



## ..... You Cannot Think Like a Westerner

“The first thing we must understand is that we do not understand.”

– Søren Kierkegaard

This article is the second in a series of essays, workshops, and events seeking to better understand the nature of deterrence, particularly from the viewpoint of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This series is a joint project between the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the U.S. China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI). Over the coming months, ASPI and CASI, along with our research associates, will exam the concept of deterrence, how both democratic countries and the PRC approach deterrence, what liberal democracies are doing to deter China, what China is doing to deter them, try to assess the impacts of those efforts, and will culminate in an in-person conference which will try to put forward policy options for Australia, the United States, and our allies and partners. These publications will draw heavily from original PRC and PLA documents, as well as interviews and personal experiences, to help understand the framework that the PRC uses when it thinks about, what we call here ‘deterrence’.

The 2018 United States National Defense Strategy uses the term “deter” or “coerce” 25 times in its 14-page summary,<sup>1</sup> and the Department of Defense (DoD) Indo-Pacific Strategy Report says, “The core diagnosis of the National Defense Strategy is that DoD’s military advantage vis-à-vis China and Russia is eroding and, if inadequately addressed, it will undermine our ability to *deter aggression and coercion* [emphasis added].”<sup>2</sup> But despite all of these lofty goals, what does it take to deter the People’s Republic of China (PRC)? And what can U.S. policy makers and military planners learn about the PRC to improve U.S. deterrence efforts?

### **Don’t Mirror Image**

In order to successfully deter or otherwise coerce the PRC, defense and security officials must understand the PRC’s views of its values and interests, strategy and policies, risk tolerance, capacities and capabilities to adapt and respond, and its decision-making processes. Additionally, as coercion is a fluid process of moves and counter-moves between nations, another key element is simply understanding how PRC’s decision makers themselves understand the logic and utility of coercion theory.

Put simply, decision makers must not “mirror image” China or any other country. Mirror imaging is the conscious or subconscious tendency to impose one’s personal perspectives and

cultural background on another. By subconsciously assuming China would think about one's coercion attempts using our own Western methods and perspective, we risk our coercion attempts failing to occur in the mind of the adversary and only occurring in our own minds.

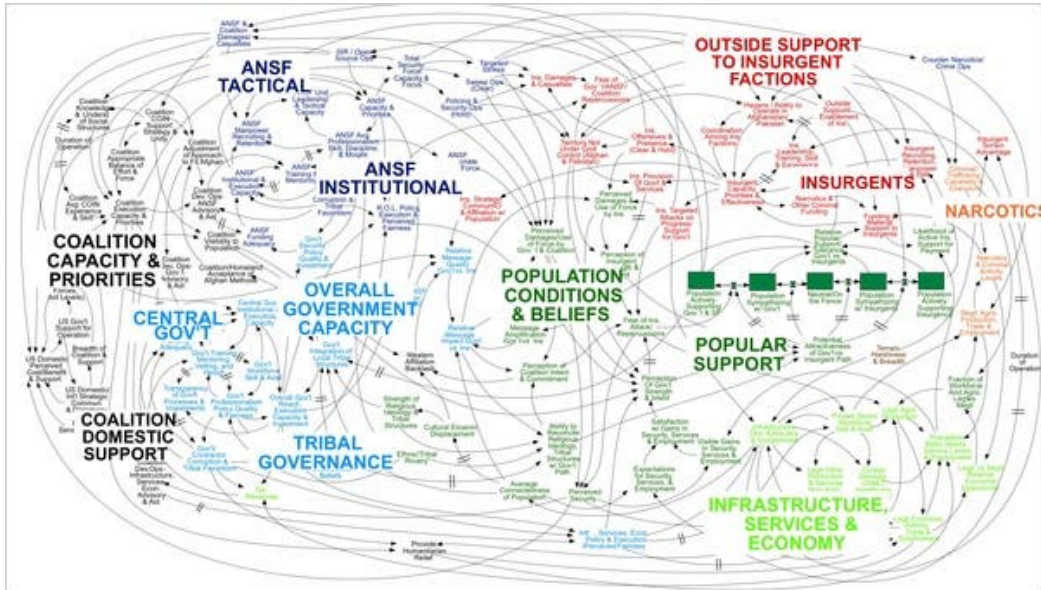
For example, in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, Austin Long's analysis of the 2002-2003 U.S. coercion of Iraq to abandon its weapons of mass destruction shows that the U.S. "failed to appreciate how its threat interacted with other threats to Iraq, most notably those concerning the regime stability of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein." As Long shows, the United States failed to understand Iraq's threat calculus, where internal threats were the most dangerous, followed closely by Iran. As Long says, "From Saddam's perspective, the United States was a distant third to those two threats." While Long says this was a failure of U.S. intelligence, even perfect intelligence would be insufficient if the United States failed to view its actions from the mind of the target.<sup>3</sup>

This has been just as true of China over the course of the last several decades, as it was in Iraq. "In the United States, few have paid much attention to the domestic political and economic drivers of Chinese grand strategy, the content of that strategy, or the ways in which China has been operationalizing it in recent decades."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when attempting to coerce the PRC one must approach the problem from the PRC's perspective. To do this, one must consider the differences between Western and Chinese thinking and decision making. Western thinking is largely driven by linear, cause-and-effect relationships. Francois Jullien says, "because Western thought projects order from the outside, it most values the causal explanation (according to which an antecedent and a consequence, A and B, are extrinsically related to one another)."<sup>5</sup> Having been influenced by Aristotle's concept of the prime mover, Western thinkers often look for a singular cause to a problem; A causes B, so therefore introducing C will cause D.

The PRC, instead, uses a combination of systems thinking, dialectic materialism, and a desire to understand the propensity of a situation.<sup>6</sup> Systems theory, or systems science, is the study of systems from a holistic approach. These "systems" can be anything from the human body to a nation's transportation system, or as Mao simply said, a "complex thing." Rather than cause-and-effect approach of A causes B, systems theory holds that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and by studying a system's constraints and feedback loops, one can attempt to control it. This also follows closely with a central tenant of communism itself, the grand arc of history. As Hegel laid out, the world is a complex relationship of systems, constantly interacting and negating one another, producing yet another system which then is negated itself. Marx applied this to human experience and saw systems of classes, and thus class struggle, as the underlying force moving history inevitably, in his view, toward the communist ideal. "Xi, driven by a sense of Marxist-Leninist determinism, also believes that history is on his side."<sup>7</sup> So unless one understands the systems, and how the CCP views them, it will be a constant struggle to find ways of affecting the system. The 2001 Science of Military Strategy says, "while thinking about problems, use the perspective of the system."<sup>8</sup> Western strategics continue to grapple with this challenge.

One of the most famous examples of western military systems thinking in recent years is actually widely used to mock PowerPoint presentations. The slide, shown below, uses causal loop diagrams to depict a systems perspective of Afghanistan. The New York Times said that the slide, "was meant to portray the complexity of American military strategy, but looked more like a bowl of spaghetti." When General Stanley McChrystal, then Commander of the U.S. and

NATO forces in Afghanistan, was shown the slide, he apocryphally said, “when we understand that slide, we’ll have won the war.”<sup>9</sup>



While General McChrystal was mocking the slide, from the PRC’s perspective, he is absolutely correct. Afghanistan is a complicated place, and only by understanding how the parts interact to become greater than their sum can we hope to ever effectively change it.

Mao Zedong in his 1937 article “On Contradiction” gives a brief introduction to why the environment around a system must also be considered. He says that, “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.”<sup>10</sup> The idea of an external-internal relationship holds that one must also consider the environment surrounding a contradiction, but also surrounding a system. In essence, as complicated as it is, the Afghanistan slide is incomplete, as it fails to show the external environment’s inputs into the system.

“The conversation in Washington has been all about what the United States ought to do, without much reflection on whether any given course of action might result in real changes to China’s strategic course.”<sup>11</sup>

Simply put, the Chinese will not frame a problem or approach a solution using Western ideas and solutions. While Western thinkers will look for the linear cause to a problem, or expect a coercive effort to have a linear effect, the Chinese will evaluate the system and the external environment surrounding the issue along with the impact of these surrounding inputs.

## Reductionist Examples

These differences between Western and Chinese approaches can not only lead to reduced efficacy in coercion attempts, but can result in completely missed signals or incorrect signals. A recent example of mixed deterrence signals is when the U.S. Department of Defense spokesman said, “We hold with the international community about the Senkakus and the sovereignty of the

Senkakus, and we support Japan obviously in that sovereignty.” Four days later, the spokesman issued a correction saying, “there is no change to U.S. policy regarding the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands.”<sup>12</sup> The U.S. appears to frame the Senkaku Island debate as a Japan-PRC issue, and this misstep as corrected. However, like the framing issues in the Austin Long chapter mentioned above, the PRC sees it differently.

The PRC has recently ramped up pressure on Taiwan, with everything from multiple crossings into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)<sup>13</sup> to sanctions on pineapples.<sup>14</sup> To these actions, the U.S. has been relatively silent. However, the new U.S. administration stated that the Senkakus were Japanese. In the PRC’s eyes, this was an intentional deterrent threat from the U.S. administration. To the PRC, both Taiwan and the Senkakus are framed as problems of sovereignty and closely related. Yet, the U.S. has drawn a line with the Senkakus, but has left Taiwan outside of that line.

Other matters that would be seen as unrelated by Western minds but integrated by the PRC could include the date of the operation (for example, the anniversary of a U.S. surrender or Chinese dynastic downfall), seemingly unrelated actions by other departments (trade agreements signed with the PRC on the same day, for example), or any number of outside events. A noteworthy example of this came during the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis. The CCP was upset that Taiwan’s President, Lee Teng-hui was moving away from the PRC’s version of the One-China Policy, and that the U.S. had granted President Lee a visa to visit his alma mater, Cornell University. From 21 to 26 July 1995, the PLA fired missiles, ‘conducted tests’ in the official PRC announcements, in an area only 60 kilometers north of Taiwanese territory. There were more missiles fired over ten days in August (15<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>), and finally a third set from 8 to 15 March of 1996. The missiles fired in March landed within Taiwan’s territorial waters, north and south, just off the ports of Keelung and Kaohsiung. In response, President Clinton ordered naval forces into the region. The U.S. Navy responded to the President’s directive with a carrier battle group that was already stationed in the western Pacific, and it ordered another one, which had been operating in the Indian Ocean, to the area as well. From the U.S. perspective, this appears to be a clear signal of resolve, meant to de-escalate the tensions between the two sides, and nothing more. The PLA received the message of U.S. military strength and resolve, but also received an additional message, which the U.S. had not intended to send. The Navy, for its part dispatched the carrier that was already operating in the Western Pacific, a logical choice from a western perspective. What the U.S. didn’t take into account, was that the carrier that was in the area was the U.S.S. Independence. The CCP, and its armed wing, the PLA, took this as an indication that the U.S. was supporting Lee Teng-hui and his move toward Taiwanese independence. U.S. decision makers may be confused by the CCP taking such notice of seemingly insignificant details, at least in the minds of the Department of Defense. However, these are exactly the kinds of signals the PRC often sends the U.S. and other Western nations, but rarely understood by the target.

In other words, it’s complicated. And just like the Afghanistan slide, if we fail to understand it – or worse, mock it – we will never be able to solve it.

## Implications for Deterrence Efforts

Being able to identify mirror imaging and our linear bias can go a long way to increasing the efficacy of the efforts of decision makers and military planners.

The most important implication is that decision makers and military planners must tailor their coercion efforts to the specific ideology of the adversary, regardless if it is the PRC or any other nation. As the PRC will not analyze Western operations using linear logic, we must not anticipate PRC reactions to coercion operations using linear logic, and should instead use dialectics and systems thinking. We cannot expect one operation to change the PRC or their strategic plan, as one action is unlikely to change the system. One has to greatly change the temperature to prevent the chicken from hatching. Similarly, it is possible for these changes, no matter the degree, to have no effect at all. As Mao said, “no temperature can change a stone into a chicken.”<sup>15</sup>

To help understand the target’s—not just PRC’s—reactions to coercion efforts and to tailor coercion efforts to their target, we must include country and regional specialists into the policy decision making and planning process. Ideally, this means allies and partners, in addition to our own Foreign Area Officers. By bringing them in early enough to help develop a tenable course of action, these specialists can greatly increase the efficacy of coercion efforts. If these specialists are only brought in for the wargame, they are often dismissed as “negative” and a hindrance to the effort, precisely because they are being asked to validate an unsound course of action. If you are afraid to have a China-watcher look at your course of action against the PRC, it probably isn’t a good course of action. And we shouldn’t shy away from debate. David Fastabend, in his article about operational concepts, said that “debates matter.” “Absence of debate is a warning sign, a signal that a real idea has not been put forward, that a real choice has not been proposed, that there is really nothing worth arguing about.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the West understanding the PRC’s perspective, the West must help the PRC understand the West’s perspective and intent. This can be accomplished through effective information planning. The issue of mirror imaging is not limited to Western minds. As much trouble as Western nations are having understanding the PRC, the PRC is having just as much trouble understanding actions of the West, as the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis showed.

As Kevin Rudd also noted following his description of how China views U.S. resolve, “What China does not include in this calculus is the reverse possibility: that the failure to fight for a fellow democracy that the United States has supported for the entire postwar period would also be catastrophic for Washington, particularly in terms of the perception of U.S. allies in Asia, who might conclude that the American security guarantees they have long relied on are worthless—and then seek their own arrangements with China.”<sup>17</sup>

Western nations must help the PRC understanding by not leaving actions to interpretation. In a vacuum of information, the PRC will come to their own conclusions. In other words, tell the PRC what you mean.

In early 2021, National Public Radio (NPR) published an article about two U.S. aircraft carriers conducting operations in the South China Sea with the opening line, “In the first large-scale ‘freedom of navigation’ operation aimed at Beijing since the start of the Biden presidency, the U.S. Navy announced Tuesday that a pair of carrier strike groups were conducting exercises in the South China Sea.” NPR later issued a correction, saying, “The U.S. Navy defines freedom

of navigation operations as ‘tangible, operational challenges against excessive maritime claims’ and says the exercises described here do not meet that definition.”<sup>18</sup> If NPR – a U.S. based organization with U.S. authors, who grew up in the English language and American culture – doesn’t understand FONOPs and did not understand the mission of the dual carrier operations in the South China Sea, how can the U.S. expect that the PRC does?

Lastly, as the PRC will use a whole-of-government analysis to build their understanding of foreign military actions, military decision makers and military planners must coordinate their own goals and actions across the interagency to maximize the efficacy of their coercion efforts. While “unified action”<sup>19</sup> is a consecrated term in the halls of Joint Professional Military Education, it does not happen naturally. Even what may appear to other Departments and Agencies as mundane, daily operations may require coordination and notification of the “seventh floors” and “E rings” across Washington to avoid sending mixed or diluted signals to the PRC.

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#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," Department of Defense, last modified on 08 Oct 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," last modified on 01 Jul 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

<sup>3</sup> Greenhil, Kelly M. and Peter Krause, eds., *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Rudd CFR

<sup>5</sup> Jullien, Francois, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, New York, 1995, Zone Books, p218

<sup>6</sup> Xing Pan, Rui Kang, and Ricardo Valerdi, "Systems Thinking: A Comparison between Chinese and Western Approaches," *Procedia Computer Science*, Volume 16, 2013, p 1027-1035

<sup>7</sup> Rudd, FA

<sup>8</sup> 2001 SMS, Chapter 4, Section Three, Subsection Three.

<sup>9</sup> Bumiller, Elisabeth, "We Have met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html>, last modified 26 April, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction," *Marxists.org*, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_17.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Rudd in FA <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-05/kevin-rudd-usa-chinese-confrontation-short-of-war>

<sup>12</sup> Japan Times, "Pentagon calls remarks on Senkakus' sovereignty an 'error'", last edited on 27 February, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/02/27/national/pentagon-us-senkakus-error/>

<sup>13</sup> Langley, William, "PLA warplanes made a record 380 incursions into Taiwan's airspace in 2020, report says," last modified on 06 January, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3116557/pla-warplanes-made-record-380-incursions-taiwans-airspace-2020>

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis, Samson and Wang, Cindy, "Pineapples Are at the Center of Latest China-Taiwan Dispute," last modified on 26 February, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-26/pineapples-are-at-the-center-of-latest-china-taiwan-dispute>

<sup>15</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction*

<sup>16</sup> Fastabend, David A., "That Elusive Operational Concept," Army, June 2001, p. 42, accessed at [http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2001/6/Documents/Fastabend\\_0601.pdf](http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2001/6/Documents/Fastabend_0601.pdf) .

<sup>17</sup> Rudd, FA

<sup>18</sup> Neuman, Scott, "U.S. Carriers Train In South China Sea In Likely Signal To Beijing," last modified on 09 February, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965766489/u-s-carriers-train-in-south-china-sea-in-likely-signal-to-beijing>

<sup>19</sup> JP 3-0, p I-8.