



Propensity, Conditions, and Consequences: Effective Coercion Through Understanding Chinese Thinking

In the absence of understanding, too many Americans assume that the PRC operates basically like the United States, when in fact it is profoundly different in all the ways that matter: politically, economically, and militarily. This is why Chinese behavior so often puzzles Western observers, and this is why, despite the long-time reluctance to officially admit it, strategic competition is here to stay.

Ian Easton, *The China Invasion Threat*¹

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Philosophy influences strategy

In late 2021, the U.S. Army released Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 7-100.3, *Chinese Tactics*. The book's first chart, Figure 1-1 Active Defense (below), shows how the People's Republic of China (PRC) People's Liberation Army (PLA) translates defensive national policy into the "basic warfighting philosophy" of active defense. Figure 1-1 says that Chinese philosophy, history and geography influence their national policy.² Likewise, Figure 1-4 PLA Operational Framework (below), states that philosophy, history, and Chinese culture and identity factor into PLA's military thought.³

However, ATP 7-100.3 fails to explain how philosophy, history, or culture influence PLA "military thought," the Chinese loose equivalent of "doctrine." Instead, the text simply lists two authors, Sunzi (older transliterations include Sun Tzu) and Mao Zedong, and states, "Sun Tzu and Mao together created the framework from which the PLA's modern-day strategy and tactics are derived." It then states that the PLA is "Influenced largely by [Sunzi's] *The Art of War*."⁴

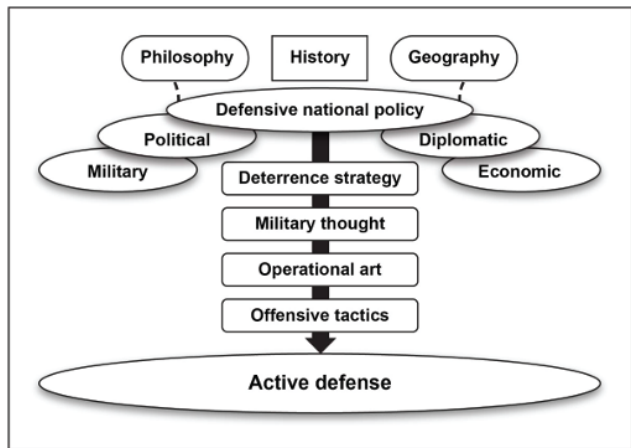


Figure 1-1. Active defense

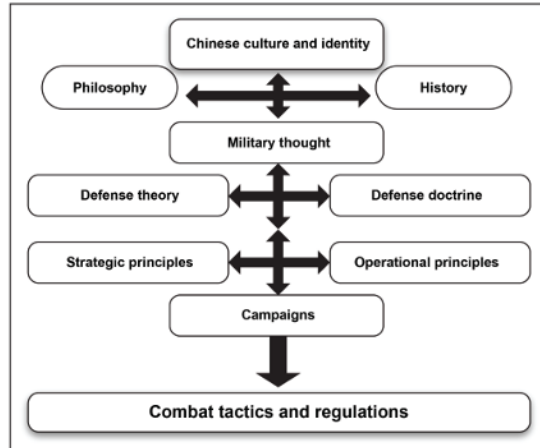


Figure 1-4. PLA operational framework

For the sake of understanding PLA tactics, reducing the PLA's culture, history, and philosophy to only Sunzi and Mao, while unfortunate, is understandable. But to understand PLA strategic thinking, Western thinkers cannot afford to be as reductionist by avoiding weighing Chinese philosophy, history, culture, and identity. In 1977 Jack Snyder, then writing about Soviet nuclear operations, said, "Neither Soviet nor American strategists are culture-free, preconception-free game theorists."⁷ The same holds true when thinking about PLA strategists.

William Mott IV and Jae Chang Kim's book, *The Philosophy of Chinese Military Culture*, details how analyses of Chinese strategic actions often fail due to the "comfortable—perhaps naïve—assumption that the Chinese are really just like us."⁸ Colin Grey says,

When American strategic theorists, or those of any other country, assert that a common logic of rational choice serves to understand strategic issues, they are bound to fall into the trap of ethnocentrism. Inevitably, that common logic is our logic. The rational choices we predict are our rational choices.⁹

Western minds must understand Chinese strategic thinking and how that is used to frame their problem solving, and avoid imposing our own Western culture and perspective onto the PRC's problem framing. Additionally, we cannot mirror image our definitions onto PRC concepts. Marx says, "the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his

mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.”¹⁰ Rarely is translation across cultures direct or easy, and it is hardest when attempting esoteric concepts like philosophy and strategy.

This paper will briefly explore the development of Chinese philosophy from Confucianism and Daoism to Marxist and Maoist communism, and the origins of Western “causal” thinking in contrast to Chinese “correlative” thinking. The paper will explain how these styles of thinking led to a Western “ends, ways, and means” method of planning, while the Chinese use “propensity, conditions, and consequences.” The paper will then use Chinese correlative thought to develop a “propensity model” to describe how China attempts to coerce other parties. It will then investigate how the divergent approaches to thought can yield disparate results when attempting and interpreting coercive actions using three case studies: the 2006 Valiant Shield exercise, the 2016 decision to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense antimissile battery to South Korea, and a 2022 Taiwan Strait transit. The paper will conclude with implications of these findings on U.S. and PRC thought.

Different philosophies lead to different thinking

The West, through the evolution of our philosophy, including Aristotle’s “prime mover”—his attempt to prove a single causal system—developed a linear cause and effect system of planning where the goal is envisioned, and a linear cause (or course of action) is developed to attain that goal. François Jullien, philosopher and sinologist, described this “causal thinking” as, “so thoroughly assimilated that we no longer see it—no longer see ourselves. We set up an ideal form (eidos), which we take to be a goal (telos), and we then act in such a way as to make it become fact.”¹¹

Jullien shows how causal thinking impacts the Western way of war.

For Clausewitz, the only possible way of “thinking through” warfare was to conceive of its conduct as *art*. In doing so, he envisaged it logically, according to an idea that had become traditional in Western philosophy, namely, the Aristotelian relation between *means* and *ends*, *Mittel* and *Zweck* (final end) or *Ziel* (intermediate end). In other words, he conceived of warfare as using the most appropriate means for achieving a predetermined end.¹²

The United States Department of Defense embraces this Clausewitzian method of causal thinking today. The U.S. Department of Defense’s Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 2-19, *Strategy*, says, “Military strategy is fundamentally about choices. *It bridges from present facts to a desired future state or condition, providing options how best to arrive there* expressed in coherent and clear terms.” [emphasis added]¹³ JDN 2-19 says that the ends-ways-means model is the “basic construct of modern strategy,” with the National Security Strategy providing the ends.¹⁴ “The ends in military strategy are a subset of the defense strategy’s objectives, while the ways and means represent how the joint force will execute the defense strategy.”¹⁵

While JDN 2-19 says, “All strategies include a fundamental logic of ends, ways, means, and risk,”¹⁶ the Chinese would argue otherwise. In contrast to the Western idea of causal thinking, or as Jullien called it, “a tradition of means and ends,”¹⁷ the Chinese outlook developed a different model. Jullien says,

But far away in China, we discover a concept of efficacy that teaches one to learn how to allow an effect to come about: not to aim for it (directly) but to implicate it (as a consequence), in other words, not to seek it, but simply to welcome it—to allow it to result.¹⁸

This difference in thinking, in the approach to “efficacy,” resulted from the millennia of isolation between ancient Greek and later European civilizations and Chinese civilizations, and this allowed for the dissimilar evolution of their philosophies.¹⁹ Events such as Marco Polo’s journey (13th century CE) and the Zheng He treasure fleet (14th century CE) were still fundamentally new contacts—philosophically and culturally—between the regions, even so long after Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Confucius (551–479 BCE). It wasn’t until the Jesuit priests began living among the Chinese to convert them to Christianity in the 16th century CE that we begin to see an in-depth study of Chinese thought. Jesuits soon found that to convert the Chinese, they had to think like them. And so, some 1800 years after Confucius, the study of Confucianism and Daoism began.²⁰

Daoism (or Taoism) and Confucianism both started²¹ in the late Zhou dynasty (around the 4th century BCE) and share many concepts. While ancient, the main texts of both remain among the most popular in modern Chinese philosophy.²²

Confucianism seeks the unity of benevolence and propriety, where propriety comes from virtue (德, *de*).²³ Through virtue, power is exercised without force and without undue interference in the surrounding situation.²⁴ Therefore, governments must be benevolent and justly use force and punishment. This just and correct path of leaders is found through the *dao* (道, older transliterations include *tao*), the way in which things exist, how people should exist, and the way things change. The *dao* is very important to Chinese philosophy, occupying “the position at the center of thought that in Western philosophy is filled by terms like ‘being’ and ‘truth.’”²⁵

Daoism, as the name suggests, follows the way of the *dao*. The *dao* is itself unchanging. The *Dao De Jing* (道德經, or *Tao Te Ching*), the principal text of Daoism, starts by saying, “The *dao* that can be spoken is not the enduring and unchanging *dao*” (“道可道也，非恒道也”).²⁶ While the *dao* is the ultimate basis of change, it does so without purpose and without judgement. The *dao* is unchanging, but the world is chaotic and one should not try to bring order to the chaos.

The acosmotic character of Daoism is based upon the affirmation rather than the negation of chaos. In the Anglo-European tradition, Chaos as emptiness, separation, or confusion is to be overcome. In Daoism, the chaotic aspect of things is to be left alone to contribute spontaneity to the process of transformation.²⁷

Therefore, causation is problematic to the *dao*. Jullien says Chinese thought “has no need for a prime mover.”²⁸ As it is unchanging, the *dao* cannot be influenced by our attempts at action. Just as Confucianism claims that power is exercised without force and undue interference in the surrounding situation, Daoism says we must not try to bring order to chaos, nor can we change the *dao*. According to Oliver Leaman, in his book *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy*, “The idea is that the nature of reality is unaffected by our ways of trying to grasp it,

and although we may use concepts to make sense of reality, we should be aware that reality in itself is completely undifferentiated.”²⁹

A philosophy that believes in constant change through contradiction (*yin* and *yang* of Daoism and the dyadic relationships and struggles within man of Confucianism) provides fertile ground for the philosophies of dialectics by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and eventually Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. Mao Zedong would build on dialectics during his time in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This thinking too set the foundation for the flourishing of systems thinking, brought from the West to the PRC by the deported rocket scientist Qian Xuesen.³⁰ This type of thinking stands in sharp contrast to Aristotle’s single causal system.

This variance in the very foundation of thought results in vastly different approaches to logic and, eventually, war planning. David Hall and Roger Ames, professors of Philosophy at the University of Texas at El Paso, posit,

What has come to be called correlative thinking is effectively a nonlogical procedure in the sense that it is not based upon natural kinds, part-whole relations, an implicit or explicit theory of types, *or upon causal implications or entailments of anything like the sort one finds in Aristotelian or modern Western logics.* [emphasis added]³¹

In *Treatise on Efficacy*, Jullien says, “Two different modes of efficacy result from these two different logics: on the one hand, the relation of means to ends with which we in the West are more familiar; on the other, a relation between conditions and consequences, which is favored by the Chinese.”³² Compared to the Western method of setting desired objectives (ends) and desired path to obtain that objective (ways and means), the Chinese approach is to set the conditions such that the consequences are a natural outcome. But before the Chinese can decide on the conditions, they must first understand the “propensity,” the trend of the times, so they can move with it.

Propensity

Jullien describes the propensity as,

Instead of constructing an ideal Form that we then project on to things, we could try to detect the factors whose configuration is favorable to the task at hand; instead of setting up a goal for our actions, we could allow ourselves to be carried along by the propensity of things. In short, instead of imposing our plan upon the world, we could rely on the potential inherent in the situation.³³

This idea of a “potential” that carries us, in conjunction with which the Chinese set conditions and consequences, is expressed in Chinese through 勢 (*shi*, older transliterations include *shih*). While often translated as “potential,” “momentum,” or even “political advantage”³⁴—or in a modern context, often “trend” (大勢 *da shi*)—this character escapes simple translation between cultures. As shown by John Sullivan, translators of Sunzi’s *Art of War* have chosen 14 different interpretations for this character—with one author choosing not to translate it at all.³⁵ In *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, Zhang Dainian defines *shi* as,

‘influence, tendency, strategic power, authority.’ In ancient Chinese philosophy it can describe the relation between one thing and another, their mutual influence. It can also describe the movement of one thing toward another, its tendency; and finally it can describe the effect of the ruler on the ruled, authority. In all these cases it is expressing a relation between two or more things.³⁶

Francois Jullien attempts to explain the character and its ideas, translating the character as “propensity,” in his book *The Propensity of Things*. He says,

For the Chinese *shi* is most important; for Clausewitz “means” and “end” are. The disparity between these categories results in a fundamental structural difference... Likewise, the attention paid to propensity, the efficacy that stems from disposition, is reflected, even more overtly, in the Chinese concept of authority.³⁷

Shi is often translated as energy or momentum, because the concept contains elements of both, but also includes much more. Sunzi says, “Thus the energy (*shi*) developed by good fighting men is as the momentum of a round stone rolled down a mountain thousands of feet in height” (故善战人之势，如转圆石于千仞之山者).³⁸ What Sunzi is describing isn’t the Ewok battle on Endor. He is describing how the condition of the stone being on top of the mountain makes the action of it rolling down a natural consequence. He is describing whereby, once in motion, the propensity of the stone is to continue, unstoppable, down the mountain. And he is describing that it is most efficacious not to resist the inevitable, downward motion of the stone, but to use that motion to one’s advantage.

Using correlative thinking, *dao*, and *shi* in warfare are not limited to Sunzi’s *Art of War*, but can be found in texts throughout China’s history. For example, Liu An’s less famous *Huainanzi*, written in 139 BCE, states,

[H]e who is good at defending cannot be overcome, and he who is good at battle cannot be attacked. He understands the Way (*dao* 道) of restricting entries and opening blockages. He takes advantage of the force (*shi* 势) of the moment, accords with the desires of the people, and seizes the world.³⁹

Taking advantage of and not resisting *shi* is reflected in the Daoist concept of *wuwei* (无为). While commonly translated as “inaction” or “nonaction,” it is better translated as the absence of contrived action, or absence of action toward a desired end.⁴⁰ Julia Ching, in *Confucianism and Taoism*, best describes *wuwei* as “acting without artificiality, without overaction, and without attachment to the action itself.”⁴¹ This concept would seem to be a natural response to the ever-changing and chaotic world of the *dao*. Mott and Kim conclude, “The Taoist term *wu-wei* (nonaction or noncompeting) did not mean doing nothing but implied refraining from activity contrary to *Tao*.”⁴² Instead, one must determine the predominant tendency—the propensity—and “go with the flow” while attempting to use this flow to create advantages.⁴³

As with many ideas in Marxism, historical materialism requires little adaptation to connect with this idea of propensity. Marx writes that history is an unvarying march of human development through the relation of productive forces; from primitive communal, slave, feudal,

capitalist, to socialist societies.⁴⁴ Marx says, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”⁴⁵ This “march of history” or “trend of the times” comports and has blended with the Chinese view of the propensity of a situation. The differentiation of “trend of the times” and “propensity” becomes challenging (if it is in fact necessary) as the modern context revises the ancient Chinese (古代汉语) to use *shi* as “trend” (大势 or 趋势), “situation” (形势), or “momentum” (势头).

Propensity is found in modern PRC government documents, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) planning, and in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) speeches. General Secretary Xi Jinping in his 2018 speech at the Central Conference on Diplomatic Work says,

We have acquired a deep understanding of the development trends (发展大势) of the new era both in China and the world...To understand the international situation, we need to have a correct view of history, of the overall picture, and of China’s role. Having a correct view of history means that we should not only observe the international situation as it stands currently, but also look back to the past to summarize history’s laws and, in looking forward to the future, identify the trends of history (把握历史前进大势).⁴⁶

As previously stated, Mao Zedong continued the development of dialectics in multiple ways. Not only did Mao accelerate the communist revolution, skipping steps on its way to communism, but he added the idea of the principal contradiction (主要矛盾), claiming that while there are many contradictions, one will be most important to the resolution of the situation. An article in the PLA’s online newspaper called, “Correctly grasp the main social contradiction and the central task,” defines the principal contradiction.

Marxist philosophy believes that everything is a complex organic system⁴⁷ composed of many contradictions. Among them, one contradiction must be in a dominant position, playing a leading and decisive role, and regulating or affecting the existence and development of other contradictions. This is the principal contradiction. Completing the central task is a series of planned and targeted activities centered on resolving the principal contradiction.⁴⁸

The principal contradiction is still used in CCP decision making today. In his October 2017 speech to the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Chairman Xi Jinping announced a change to the PRC’s principal contradiction.⁴⁹ He stated, “What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.”⁵⁰

The principal contradiction can also be found in military strategy. The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* says, “correct strategic judgement of the security situation (形势) facing the country is the starting point for conducting strategy.”⁵¹ Strategic judgement “is the process of analyzing, predicting, judging, and drawing conclusions on major issues related to national security and military conflict. It is the premise and basis for strategic decisions and strategic guidance.”⁵²

Further, “Strategic judgements must use the dialectical materialist world outlook and methodology, seek truth from facts and scientifically analyze and understand the objective

situation, reveal the intrinsic and essential connections of military conflicts, and prevent subjective assumptions.”⁵³ It continues, “although the strategic situation (形势) is complex and variable, it is often the principal contradiction (主要矛盾) and key issues that restrict the development of the strategic situation (形势) that determine the transformation of the strategic situation (形势).”⁵⁴ In other words, strategic judgement is how the PLA uses dialectics (and systems thinking) to determine the principal contradiction restricting the positive development of propensity. From this judgement, the PLA determines their strategic tasks and objectives—the strategic decision.⁵⁵

The primary basic requirement for strategic decision, as defined by the *Science of Military Strategy*, is to “submit to the overall situation and determine the propensity” (服从大局, 审时度势). Here again, it states, “It is necessary to weigh the various local issues on the overall basis in order to grasp the principal contradiction or important critical points that have a decisive effect on the overall situation.”⁵⁶

The repeated references to the “strategic situation,” while tempting for the Western mindset to interpret as similar to our meaning, is in fact an allusion to Mao’s other contribution to dialectics, the importance of the external environment. Mao says that the external environments, or “external causes,” impact the contradiction. In his essay “On Contradiction,” Mao states,

It holds that external causes are the condition of change and internal causes are the basis of change, and that external causes become operative through internal causes. In a suitable temperature an egg changes into a chicken, but no temperature can change a stone into a chicken, because each has a different basis.⁵⁷

This “external environment” is used outside of the PLA in PRC government planning. In his speech to the Central Conference on Diplomatic Work in July 2018, Xi said,

Having a correct view of the overall picture means we should not only pay attention to phenomena and the finer details, but also have an understanding of the essential nature and overarching situation. We need to identify the principal contradictions and the primary facets of these contradictions, so that, amid a complex and volatile international situation, we don’t lose our way or become bogged down in the details at the expense of the essentials... History has shown that the world has always developed as a result of contradictions intertwining and interaction with one another.⁵⁸

Propensity is not simply “Phase Zero” or “shaping operations,” although “left of bang” (actions taken before conflict) is a major part of propensity. Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, says,

shaping activities help set conditions for successful theater operations. Shaping activities include long-term persistent and preventive military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence actions to assure friends, build partner capacity and capability, and promote regional stability. They help identify, deter, counter, and/or mitigate competitor and adversary actions that challenge country and regional stability... In the best case, shaping activities may avert or diminish

conflict. At the least, shaping provides a deeper, and common, understanding of the OE [Operational Environment].⁵⁹

Shaping operations are attempting to mold the environment to better suit our ways, to achieve our desired end. *Wuwei* says we should not try to shape the propensity, as the world is unmoved by our actions. Instead, one should identify the propensity, the trend of the times, and take actions that use this propensity to one's advantage.

Conditions and consequences

Wuwei's "absence of action toward a desired end" can appear to the Western, causal mind to make planning impossible. However, once one has identified the propensity, one can begin to set the conditions through early and subtle interventions. Jullien says,

Upstream from actualization, however, reality is still flexible and fluid; one does not have to confront it head-on, since whatever one might need to pressurize has not yet come about... At this early stage, reality is still largely at one's disposition, its functions not yet channeled. So one can steer it gently, and the slightest inflection will be decisive, since the progressivity of things inclines it to deploy itself.⁶⁰

Besides early intervention, setting conditions also means limiting choices available to one's opponent, thus ensuring the desired outcome. In either case, the idea is to set the conditions so that the consequences are a natural outcome. "Results follow automatically, for they are simply effects."⁶¹

Therefore, planning is done by detection of the propensity and setting the conditions through early and subtle intervention toward a general end (instead of forceful action toward an ideal goal) that results in desired consequences. These three concepts—propensity (*shi*), conditions, and consequences—combine into our concept of "correlative thinking." A gentle nudge can start the stone rolling down the mountain, and a gentle nudge very early in the rolling of a stone results in a dramatic change in its destination. Once the stone is rolling in the generally right direction—and not setting an ideal goal for its destination—it can proceed on its own momentum, its own propensity. The favorable development of the propensity may be hindered by a contradiction, which can be identified and resolved. In strategic planning, "setting the conditions" means understanding the propensity and taking actions to reduce the options available to one's opponent. Once you have successfully set the conditions, your opponent has no other option but to take your desired action and believe it was their choice.

A tactical example of setting the conditions is what Richard Solomon, in his book *Chinese Political Negotiating Behavior, 1967-1984*, calls "establish a favorable agenda," or what Admiral C. Turner Joy calls in his book regarding the negotiation of the Korean War Armistice, *How Communists Negotiate*, the "loaded agenda." According to Admiral Joy, "They seek an agenda composed of conclusions favorable to their basic objectives." In his example, he says that "among men who adhere to logic," one might set the agenda to discuss a baseball game as "Place the game is to be played." But the Communists submit an agenda that says, "Agreement that game is to be played in Shanghai." Therefore, by agreeing to the agenda, the game location has already been decided.⁶² Solomon uses the example of the early Nixon talks, where the PRC

attempted to have the agenda set with “withdrawal of U.S. forces from Taiwan.” Solomon points out,

In the final exchanges via the Warsaw talks channel in early 1970, the Chinese negotiator, Lei Yang, again repeated his government’s “principled position” that Taiwan was the crucial issue preventing an improvement in the U.S.-PRC relationship, but he made no demands on the United States and enticingly but ambiguously noted that it would be “necessary to create the conditions” to resolve the Taiwan issue as a matter of dispute between the two countries.⁶³

Correlative planning

The ultimate goal is to use the propensity and to set the conditions such that “the process that leads to victory is determined so far in advance (and its development is so systematic and gradual) that it appears to be automatic rather than determined by calculation and manipulation.”⁶⁴ Sunzi says, “Thus a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning.”⁶⁵ Therefore, Western military planners should not presume the PLA wants to “win *without* fighting.” Instead, the PLA wants to set the conditions beforehand so they “win *before* fighting.” “[T]he conflict is already resolved before it even begins...by the time the fight at last begins, the enemy is *already* undone.”⁶⁶

This method of “winning before fighting” results in two byproducts that conflict with Western notions of war. First, Chinese military strategy “does not have to cope with ‘friction,’ since, whereas friction is a threat to any plan drawn up in advance, adventitious circumstances are themselves precisely what makes it possible for the implied potential to come about and deploy itself.”⁶⁷ Second, while the West mocks PLA planning for being a “playbook” or “highly scripted,” PLA planners believe that by setting the proper conditions, the plan need not include American levels of flexibility or include “branch plans.”

U.S. veterans laud that “no plan survives first contact with the enemy,” and see the PLA “playbook-style” plans as naïve and failing to account for the “fog of war.” However, this perspective fails to consider that the conditions are set such that the consequence (the plan going as-planned) is a foregone conclusion. Americans would also do well to remember that the last time the U.S. and PRC were able to compare war planning systems—the 1950 to 1953 Korean War—the U.S. was pushed away from the Chinese border and forced to agree to an armistice.

Setting the conditions to guarantee success is also present in CCP voting. Jullien illustrates Western and Chinese approaches to voting by comparing them to battle.

In particular, the contrast between these concepts of strategy cannot fail to be reflected, on both sides, in the domain of politics. The choice of head-on clash in hoplite battle, representing a direct, immediate, and unequivocal means of obtaining a decision, is closely linked with another Greek invention, the vote in the assembly.⁶⁸

Just as the West mocks PLA “playbook” planning, the West often derides PRC government voting as “rubber stamp,” when votes are near unanimous. However, the truth is that the PRC works before the vote to obtain such a result. The Communist Party sets the conditions to ensure that a successful vote is merely a consequence. Rather than clashing at the

ballet box, with the risk of embarrassing failures (see any U.S. Congress budgetary vote), the Communist Party works well before the vote to secure the support of the majority of the Party.

A good—if imperfect—illustration of the interaction of propensity and *wuwei* in correlative planning compared to Western linear planning comes from the Chinese idiom 拔苗助长 (*bamiao zhuzhang*, literally “to help the sprout by pulling”). The idiom tells of a person who attempts to speed up a growing sprout by pulling on it, only to kill the plant. Try as one may, the linear approach of pulling will only result in a dead plant. However, *shi* and *wuwei* tell us that the best method is to set the conditions such that the seed has no choice but to grow into a plant. By setting the conditions early—watering the soil, providing the right temperature and sunlight, etc.—the plant will grow. Overly contrived action—watering the plant too much or using too much fertilizer—will only hurt and possibly kill the plant.

Additionally, correlative thinking affects the PRC’s approach to crisis communications. The Western, causal ideal of crisis communications is a hotline that provides the leaders with direct communications. In this scenario, the leaders would use this hotline to negotiate an end to a crisis. However, after the West establishes the much-desired hotline with the PRC, Western leaders complain that the hotline is of no use and simply phones ringing in “empty rooms.”⁶⁹

But the Chinese, using correlative thinking, see the use of a hotline between two nations as an overly contrived action. It is more efficient to prevent the situation from occurring in the first place—an early intervention to set the proper conditions. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) National Defense University’s 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* (《战略学》) says in a chapter on preventing military crisis, “Smart crisis management does not lie in the ability to intervene after the formation and outbreak of a crisis, but whether the crisis can be avoided.”⁷⁰ Other factors certainly contribute to the failure of hotlines with the PRC, such as the difference in decision making styles between the two nations. However, correlative thinking removes the urgency to answer the phone as the act is already done. In the 2001 EP-3 incident, this difference in approach resulted in President George W. Bush’s statement, after 24 hours of the PRC not responding to the presidential hotline established in 1997, that he was “troubled by the lack of a timely Chinese response.”⁷¹ Attempts to advance crisis management with the PRC, such as the DoD and PLA’s Crisis Communications Working Group,⁷² will not be able to make significant advancement until both sides are better able to understand the others’ approach to crisis management.

To continue our definition through negation, the principal contradiction is not simply the Chinese version of “center of gravity (COG).” Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, defines the COG as,

the source of power or strength that enables a military force to achieve its objective and is what an opposing force can orient its actions against that will lead to enemy failure. COGs are determined by their impact on the military end state. Success requires protecting the friendly COG while defeating the enemy COG.⁷³

The PLA’s *Science of Military Strategy* has a section called “Overall planning and grasping the center of gravity (重心).” One shouldn’t be misled by the translation of “center of gravity.” It says, “Strategy’s guidance to the overall military conflict is often achieved through the planning and resolution of key issues that have a decisive impact on the overall situation. This key is the focus of the overall situation and is the principal contradiction.”⁷⁴

Earlier, the *Science of Military Strategy* says,

when establishing and implementing a strategy, we must be adept at analyzing various factors and contradictions (矛盾) that affect the overall situation (全局), grasp the principal contradiction (主要矛盾) that plays a decisive role in the overall change, and find effective methods and countermeasures to solve this contradiction (矛盾) to ensure the strategic goal.⁷⁵

The “strategic goal” is the resolution of the “contradiction.”

The key difference is what is done with the principal contradiction and the COG once identified. JP 5-0 says the COG is to be “weakened or destroyed.”

Joint force intelligence analysts determine potential options for the threat COG by identifying what needs to be weakened or destroyed to defeat the enemy. The J-2, in conjunction with other operational planners, then determine if the proposed COGs are truly critical to the enemy’s strategy.⁷⁶

On the other hand, the principal contradiction, as a relationship between multiple things, is to be resolved. Mao says, “Every contradiction is an objective reality, and it is our task to reflect it and resolve it in as nearly correct a fashion as we can.” While an enemy’s COG may be their engineering unit or the will of the people, the principal contradiction will be a dialectic relationship. One example contradiction from “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,” Mao says, “The co-operative transformation of agriculture has been successfully accomplished, and this has resolved the great contradiction in our country between socialist industrialization and the individual peasant economy.”⁷⁷

In his writings, Mao stresses that there are multiple methods to resolve contradictions, including democratic methods. He says,

The principle of using different methods to resolve different contradictions is one which Marxist-Leninists must strictly observe. The dogmatists do not observe this principle; they do not understand that conditions differ in different kinds of revolution and so do not understand that different methods should be used to resolve different contradictions; on the contrary, they invariably adopt what they imagine to be an unalterable formula and arbitrarily apply it everywhere, which only causes setbacks to the revolution or makes a sorry mess of what was originally well done.⁷⁸

The clearest use of propensity in the *Science of Military Strategy* is in the chapter “Strategic Deterrence.” Interestingly, the book does not use any alternate or modern version of *shi*, instead referring directly to the single ancient Chinese character. It says, “Strategic deterrence is about seeking ‘propensity.’ Although there are many methods, they are all focused on ‘propensity.’” (战略威慑贵在谋“势”,其方式虽然很多,但都是紧紧围绕“势,”来做文章.)⁷⁹ It then states multiple “methods” to build propensity; create an atmosphere of war, show advanced weapons, hold military exercises, adjust military deployment, raise the level of combat readiness, implement information attacks, restrictive military operations, and warning military strikes. While “deterrence” is explored further below, the method of “warning military strikes” deserves special attention. The *Science of Military Strategy* says,

A warning military strike is a small-scale strike against a specific target with a small number of selected troops in response to the enemy's serious provocative behavior. Its purpose is not to destroy the opponent's military power or destroy the other's important targets, but to show the ability to strike and the determination to strike when necessary, and to enhance the effectiveness of deterrence by means of small battles... Warning military strikes do not aim at war, but are intended to deter. Therefore, it is necessary to correctly judge the situation, strictly control the means and scale of strikes, and prevent the escalation and expansion of operations and evolve into war.⁸⁰

From a Western perspective, “military strikes” would cross from deterrence into war, a linear effect from a kinetic-attack cause. But from the PLA’s perspective regarding propensity, these strikes are designed to shape the conditions and restrict the decision making space of the enemy, not go to war. This difference could have huge implications for the PRC conducting “warning military strikes” on the United States. While this paper is certainly not advocating that the United States not respond to a kinetic attack from the PRC, this possible intention should be factored into U.S. decision making.

A propensity model of China’s external behavior

To predict or understand the PRC’s actions, one must first understand how they approach the problem. With distinct thinking and priorities, using unique methods of analysis, the PRC will therefore come to different conclusions. To use correlative thinking to better predict and understand PRC actions, we must first model how this style of thinking would apply to international relations.

The PRC’s use of propensity, the external environment, and the principal contradiction, has three immediate impacts on coercion efforts. First, short duration coercion efforts, such as military exercises (limited in space and time) or weapon demonstrations, will not be as effective in isolation. In a Western approach, the planner derives the military objective (end), decides on the method to achieve that objective (ways), and allocates the resources for that method (means). The end becomes preventing a military attack, for example, the ways becomes deterrence, and the means is a military exercise. This ends-ways-means approach creates a false linear connection between the execution of a single military exercise to a deterred enemy.

In a Chinese approach, a short duration event is unlikely to change the contradiction, the environment, their assessment of the propensity, or their approach to setting the conditions. Thus, it would not change their behavior. For these events to not simply be transitory, they must be combined with other events and challenge the PRC’s assessment of the propensity or contradiction. While the *Science of Military Strategy* lists military exercises and weapon demonstrations as deterrence methods to build propensity, they must be used as a piece of a larger puzzle, not a stand-alone solution. As R. James Ferguson and Rosita Dellios report on the Chinese perspective of conflict, “Great emphasis was placed on leadership and strategy, less on technology and routine applications of tactical doctrine.”⁸¹ Actions that are not short in duration, such as new U.S. commitments to allies (or vice versa), will have a larger coercive effect, as they are more likely to force the PRC to re-evaluate the environment, contradiction, or propensity. Conversely, this means that the PRC will take coercive actions against the United States that may be short in duration but intended to have longer term effects.

Secondly, as an extension of the above, the Chinese will think less about the U.S. actions themselves, and more about the consequences of that action and its interplay within the overall environment surrounding that action. In propensity thinking, systems thinking, and dialectics, the relationship between factors is equally important, if not more important, than the factors themselves. For the PRC, this means that all actions are judged through a series of lenses, and not viewed in isolation. As Robert Jervis says in his book *System Effects*, “In politics, connections are often harder to discern, but their existence guarantees that here too most actions, no matter how well targeted, will have multiple effects.”⁸² While the U.S. may desire that the Chinese view an event in isolation—or at least not directly connected to other events—the PRC will not.

For Western planners, this means that the envisioned direct line between the means and the end can be easily masked by other means directed at separate ends, by other actions taken by the department or other organizations. Even if the coercive action appears perfectly clear to the Western planner, it may be judged more heavily by the PRC in its connection to other parts of the system. This makes communication of the coercion effort even more important.

Third, the PRC will take actions aimed at setting conditions, and not aimed at an immediate, imagined goal or defined end state. Rather, they will be aimed at limiting the future options of the United States or other nations. Ends-ways-means planning creates options to obtain the desired ends. JP 5-0 defines joint planning as,

At the strategic level, joint planning provides the President and the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) with options and advice to achieve the National Security Strategy of the United States of America objectives through the employment of the joint force.⁸³

In contrast, the PRC approach seeks “means” that *remove* ends from the enemy’s list of available options.

For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviets attempted a *fait accompli* by establishing the strategic weapons in Cuba before the United States could discover them. As Theodore Sorenson, then special council to the President, said,

For all of us knew that, once the missile sites under construction became operational and capable of responding to any apparent threat with a nuclear volley, the President’s options would be drastically changed.⁸⁴

But the PRC need not deploy missiles to limit choices. Talking points, when used skillfully, can also accomplish this task. In 2014, then Chief of Staff of the Army General Ray Odierno responded to PRC claims that the U.S. strategy of the “rebalance” to the Indo-Pacific was an attempt to contain (遏制) the PRC. General Odierno said at Peking University during his 2014 visit to China, “The one point I would make is our rebalance to the Asia Pacific is not about the containment of China. You will find no one who talks in that manner in the United States.”⁸⁵ Similar to the elicitation technique of the provocative statement,⁸⁶ the PRC asserts a claim to force U.S. leaders to go on record refuting that claim. It then becomes the official U.S. stance that it is not “containing” China or that it will work to avoid the “Thucydides Trap.”⁸⁷

These observations build a model for international relations that focuses on three aspects; taking a longer approach to solve a problem; immediate actions are not important, but their effects on the system is important; and actions are taken to limit options of the target. While it

would be more accurate to call this model a “correlative model,” due to the Western bias against correlation (as compared to causation⁸⁸) we will call this model the “propensity model.”

One way to look at the propensity model is shown below. The actions within the graphic should not be read as linear in time. The development of the propensity is restricted by the principal contradiction, until it is resolved. The PRC will take actions to restrict the options available to the United States, until the desired conditions are set. Once these conditions are set, the consequences are a forgone conclusion.

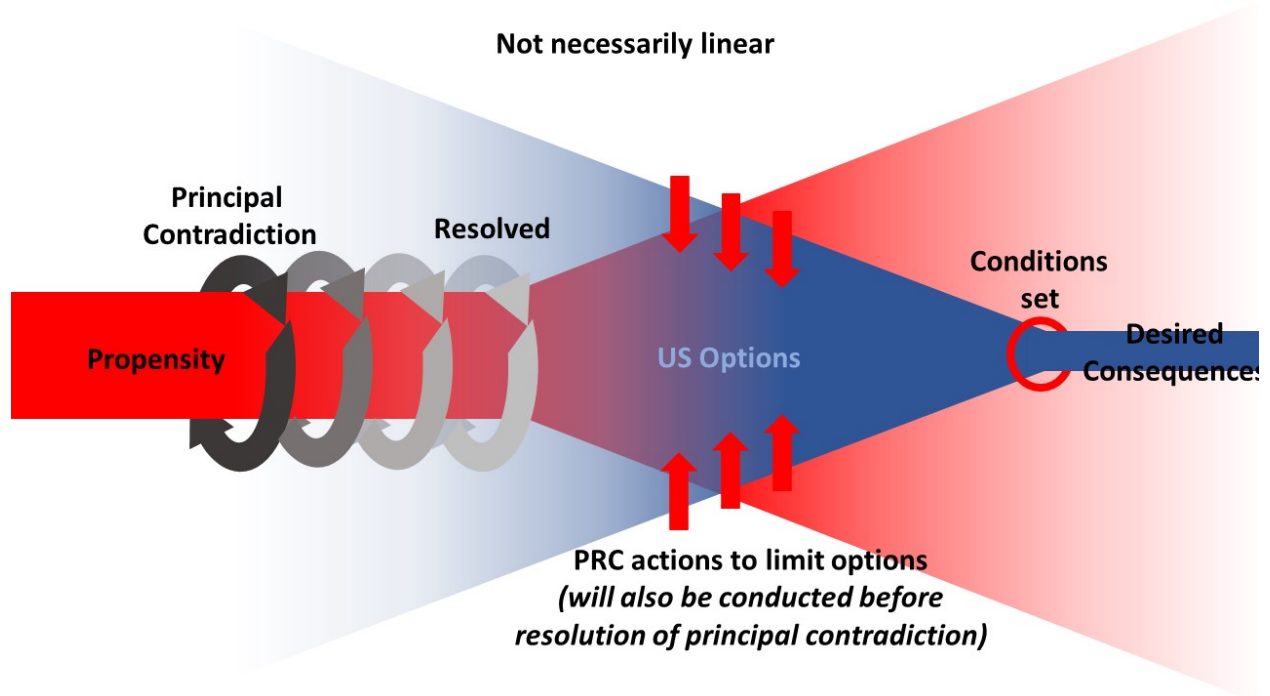


Figure 1, A depiction of the propensity thinking model

Coercion

According to Thomas Schelling, “There is a difference between taking what you want and making someone give it to you.”⁸⁹ This is the distinction between “brute force” (taking what you want) and coercion. Joint Doctrine Note 2-19, *Strategy*, says,

Coercion uses threats of force to shape the behavior of another actor. The word “coercion” is an umbrella term that encompasses two distinct forms: deterrence and compellence. Deterrence seeks to prevent an enemy from taking an action he has not yet taken; compellence seeks to persuade an enemy to do something he would rather not do— or to cease an action he has begun.⁹⁰

Schelling says, “To be coercive, violence has to be anticipated. And it has to be avoidable by accommodation. The power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy—vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy.”⁹¹ Thus the equation for coercion includes both threats and accommodation, or “sticks and carrots.”

JDN 2-19 says, “In the case of both deterrence and compellence, the decision to comply is in the hands of the target state.”⁹² Or, as Johnson, Mueller and Taft state in their *Conventional Coercion Across the Spectrum of Operations*, “deterrence, like all coercion, occurs in the mind of the adversary. Reality matters in deterrence only insofar as it affects the perceptions of those who will choose whether or not to be deterred.”⁹³ In other words, it doesn’t matter what one actor thinks about their own coercive efforts; what matters is what the enemy thinks. JDN 2-19 says,

Successful coercion thus requires a detailed understanding of the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses, and his will and determination. It is highly dependent on intelligence, and the ability of the coercer to structure the enemy’s incentives.⁹⁴

JDN 2-19 further splits deterrence into two categories. “Deterrence may be accomplished by threat of punishment or threat of denial.”⁹⁵ Deterrence by denial is when, “the coercer threatens to deny (through the use of military force) the enemy’s ability to achieve its objective.” Michael Mazarr of RAND states, “Deterrence by denial represents, in effect, simply the application of an intention and effort to defend some commitment.” He continues, “Deterrence by punishment, on the other hand, threatens severe penalties, such as nuclear escalation or severe economic sanctions, if an attack occurs.”⁹⁶

A third division of coercion, not listed by JDN 2-19, is “dissuasion.” While the idea of “dissuasion” was not new, the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) re-introduced it to U.S. strategy. The QDR laid out four goals for the U.S. strategic framework; “assuring allies and friends; Dissuading future military competition; Deterring threats and coercion against U.S. interests; and If deterrence fails, decisively defeating any adversary.”⁹⁷ These four words—assure, dissuade, deter, defeat—are still posted in large letters in the hall of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Pentagon.

While the 2001 and 2006 QDR and the 2005 NDS all employ “dissuasion,” they fail to define the term. In December 2006, Andrew Krepinevich, Jr, Executive Director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, prepared a report for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Net Assessment called “Dissuasion Strategy.” This report elaborated on the term “dissuasion” and gave suggestions for how to dissuade the PRC. Krepinevich stated that dissuasion was “pre-deterrence” by “discouraging a rival from developing threatening capabilities to begin with.”⁹⁸

A recent addition to the coercion lexicon is U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III’s “integrated deterrence.” He defined this as “The right mix of technology, operational concepts and capabilities — all woven together and networked in a way that is credible, flexible and so formidable that it will give any adversary pause.”⁹⁹ This new addition has been thoroughly sprinkled into recent Department of Defense documents. However, the definition seems to not truly add to the concept of coercion theory. Notably, it removes one of the three “Cs” of coercion—credibility, capability, and communication—by failing to mention the critical need to communicate coercive threats to an adversary or enemy. This definition would benefit from making clear the importance of communication.

As should be expected at this point, the PLA has a different definition for coercion. While the Chinese word 威慑 (*weishe*) is often translated as “deterrence,” it is more closely aligned with the Western use of “coercion.”¹⁰⁰ The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* says,

Strategic deterrence (*weishe*) is a method of military conflict to achieve a political goal based on military strength, a comprehensive use of various means, through clever display of strength and determination to use strength, makes the other side face consequences not worth the gains or even unbearable, and is forced to give in, compromise, or surrender.¹⁰¹

This definition highlights the importance of understanding the Chinese way of thinking. Because coercion occurs in the mind of the enemy, to coerce the PRC the United States must alter its approach to address the thinking of the PRC. We must influence their perception of the situation's propensity, contradiction, or environment to influence their behavior.

Second, the definition accentuates the PLA's lack of distinction between coercion, deterrence, compellence, and dissuasion. While words do exist in Chinese for these concepts (威迫, 威慑, 胁迫, 劝止), they are rarely used, with *weishe* (deterrence) being the term of preference. The PLA's 2019 defense white paper uses the term “慑止” (*shezhi*, literally “use fear to stop”) and, in their own English translation, uses it as “to deter,” further hinting at a different meaning for *weishe*.¹⁰² While the United States may find differences in the tone of these words, such as the aggression of compellence and the passive nature of deterrence,¹⁰³ the PRC may not understand the subtle signals the West is trying to send.

Propensity model applied to coercion case studies

Let us now attempt to apply the above propensity model to three case studies; two studies where the U.S. attempted to coerce the PRC, and one where it inadvertently coerced the PRC.

2006 Valiant Shield exercise

Five years after the 2001 QDR introduced “dissuasion” as a U.S. military objective, the 2006 QDR says,

Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies.

One page later, the 2006 QDR says,

[the United States] will attempt to dissuade any military competitor from developing disruptive or other capabilities that could enable regional hegemony or hostile action against the United States or other friendly countries, and it will seek to deter aggression or coercion.

With this background, the Department of Defense held the 2006 Valiant Shield exercise off the coast of Guam from 19 to 23 June, 2006. Valiant Shield 2006 featured 30 Navy ships, including three U.S. aircraft carriers, making it the largest U.S. maritime exercise in the Pacific since the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁴ According to the United States Pacific Command website and the Department of the Navy's Annual Financial Report for 2006, the focus of Valiant Shield was,

integrated Joint training among U.S. military forces, enabling real-world proficiency in sustaining Joint forces and in detecting, locating, tracking and engaging units at sea, in the air, on land, and cyberspace in response to a range of mission areas.¹⁰⁵

However, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, then Chief of Naval Operations, during his testimony before Congress, said that the United States is, “confronted by potentially hostile nation-states determined to develop and use sophisticated weapons systems,” and that the Navy was, “demonstrating our surge capability and partner building capacity in exercises Valiant Shield and RIMPAC.”¹⁰⁶

The 2006 Krepinevich “Dissuasion Strategy” report suggests that this type of exercise could dissuade the PRC from further developing these “disruptive military technologies.” It says,

The demonstrations of military capability in peacetime can also exert a dissuasive effect. For instance, future U.S. field exercises and wargames could be intentionally scripted to demonstrate, as vividly as possible, the supposed vulnerability of worrisome capabilities that prospective adversaries are believed to be interested in developing or expanding.¹⁰⁷

The United States attempted to dissuade the PRC from continuing development of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities by demonstrating the Department of Defense’s surge capabilities in the Pacific. The intention, it is surmised, is to show the PRC that A2/AD capabilities are not worth their cost and ineffective against the United States’ ability to surge. Thus, the idea was that the exercise would convince the PRC to abandon the development of this disruptive technology. Alternatively, the exercise could be seen as designed to simply deter the PRC from using its A2/AD capabilities by showing how the U.S. could still surge forces.

To dissuade or deter the PRC, the U.S. must communicate the dissuasion threat to the PRC. To accomplish this, the PLA was invited to observe Valiant Shield 2006, marking the first time the PLA had observed U.S. wargames in the Pacific.¹⁰⁸ Their observation included a tour of the Ronald Regan aircraft carrier, watching day and night flight operations, and a visit to the Combat Direction Center.¹⁰⁹

Was dissuasion achieved at 2006 Valiant Shield? Despite the effort, the PRC continues to develop A2/AD capabilities. To understand why it failed, compare the approaches of a Western planner and the PRC’s propensity thinking. The Western planner, using ends-ways-means, sees an objective of the PRC abandoning development of A2/AD (ends), achieved through dissuasion (ways), and executed by this exercise (means).

To the PRC, the propensity was (and continues to be) the decline of U.S. and the rejuvenation of China.¹¹⁰ U.S. operating with impunity near Guam was a continuation of this propensity, not new circumstances that would cause them to re-evaluate the trend or the environment. Nor does the current U.S. ability to surge necessitate changes to a plan of future A2/AD capabilities—or create the unwillingness to use them. The PRC’s goal of isolating Taiwan and removing the U.S. option of intervention in a Taiwan contingency is not changed by this exercise. If anything, it reinforces the PRC’s need to further develop these capabilities. The entire concept of “dissuasion” is curious. Why would the U.S. believe that any nation would simply give up when confronted with a threat? Will the U.S. capitulate now that the PRC has

developed an A2/AD capability? The recently announced Marine Corps Stand-In Force proves they will not.¹¹¹ Krepinevich lists multiple examples of the “track record” of dissuasion. However, all but one either required the use of force to accomplish (such as his example of the Roman destruction of Carthage) or only caused temporary re-evaluation, not abandonment of research (such as the HMS *Dreadnought*).¹¹² So why did the U.S. think dissuasion would work against the PRC? In this author’s opinion, it is as Frank Herbert said in *Dune*; “Hope clouds observation.”¹¹³

2016 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery

In July 2016, the United States and South Korea announced that the U.S. would deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile battery to South Korea. According to a U.S. Department of Defense press release, the THAAD deployment, “will contribute to a layered missile defense that will enhance the alliance’s existing missile defense capabilities against North Korean missile threats.” The DoD press release stated that the deployment was, “In response to the evolving threat posed by North Korea.”¹¹⁴

The PRC’s opposition was strong and swift. That same month, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release said,

The U.S. and South Korean deployment of the THAAD missile defense system will not help achieve the goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and is not conducive to maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula, strategic security interests, and regional strategic balance.¹¹⁵

Knowledgeable Western sources, from the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission¹¹⁶ to the *Naval War College Review*¹¹⁷, have laid out excellent rebuttals to these talking points. For example, Robert Watts IV, in his report for the *Naval War College Review*, concludes that

It is reasonable for the United States and South Korea to deploy THAAD—a defensive weapon—to defend their forces against new and challenging North Korean threats. It will not spark an arms race in what already is one of the world’s most militarized areas. It does not threaten China’s nuclear deterrent. It—perhaps—would improve bilateral and trilateral U.S. alliance relationships in Northeast Asia.

These point-for-point reactions, and the focus on THAAD’s defensive nature, reflect the Western thinking about THAAD. In the ends-ways-means construct, the defense of South Korea from North Korean missiles (ends) is best achieved by missile defense (ways). And THAAD (means) best achieves that objective. After all, THAAD is a defensive weapon system, and the PRC should not view it as aggressive, but as a natural reaction to North Korean threats.

This THAAD deployment is one part of a larger U.S. objective of improved national missile defense. Beginning with the January 2001 announcement that the U.S. would deploy a National Missile Defense, the United States has taken a series of steps to achieve its ends to greatly improve its missile defenses, including withdrawing from the U.S.-Russia Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.¹¹⁸ A non-exhaustive list can be found at the Union of Concerned Scientists website.¹¹⁹ In December 2016, shortly after the THAAD announcement, Congress altered the

U.S.'s 1999 National Missile Defense Act to remove the quantifier "limited" from "an effective National Missile Defense system capable of defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack."¹²⁰ This removal opened the legal door for the U.S. to greatly expand its missile defense system and move to absolute missile defense.

On the other hand, the PRC believes that the United States is working to remove the PRC's option of a nuclear counter-strike by achieving "absolute security" with its expanded missile defense. Brad Roberts of the Center for Global Security Research defines absolute security as, "the freedom from attack and the freedom to attack—and thereby to escape the so-called nuclear revolution in world politics whereby the long nuclear shadow makes war among nuclear-armed states inconceivable."¹²¹ Absolute security removes what Snyder called "stable deterrence based on mutual vulnerability."¹²² THAAD, as a part of the greater U.S. missile defense system, reduces the PRC's nuclear counterstrike capability, and while making the United States safer, it makes the PRC *less* safe from U.S. nuclear strike, therefore reducing the strategic balance in the region. The U.S.'s growing ballistic missile defense sets the conditions such that nuclear war is again possible.

While the U.S.'s removal of "limited" National Missile Defense certainly fueled the PRC's concerns about "absolute security," the new law also added language. The new law states,

It is the policy of the United States to maintain and improve an effective, robust layered missile defense system *capable of defending the territory of the United States, allies, deployed forces, and capabilities* against the developing and increasingly complex ballistic missile threat. [emphasis added]¹²³

The new law adds the requirement to provide missile defense to allies and deployed forces. With the legal requirement to protect Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and other allies in the region, the PRC undoubtedly sees this as a huge expansion of U.S. missile defenses, *because it is*. These fears were not assuaged when, the following year, Japan announced it would purchase two Aegis Ashore systems.^{124, 125}

Given these actions by the United States, how can the PRC restore its options? In 2003—13 years before the THAAD deployment—Jing-Dong Yuan, at the time with the Monterey Institute of International Studies, wrote of the possible PRC responses to then-President George W. Bush's December 2002 announcement of increased U.S. missile defense systems. Yuan said,

Barring a significant breakthrough in achieving strategic understanding between Beijing and Washington, a U.S. decision to deploy ballistic missile defense systems will force China to react in ways that could have far-reaching consequences for global arms control and non-proliferation and consequently, regional stability. China may embark on a nuclear modernization drive in both quantitative and qualitative terms unseen in the past two decades.¹²⁶

Interestingly, Yuan specifically lists the deployment of THAAD—although he predicts its deployment to Japan—as a trigger for this PRC response.

Understanding that any ballistic missile defense can be overwhelmed by using a saturation strike,¹²⁷ the PRC feels that it is being forced to greatly increase its number of missiles, nuclear and non-nuclear, to restore the strategic balance. This can be seen playing out

currently. The DoD's 2020 Annual Report to Congress "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2021" states,

Last year, DoD estimated that the PRC had a nuclear warhead stockpile in the low-200s and projected it to at least double over the next decade. Since then, Beijing has accelerated its nuclear expansion, which may enable the PRC to have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027 and likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030.¹²⁸

This action is taken not to destabilize the already tenuous balance in the region, but to restore the balance, restore the conditions that take nuclear war off the table, and therefore restore their options and the conditions for peace. The PRC said in their 2019 defense white paper that the PRC "keeps its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for national security."¹²⁹ This is not a contradiction; the PRC feels that boosting its nuclear weapons stockpile is necessary for the "minimum level."

But, the Department of Defense does not perceive it as such. The Commander of U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), Admiral Charles A. Richard, said, "We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China. The explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking. And frankly, that word breathtaking may not be enough."¹³⁰ In the same speech, the USSTRATCOM Commander said that the PRC's growth and modernization may threaten the U.S.'s nuclear deterrence, and called for modernization of the U.S. nuclear triad and bolstering conventional forces. Therefore, the spiral of misunderstanding is likely to continue, and the PRC's fear of an arms race is likely to be realized.

2022 Taiwan Strait transit

On 26 February, 2021, a spokesperson for the U.S. 7th Fleet said,

The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson (DDG 114) is conducting a routine Taiwan Strait transit Feb. 26 (local time) through international waters in accordance with international law. The ship is transiting through a corridor in the Strait that is beyond the territorial sea of any coastal State. The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows.¹³¹

According to this press release, the United States sees the purpose of the Taiwan Strait transits as demonstrating commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a speech to Universitas Indonesia, describes the "free and open Indo-Pacific" as a place where, "problems will be dealt with openly, rules will be reached transparently and applied fairly, goods and ideas and people will flow freely across land, cyberspace, and the open seas."¹³² Let us recall Mazarr's statement that, "Deterrence by denial represents, in effect, simply the application of an intention and effort to defend some commitment."¹³³ Therefore, as a part of a free and open Indo-Pacific, the Taiwan Strait transits (means) use deterrence by denial (ways) to support the open seas (ends).

Once again, the propensity thinking model provides a different viewpoint. While it is impossible for those outside Chinese Communist Party leadership to know for certain, from their public statements, it appears that the PRC views the propensity as moving toward

reunification,¹³⁴ hindered by the principal contradiction of the desire for the Mainland to complete reunification and the counteractions of “Taiwan independence” forces.¹³⁵ The PRC’s 2019 White Paper, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” says, “To solve the Taiwan problem and achieve complete unification of the country is a fundamental interest of the Chinese nation and essential to realizing national rejuvenation.”¹³⁶ In a section called “China’s Security Risks and Challenges Should Not Be Overlooked,” the white paper lists the first challenge as “Taiwan independence” forces. The other side of the dialectic is defined as, “The ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces and their actions remain the gravest immediate threat to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the biggest barrier hindering the peaceful reunification of the country.”¹³⁷

PRC public statements after the Taiwan Strait transit support this conclusion. The PLA’s Eastern Theater Command issued a press statement saying that the U.S., “has carried out this provocative act, trying to support the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces by making this stance, which is both hypocritical and futile” (企图通过作一些姿态给“台独”势力撑腰打气).¹³⁸ Of the same incident, the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said, “this will only accelerate the demise of the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces (这只会加速“台独”势力的覆灭), and the U.S. will pay a heavy price for its risky actions.”¹³⁹

But looking at the Taiwan Strait transit in isolation doesn’t convey the full system that the PRC would use to analyze the U.S.’s action. That same month, the United States notified Congress of impending arms sales to Taiwan,¹⁴⁰ a U.S. Navy ship conducted 19 straight days of operations in the South China Sea,¹⁴¹ the U.S. held exercise Resilient Shield with Japan,¹⁴² and announced former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen would travel to Taiwan,^{143, 144} The propensity model shows that the 26 February Taiwan Strait transit will not be viewed by the PRC in isolation, nor can it be perceived as meeting the remote and lofty goal of freedom of the seas, but instead as part of a larger coercive system aimed at frustrating PRC efforts to resolve the Taiwan contradiction.

Implications for U.S. decision making

First, to coerce the PRC or the PLA, the Department of Defense should rely less on military exercises or weapon demonstrations, and more on long term changes to the environment, such as public commitments between the U.S. and its allies and partners. For example, the United States and other nations can deter the PRC from attacking Taiwan through public commitments to Taiwan. Taiwan does not need an explicit pledge from other nations, just reasonable—in the mind of the Chinese—implicit support for sanctions or supplies in case of a PRC invasion of Taiwan. While Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has stated that the U.S. is prepared to use sanctions against the PRC if it attacks Taiwan,¹⁴⁵ if other countries make the same public pledge this would further the PRC’s conclusion that the conditions are not yet set for the invasion of Taiwan. Additional pledges of military support or preemptive weapon transfers would alter the environment surrounding the Taiwan problem to deny the PRC setting the conditions for an invasion.

Second, when attempting to coerce the PRC—or any other nation—the United States must focus on the third of coercion’s three “Cs”, communication. The United States must be clear and explicit in the communication of its coercion efforts. Without effective

communication, the target is left to draw their own—possibly wrong—conclusions. Communication is the responsibility of the communicator.

This communication requires that the coercion threat be clearly communicated to the PRC, and that the threat be coordinated and deconflicted with other efforts throughout the interagency. This isn't a new idea, but its importance is emphasized by the conclusions of this paper.

Third, when attempting to analyze the intention behind PRC actions, it is necessary to identify what U.S. options the PRC is seeking to limit by these actions. What options are removed? What conditions are the PRC attempting to set? From there, the United States can better determine the intention and possible options for U.S. reaction.

The biggest take-away for U.S. leaders, however, is that sometimes things are complicated. Sometimes, to understand an issue, more than a five-minute pre-brief or two-page executive summary is required. U.S. planners throughout the government need to eliminate the idea that the “elevator speech” or the “walk-and-talk” are sufficient for complex issues. While we blame the Challenger disaster on oversimplified slides,¹⁴⁶ we still expect short explanations for complicated problems and for them to produce simple answers. Senior leaders should not make critical decisions when they have not first taken the time to understand them. If it is not important enough for leaders to take the time to understand, then it should be easy for them to delegate this authority to subordinates who can.

Implications for PRC decision making

This paper would be remised to place the onus only on the United States; the PRC has equal purchase in the relationship. However bold it is to assume the PRC is reading this paper, it is bolder to assume the PRC has room to change. It is almost presumptuous to offer changes to the PRC, who must wade through the politically charged Communist Party apparatchik. However, hope springs eternal.

First, the PRC should attempt to be clearer in their communication. While Paul Godwin and Alice Miller attempt to decode PRC's signaling in “China's Forbearance Has Limits,”¹⁴⁷ it illuminates the PRC's inability to send clear signals to the United States. Inclusion of the PRC's “Western thinkers” into their planning efforts could help improve their communication efforts. Understanding the Aristotelian roots, causal thinking, and ends-ways-means approach to problem solving would also help the PRC to understand Western messaging and signaling.

Relatedly, the PRC and United States must continue frank and honest discussions about their intentions and signaling. These discussions are regularly conducted at the Defense Policy Coordination Talks (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense level), but not at the Assistant Secretary and Secretary level. Just as in the 2020 Crisis Communications Working Group, where the Department of Defense and PLA discussed the concepts of crisis communications, crisis prevention, and crisis management,¹⁴⁸ these discussions may need to start with definitions of terms to share ideas and perspectives.

Conclusion

While the Department of Defense relies on a model of ends, ways, means, and risk to plan, to better understand actions by the PRC, the U.S. should instead analyze their actions using

the above model of propensity, conditions, and consequences. To coerce China, the United States need not use correlative thinking to plan, but must incorporate correlative thinking into its assessment of the PRC's perspective. The 2010 QDR says,

Credibly underwriting U.S. defense commitments will demand tailored approaches to deterrence. Such tailoring requires an in-depth understanding of the capabilities, values, intent, and decision making of potential adversaries, whether they are individuals, networks, or states.¹⁴⁹

Because coercion occurs in the mind of the enemy, to coerce the PRC, U.S. planners must use this model of propensity thinking to anticipate the PRC's view and reactions.

Unfortunately, in attempting to study a non-reductionist method of thinking, this paper is forced to be reductionist. The above propensity model is just that, a model. Be it realism, coercion, or *shi*, each model certainly has its limitations, and one cannot rely on any one model too heavily. This model is one tool of many to assist policy and military decision makers in understanding and predicting PRC actions, but it is not a crystal ball for predicting their next move.

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