricultural experience irrelevant and feared that reform would wreck the country's foundations. Another, Feng Guifen, believed that mechanization was unlikely to yield significant benefits, because the country had a large pool of farmers and traditional production methods remained the best (Zhang 2022, 298–299). Ancient and tested economic practices would ultimately work.

In the end, "the tension between the well-nigh utopian hopes of the Qing government and the various internal pressures eventually led to the demise of the Qing" (Moniz Bandeira 2023, 252) and the central state's collapse in 1911. In 1905, the court abolished the traditional civil service examination system. This system was one of the only leverages that the central state had over provincial elites. Now that social promotion was not dependent on Beijing's agreement, local elites had little incentive to please the court (Wang 2022, 193). Regional and local authorities kept significant power. Particular loyalties and the lack of esprit de corps left the military impotent, and this ultimately played a key role in overthrowing the imperial regime. The revolution broke Beijing's central rule over the country, and the countries slowly sank into civil war pitting nationalists, communists, and warlords against each other (Wojciuk 2021, 545, 552).

Exciting nationalism can help rally elites around a reformist agenda. Japanese leaders and their discourse of 'national essence' (*kokusui*) united the elites around reforms to adopt foreign models. However, in China, the Manchu dynasty was working to maintain its separate identity. Meanwhile, many Chinese still perceived the Manchu Qing as barbarians. Hence, Beijing failed to mobilize nationalism and gain elite approval (Rhoads 2000; Taliaferro 2009, 220–221).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the main political demarcation line could be drawn between the reformists under the Emperor and Kang Youwei and the conservatives led by Empress Dowager Cixi. Domestically, a fundamental difference existed concerning the need for radical institutional reforms. Internationally, Qing leaders were torn between a pro-Russian faction led by Cixi and a current desire to establish closer relations with Japan, England, and the United States (Wong 1992, 535).

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The death of Empress Dowager Cixi and the Emperor Guangxu in 1908 led to the advent of a group of elites advocating for state centralization. Led by the Head of Finance Ministry Zaize, a group of Manchu officials gained the trust of other reformists. The 1909 financial reform is another example of an attempt to centralize the administration. The revenue reform would, through the creation of provincial bureaus in regions such as Sichuan, help the central administration to control more efficiently corrupted practices such as fees-taking from officials, and hinder, as a result, personal enrichment with public money (Hickey 1991, 391–409).[6]

The Qing's failure to adopt best practices

The Qing government declared its intent to enforce a constitution in 1906, but it did not provide a clear timeframe for implementation. The Chinese court was cautious, because, contrary to Japan, it knew it could not count on widespread elite support for its constitutional project. It refused to create too liberal a constitution for fear of losing power. But it feared that liberal reformers would heavily criticize a non-democratic constitution. The court believed significant preliminary reforms were necessary for China to be ready for parliamentarism. Beijing announced in 1908 that a constitution inspired by Japan's would be put in place for nine years, until a national assembly was finally assembled in 1916 (Moniz Bandeira 2023). Furthermore, the Six Ministries of the traditional order were replaced by European-like ministries in 1906.

The constitutional revision was intended to introduce comprehensive reforms covering numerous aspects of Chinese institutions. In 1909 the Qing court allowed the enforcement of various financial reforms to modernize the administration overall. A more modern budgetary system would replace the traditional finance system, relying on a bureaucratic *millefeuille* to assure better revenue control. Finance officials directly appointed by the Finance Ministry would then supervise ad hoc financial provincial bureaus. A major component of that reform was to rectify officials' salaries. The dramatically low salary led local officials to collect unofficial fees from the people from their jurisdiction and higher officials directly from their subordinates. As a result, a significant part of the circulating money was outside the official circuit. The financial reforms would also tackle corruption and collusion between official strata. The fee-taking between officials led to practices of patronage, negligence, and corruption as higher officials hindered them from being strict with their subordinates. Fee-taking practices greatly undermined central authority, alongside the power decay of provincial treasurers (Hickey 1991, 398). The constitutional reform was buried along with the Qing Dynasty in the 1911 revolution.

In the Chinese case, failing practices were embedded too deeply to make reform possible. The Qing government did not imitate the Meiji regime, which reformed the *daimyo* system so the central government could receive land taxes. Although revenue gradually increased, Qing officials could not afford to trigger costly modernization policies. Neither did the Chinese government reform its banking system to make investments in industry possible. As opposed to Japan, with its bank reforms of the 1870s, China only started to implement gradual changes at the end of the nineteenth century, with resultingly limited effects on industrial development (Perkins 1967, 486–489). In sum, "what had fundamentally changed between 1850 and 1901 was the political and intellectual attitudes of political elites" (Zhang 2022, 301). As Wakeman put it: "The fall of the old order was thus the culmination of processes which began during the 1850s in response to internal rebellion and external aggression: the development of

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regional armies, the rise of a rural managerial class, the political entrenchment of the gentry in provincial government, and so forth" (Wakeman 1975, 228).

Conclusion

To maintain and improve its international position, a state needs to adopt the practices most able to generate power. This requires a leadership who understands best practices and is willing to adopt them. This leadership then requires the state elites to implement them faithfully. We have argued that the responsiveness of both leadership and the elite will depend on the embeddedness of traditional practices. If a great power has been in a dominating position, many are likely to believe that its traditional model worked well in the past and could work again in the future. Conversely, a state emerging from enduring weakness will more readily adopt new practices as its officials understand their fragile position and will feel the need to improve it.

Qing China and Meiji Japan confirm our expectations. China enjoyed centuries of hegemony in Asia before European great powers entered the region. Beijing long failed to acknowledge that its traditional model was failing to keep up with them. When the Chinese leadership finally decided to make extensive reforms at the turn of the twentieth century, the elites were still reticent to drop many of China's traditions, eventually hastening state collapse. Meanwhile, both Japan's leaders and elites, despite some initial opposition to the government, acknowledged the country's weakness and quickly moved to reform and improve their international position. In the Japanese case, the previous practices were not deeply embedded within the polity. In China, the traditional model from the heyday was profoundly embedded and took decades to give way to major reforms (Table 2).

Our argument can be applied to other cases, such as the late Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was extremely powerful, being one pole of the post-1945 bipolar system. Many Soviets were deeply convinced of the superiority of the communist regime. Therefore, although Moscow's inefficient economy increasingly fell behind the West after the 1960s, and Soviet economic decline became dire by the mid-1970s, it took until well after the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 for reformist forces to enact significant new policies (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000, 14–21). The KGB, followed by most of the Communist Party, saw Gorbachev's reforms as weakening the Soviet Union's international position and wanted a return to a communist hardline. Key leadership figures perceived the need to reform differently, and numerous high-level officials up to the vice president and the minister of defense participated in the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev. State officials were deeply divided too. The KGB, most of the party and regional soviets, and some military units followed the putschists, disgruntled by the Perestroika. Testing our arguments on other historical great powers such as this one could thus be valuable.

Table 2. Summary

Explanatory variables		Elite cohesion	
		yes	no
Leadership's belief in best practices	yes	Meiji Restoration	Hundred Days Reform Late Qing reforms
	no	Japan, 1853–1868	Self-Strengthening period

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Our theoretical claims could also apply to the case of the Ottoman Empire. The decline of the Ottoman Empire began relative to European competitors in the seventeenth century and unfolded over several centuries. The defeat at the Battle of Vienna in 1683 marked the end of the Empire's expansion. However, Ottoman leaders missed many of the eighteenth century's economic and military advances. They still lived on the inertia of the preceding era of military glory, as their formerly successful practices and tactics were deeply embedded. Internally, administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and a weakening of central authority undermined the government's ability to maintain control over its vast territories. As the empire struggled to modernize its economy and military, European powers surged ahead during the Industrial Revolution. At first, the Empire's mass and its immediate neighbors' weakness compensated for the Ottoman technological and doctrinal lag. However, the decisive defeat during the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829 shook the Ottoman leadership, which engaged in 1839 in extensive reforms (the Tanzimat period). Still, by then, it was too late to salvage the Empire's position. The Muhammad Ali revolt in Egypt deprived the Empire of one of its key provinces, and the Ottomans became torn apart by the competing great powers. By the late nineteenth century, the empire was the unfamous 'sick man of Europe,' continuing to lose territory until its dissolution in 1922 after World War I.

More broadly, there is a strand of literature arguing that neorealist insights on state adaptation cannot apply to non-Western or ancient international systems (Huang and Kang 2022a). For instance, Phillips and Sharman (2015) see the Mughal Empire's failure to adopt the technologies and organizations of the small colonial enclaves on the Indian coast as a proof that interstate emulation does not apply. But our argument helps solve this puzzle. The massive Mughal Empire dominated India until the early eighteenth century, and sizable inland European conquest did not occur until the second half of that century. Why should we expect local powers to imitate the domestic politics of small European trading outposts instead of imitating dominant continental great powers like the Mughal or the Maratha Empire? Imitation implies the knowledge of what best practices are. Indian polities only interacted with tiny European trading enclaves for a long time. This was not a shock impactful enough to question long-embedded practices. It is thus unsurprising that this did not elicit clear-cut convergence.

A further avenue would be to extend the discussion of best practices to minor powers. Minor powers should be especially receptive to changes in the balance of power, since they are likely to be the first victims. However, the lack of power potential and the presence of strong powers to pass the buck of balancing onto could discourage reforms toward best practices, as these are costly but do not bring much additional security; one can think of late Joseon.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. A definition of effectiveness in international politics is Millett, Murray, and Watman 1986. See also Brooks and Stanley 2007. For a constructivist take on the issue of adaptation, see Legro (2005).

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2. For a discussion of intervening variables in realism, see Götz 2021.
3. Of course, we do not argue that unanimous leadership and elite is always better than the opposite. States can sometimes be united around bad ideas, and domestic dissension can sometimes help prevent mistakes (Tang 2009, 800).
4. The late nineteenth century was a multipolar structure, with Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Italy (after 1861), and the United States (after 1898) as great powers (Levy 1983, 29–42; Mearsheimer 2014, 6).
5. For a discussion of best practices imitation in first-millennium Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, see Huang and Kang 2022b. For more ancient East Asian international relations, see Hui 2005 and 2018, Meng and Hu 2020, and Wang 2013, 2020, and 2021.
6. One can make a good case that demographic factors accelerated elite disintegration (Orlandi et al. 2023).

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