

PHILOSOPHY TO POLICY: STRATEGIC CULTURE IN DRAGON'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY

ROHIN BAWA, APARAAJITA PANDEY
AND RAJAN KOCHHAR

INTRODUCTION

The rise of China as a major global power stands out as one of the pivotal developments in the post-Cold War world.¹ In the last ten years, strategic observers of China have ascertained, some with concern, the swift expansion of its economy and its rising influence. Many analysts have highlighted China's significant defence expenditure, prompting global policy-makers to wrestle with the potential implications of a more formidable and assertive China for both the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large. China's approach to nuclear strategy has remained largely consistent in recent decades, yet its nuclear arsenal seems to have experienced rapid expansion

Major General **Rohin Bawa**, a serving Officer of the Indian Army, has a Masters in Defence and Strategic Studies and a Masters in Management Studies. He has an M Phil from the most prestigious National Defence College, New Delhi. He is pursuing his Doctorate from Amity University, Noida.

Dr **Aparaajita Pandey** has a PhD in Energy Statecraft and her area of specialisation is Latin America and the Caribbean. She is an Assistant Professor at the Amity Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Amity University.

Major General **Rajan Kochhar**, PhD, is presently Vice Chairman, National Council of News and Broadcasting. He is a known International Affairs and Defence Expert. A double doctorate, prolific writer and defence analyst, he is a regular contributor of articles on National Security, Defence Modernisation and Geopolitics.

1. Rex Li, "Security Challenge of an Ascendant China," in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 23.

A comprehensive examination of China's evolving nuclear strategy since the 1960s uncovers a distinctly Chinese approach to strategy, shaped by its strategic culture.

in recent years.² Additionally, Beijing is actively engaged in the ongoing modernisation and diversification of its nuclear delivery systems.³ China's adherence to its 'No First Use' (NFU) nuclear doctrine and 'Assured Retaliation' strategy has remained largely unwavering. However, recent doctrinal publications suggest a shift towards utilising its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against conventional strategic threats.

Furthermore, China is currently involved in upgrading and enlarging its nuclear capacities, which encompass deploying mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and advancing submarine-launched ballistic missiles designed for its new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. This marks a departure from its previous reliance on a smaller and potentially vulnerable nuclear deterrent, as China aims to establish a more streamlined and potent nuclear force.⁴ Consequently, nuclear considerations are expected to assume greater significance in the global balance of nuclear power.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has embarked on a substantial military modernisation campaign, which encompasses the enhancement of its nuclear arsenal not only for deterrence purposes but also to effectively counter any potential attacks, thus, safeguarding its national security. China's defence budget for 2024 increased by 7.2 percent to \$231.4 billion, prioritising the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in order to realise Xi Jinping's objective of establishing a modern and contemporary military by 2027, with a particular emphasis on Taiwan and enhancing strategic capabilities.⁵

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2. Jennifer Bradley, "China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy", National Institute for Public Policy, Occasional Paper, July 2022
 3. Suyas Desai, "China's Evolving Nuclear Strategy", Raisina Debates, October 2023.
 4. Michael S Chase, "China's Transition to a More Credible Nuclear Deterrent: Implications and Challenges for the US", *Asia Policy*, no 16, July 2013, pp. 69-101.
 5. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-maintains-defence-budget-growth-despite-economic-travails/articleshow/108418287.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

A comprehensive examination of China's evolving nuclear strategy since the 1960s uncovers a distinctly Chinese approach to strategy, shaped by its strategic culture. Given the evolving security landscape, China's future deterrence posture holds significant implications for the global powers. It becomes crucial to grasp how China's strategic culture shapes its worldview and elucidates its behaviour on the international stage.⁶ China's nuclear strategy has been a subject of significant interest and debate among scholars and policy-makers alike. Central to understanding China's approach to nuclear deterrence is the concept of strategic culture, which encompasses the beliefs, norms, and values that shape a nation's strategic behaviour. In the case of China, its rich historical and cultural heritage profoundly influences its nuclear strategy. The correlation between strategic culture and nuclear strategy is a multifaceted and crucial aspect of international security. In the case of China, understanding the interplay between its strategic culture and nuclear doctrine is of paramount importance given its emergence as a major nuclear power. This paper aims to delve into the correlation between the Chinese strategic culture and its nuclear strategy, examining how historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors have shaped China's approach to nuclear weapons.

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WHAT IS STRATEGIC CULTURE?

The concept of strategic culture refers to a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements, and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force. "Strategic culture" refers to the unique approach or mindset of a society when it comes to addressing and conceptualising issues related to national security. It encompasses the collective beliefs, values,

6. Colonel Kenneth D Johnson, *China's Strategic Culture: A Perspective for the United States* (US Army War College, 2009), p. 3.

historical experiences, and norms that shape how a nation perceives threats, formulates strategies, and makes decisions regarding its security posture and defence policies. Essentially, it reflects a nation's distinctive way of thinking about, and navigating, the complexities of security challenges within its geopolitical context.⁷ Examining a nation's strategic culture has emerged relatively recently. Numerous strategists have sought to characterise it as intertwined with a nation's culture, heritage, history, and traditions. Most definitions generally revolve around two main ideas: firstly, how nations formulate strategic decisions during crises and challenges; and, secondly, that these decisions reflect the nation's evolutionary past, ideology, culture, and traditions.

Delving into a nation's strategic culture offers insights that enable planners and military analysts to anticipate the conduct of nation-states. Lieutenant General Li Jijun, the former vice president of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, believes,

Culture is the root and foundation of strategy. Strategic thinking is the process of its evolutionary history that flows into the mainstreams of a country's or a nation's strategic culture. Each country's or nation's strategic culture cannot but bear the imprint of the cultural traditions, which, in a subconscious and complex way, prescribes and defines strategy-making.⁸

China's strategic culture is deeply rooted in its millennia-old civilisation, marked by periods of imperial dominance, foreign invasions, and internal upheavals. Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism have all contributed to shaping Chinese views on statecraft, warfare, and diplomacy. Additionally, China's experiences during the Cold War, particularly its isolation from both superpowers and its nuclear standoff with the United States, have left a lasting imprint on its strategic thinking.

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7. Andrew Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, May 2002), Foreword.
 8. Thomas G Mahnken, *Secrecy & Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture* (Lowy Institute, February 2011), p. 3.

CORE ELEMENTS OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

Over the past decade, China has increasingly exhibited aggressive behaviour, contradicting previous perceptions that emphasised its purportedly weak military tradition, inclination towards non-violent problem-solving in governance, and preference for defensive strategies such as fortified structures over expansionist endeavours. China's strategic outlook can be described as possessing a **dualistic strategic culture**. This comprises two primary elements: a Confucian-Mencian aspect, which tends to avoid conflict and prioritise defence, and a realpolitik dimension, which leans towards military solutions and offensive strategies. Both aspects are active and interact in a dialectical manner, shaping what could be termed as a "**Chinese Cult of Defence**."⁹ The "Chinese Cult of Defence" paradoxically inclines Chinese leaders toward prioritising offensive military actions as a primary means of achieving national objectives, all the while justifying these actions as defensive measures of last resort. This idea, as expected, also exposes itself to potential misuse. For instance, while Confucian philosophy does not endorse the shooting of students, the events of June 1989 at Tiananmen Square demonstrate how easily the military could be deployed for such purposes, under the guise of restoring order, highlighting the dual nature of this moral authority concept.

In practical terms, it suggests that China's leaders, regardless of their moral standing, have had to wield control over power to ensure their own stability. This is evident in Mao Zedong's assertion that power, particularly that of the Party, "emanates from the barrel of a gun". Similarly, Deng Xiaoping maintained his supreme authority with the support of the armed forces.¹⁰ While this strategy so far has been related to the conventional domain, however, analysing China's nuclear modernisation drive and posturing, clear reflections emerge wherein China reaffirms support for complete and total nuclear disarmament and simultaneously is modernising and diversifying its nuclear delivery systems for a robust second strike, as also signalling

9. Ibid.

10. Rosita Dellios, "Chinese Strategic Culture: Part 1 - The Heritage from the Past", *Culture Mandala*, vol 13, special issue 3, February 2020, p. 4.

ambiguity around its NFU stance, besides displaying reluctance to engage in disarmament measures.

Certain analysts propose that strategic culture should not be viewed as a straightforward single cause, but rather as an ideational framework that influences how political leaders perceive feasible national objectives and the suitable strategies to attain them.¹¹ Additionally, some perspectives suggest that strategic culture comprises a backdrop of diverse “subcultures” that delineate various norms impacting the role and effectiveness of employing military force to accomplish national objectives.¹² Within the overarching culture, various subcultures exist, each fluctuating in prominence as different norms gain or lose influence over time. Examination of the historical evolution of the Chinese strategic culture highlights discernible strategic subcultures and indicates that norms regarding the use of force are subject to contention, thus, contributing to uncertainty.¹³

CHINA'S STRATEGIC PHILOSOPHY

The Chinese people don't have the gene for invasion and hegemony in their blood.

— Xi Jinping¹⁴

In the realm of Chinese strategic philosophy, certain timeless elements persist, such as deterrence and psychological tactics, which remain relevant across different epochs and cultural contexts.¹⁵ China's strategic doctrine, historically and presently, can be understood to address two fundamental imperatives. The first is the assurance of inviolability, while the second

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11. Jeffrey W. Meiser, Renny Babiarz and David Mudd, “Strategy, Uncertainty, and the China Challenge”, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, Winter 2023, pp. 45-72.
 12. Alan Bloomfield, “Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2012, p. 451.
 13. Meiser, et. al., n. 11.
 14. “Speech by H. E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at China International Friendship Conference in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the CPAFFC,” The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), May 15, 2014, <https://cpaffc.org.cn/index/news/detail/id/6541/lang/2.html>. Accessed on April 20, 2024.
 15. Dellios, n. 10.

involves the realisation of China's perceived rightful position in the world order. The notion of inviolability primarily emphasises defensive measures, while the concept of achieving China's "rightful place" entails a more expansive vision. These two imperatives are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected. Without ensuring inviolability, it becomes challenging to achieve the desired "rightful place." Similarly, without attaining the perceived rightful position, the assurance of inviolability cannot be fully guaranteed, as it aspires to a complete security that depends on broader geopolitical factors.¹⁶ This aspiration should be understood from the Chinese viewpoint of pursuing purpose rather than courting disappointment, reflecting a moral strength advocated by influential Chinese philosophers, foremost among them Confucius.

The dual nature of the Chinese strategic philosophy, encompassing both negative (or defensive) and positive (or expansive) attributes, resonates with the *Yin-Yang* concept central to various Chinese philosophical traditions, including Daoism. *Yin* and *Yang*, representing complementary forces, are foundational to understanding the dynamics of the universe and all its manifestations. *Yin* embodies the qualities of passivity, yieldingness, and nurturing, while *Yang* represents the attributes of activity, dominance, and creativity.¹⁷ Similar to the Chinese strategy, there exists a dual motivation: to prevent something (such as aggression against China) and to achieve something (such as the goals articulated by Xi Jinping of becoming a moderately prosperous society by 2021¹⁸ and a fully developed, rich and powerful country to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" by 2049).¹⁹

The defensive stance in the Chinese strategy has deep historical roots, dating back to the early imperial period. Throughout history, China has been

16. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

17. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

18. Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech on the CCP's 100th Anniversary," *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>.

19. Graham Allison, "What Xi Jinping Wants," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/whatchina-wants/528561/>.

wary of potential invasions from its northern borders. The construction of the Great Wall, which spans over 4,500 km across northern China and is more than 2,000 years old, serves as a testament to this defensive mindset, aimed at repelling “barbarian” incursions. However, if China’s strategic orientation were solely defensive, it would not have pursued strategies such as demanding tributes from outlying “barbarian” nationalities or engaging in territorial expansion, as has been evidenced in history and in the recent past. China has always perceived itself as the “Middle Kingdom,” considering itself the focal point of its world. It organised its diplomacy based on Confucian principles, with particular emphasis on the importance of filial piety. Within this hierarchical structure, led by the Chinese emperor, subordinate kingdoms were required to show submission in return for Chinese patronage and safeguarding. This adherence to the Confucian model continued into the modern era and was conspicuous during the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict of 1979. Beijing’s objective was explicit: to impart a lesson to the Vietnamese so that they would be restrained from excessive actions.²⁰

Therefore, while the defensive cultural trait is evident throughout China’s strategy documents and military White Papers, this doesn’t necessarily mean that China refrains entirely from offensive actions. Chinese leaders might justify such actions as defensive in nature, even if they appear to be offensive. Similarities can also be drawn from the Sino-India conflict of 1962 wherein then Chinese President Liu Shaoqi remarked post conflict that it was “to demolish India’s arrogance and illusions of grandeur. China had *taught India a lesson* and would do so again and again” (this was said to Sri Lankan leader Felix Bandranaike).²¹ Therefore, while China’s deterrence strategy might appear purely defensive on the surface, it is essential to approach this interpretation with some scepticism²². The recent belligerent actions in the South China Sea and aggressive border actions with its neighbours in South

20. Hoang Nguyen, “Chinese Aggression: Origins, Results and Prospects”, in “Chinese Aggression Against Vietnam: Dossier”, *Vietnam Courier*, Hanoi, 1979, pp. 34-5.

21. Mastny, “The Soviet Union’s Partnership with India,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, summer 2010.

22. Yasuhiro Matsuda, “China’s Strategic Culture Hypothesis: Pursuing the Mystery of a Unique Idea”, Japan Institute of International Affairs, Research Reports July 2022, p. 4.

Asia, completely contradict Xi Jinping's quote above. What the Chinese say, mean and ultimately do, continues to intrigue the world. Probably, they firmly believe that their actions are defensive in nature while they may seem to be contrary to the world.

Historical Mandate to Establish Supremacy: The century of humiliation galvanised China's ambition to eradicate discrimination and become a global power. The Chinese population possesses a deeply ingrained sense of being 'victims' because of historical encounters with aggressions from the imperialist forces. The People's Republic of China (PRC), feels its actions are morally justified as it is seen as the "unilateral victim." As a result, China has developed a certain level of paranoia, fearing that foreign nations are constantly endeavouring to limit its rise in power, and that any lapse in vigilance could lead to an invasion²³. Today, this narrative legitimises the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) power by portraying it as the only contemporary Chinese political party that can effectively resist foreign aggression. The Chinese government and strategic thinkers want to overcome this so-called sense of unfairness, and avenge the humiliation. They believe China has a historical mandate to restore its place in the world order. This ideology is spurring China to modernise its military and specifically its nuclear capabilities.

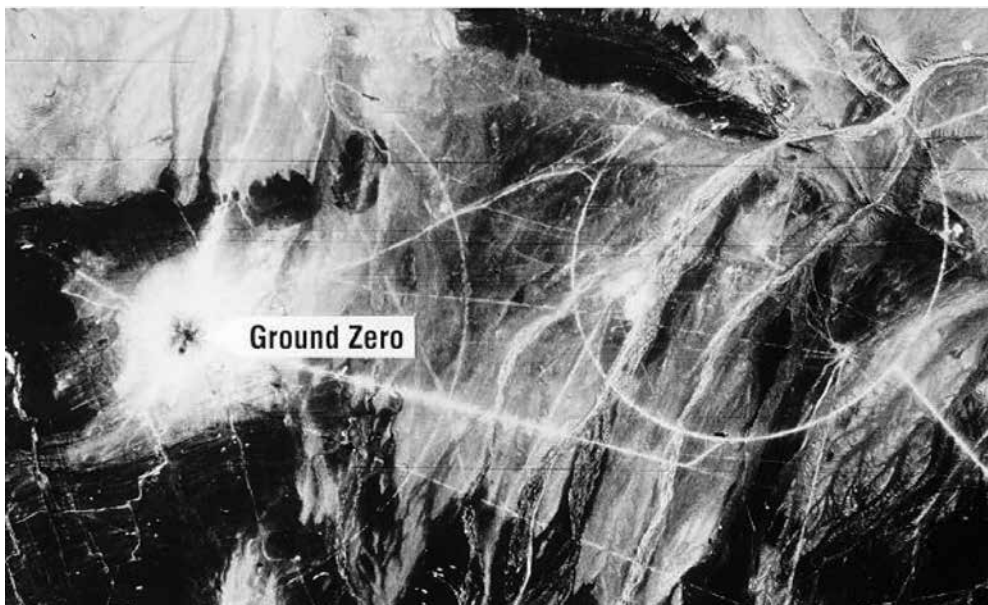
EVOLVING CHINESE NUCLEAR STRATEGY

In 1951, China clandestinely engaged in an agreement with Moscow, trading uranium ores for Soviet assistance in nuclear technology. This partnership prompted China to commence its own nuclear weapons programme in the late 1950s, greatly aided by Soviet support. However, as tensions between China and the Soviet Union escalated during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviet Union halted the sharing of atomic bomb plans and data, and started withdrawing its advisors. Despite this cessation of Soviet aid, China persisted in its determination to advance its nuclear weapons programme. During the 1960s, China achieved notable progress in nuclear weapon

23. Ibid., p. 4.

development. It carried out its inaugural nuclear test at Lop Nur on October 16, 1964, utilising a fission device fuelled by uranium 235, with a yield of 25 kilotons. Surprisingly, in less than 32 months after that, China achieved the successful detonation of its initial hydrogen bomb on June 14, 1967.²⁴

Fig 1: Nuclear Test Site, Lop Nur, China, October 20, 1964



During the Cold War era, China's strategic outlook was shaped by its isolation from the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong's revolutionary ideology and the experience of the Korean War reinforced China's perception of itself as a victim of external aggression, fuelling its commitment to self-reliance and strategic caution. This period also witnessed the development of China's nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against the perceived threats from the United States and the Soviet Union.

24. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/statement-government-peoples-republic-china>

Additionally, the PRC has consistently viewed its nuclear arsenal as ethically justified, not just for defensive purposes against the existing nuclear powers but also, during the Cold War period, as a means to challenge the dominance of the superpowers by positioning itself as a non-aligned nuclear entity outside the East-West divide. Furthermore, the Chinese nuclear test in 1993 and, subsequently, in 1996, served as a clear message in the post-Cold War era that although ‘coalition’ forces may have been capable of halting nuclear programmes in Iraq and applying pressure (albeit unsuccessfully) on those in North Korea, they could not reverse the formation of a closed nuclear club.²⁵ While the Chinese actions might appear to align with the strategic calculations of classical realism—engaging in power dynamics—the fundamental motivation seems to be more closely tied to the idealistic pursuit of maintaining ‘moral superiority’.

Presently, China perceives itself as susceptible to a preemptive nuclear attack from the United States. Despite having a second strike capability, it is considered insufficiently secure, with analysts suggesting it remains highly vulnerable to a first strike by the US. To mitigate this vulnerability, China is focussed on enhancing the resilience of its nuclear forces to the extent that the US cannot be confident in executing a preemptive strike. Consequently, China is allocating resources towards bolstering its nuclear capabilities to achieve this objective.²⁶ China is also substantially enlarging its military capabilities. In a recent development, three new missile sites have been uncovered, indicating China’s construction of potentially 360 additional long-range missile silos.²⁷

25. Dellios, n. 10, p. 3.

26. Robert S Art, “The United States, and the Rise of China: Implications for Long Haul”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 125, no. 3, Fall 2010, p. 373.

27. Admiral Richard, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/3022885/senatearmed-services-committee-hearing-nuclear-weapons-council/>.

CONCEPT OF CHINESE DETERRENCE

Sun Tzu emphasised the importance of stratagem over physical force, stating that skill lies in subduing the enemy without fighting. A superior strategist attacks the mind of the opponent, considering actual fighting as not being the epitome of skill. To explore how traditional values of moral and psychological superiority can be aligned with the modern nuclear condition, we need to examine the concept of Chinese deterrence. “Deterrence” is the prevailing term in the Western strategic discourse referring to the defensive aspect of strategy, often characterised as the *Yin* facet. It involves developing the capacity to resist aggression and convey the willingness to employ this capacity to dissuade a potential adversary from pursuing actions deemed detrimental to one’s own interests. Deterrence operates on a psychological level. The aim is to wield physical force not on the actual battlefield, but rather in the realm of perceptions. If physical force is utilised in direct combat, it signifies a failure of deterrence on the psychological front. This underscores the rationale behind possessing nuclear arms: **their utility lies in their non-utilisation.**

If nuclear weapons are employed in a physical conflict, they have essentially failed in their primary function of deterring aggression. Conversely, if an adversary is aware that you have no intention to use nuclear weapons, the effect of deterrence is likely to diminish. This necessitates a demonstration of both intent and capability to effectively maintain a deterrent posture. The adversary must be persuaded that you are genuinely ready to utilise nuclear weapons if required, and that your threats are not simply empty rhetoric. In essence, your deterrent threat must be perceived as credible.²⁸ Based on this view, it is believed that deterrence effectiveness hinges not on possessing extensive nuclear attack capabilities, but on being “invulnerable to nuclear strikes.” China maintains that it doesn’t need an extensive nuclear arsenal to dissuade potential adversaries. Instead, its second strike capability must be both credible and capable of survival to effectively deter. Therefore, Chinese strategists view the concept of minimum deterrence as relative, not solely

28. Fung Yu-Lan (trans.) *Chuang-Tzu* (Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1989, pp.73-78).

based on numerical quantity, but, more importantly, on factors like the impregnability of nuclear forces, guaranteeing retaliation, and the credibility of counter-attack.²⁹

Before the 1980s, China's nuclear arsenal was restricted to delivery systems based on land and air. However, the introduction of ballistic and cruise missile submarines marked a shift towards meeting contemporary requirements for a comprehensive deterrence strategy. This shift reflects a strategic culture that, akin to its political counterpart, draws on internal principles to adapt to external circumstances. Rather than simply adopting new or foreign elements, the approach is to integrate or 'civilise' them within the existing framework. This pattern mirrors historical instances such as the assimilation of Mongol and Manchu rulers into Chinese society, as well as the incorporation of Communist and Capitalist ideologies. The incorporation of 'Chinese characteristics' underscores the traditional practice of Sinicising novel or foreign concepts. This approach extends to defence-related matters as well.³⁰

ATTRIBUTES OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

China's strategy of nuclear deterrence primarily focusses on other states possessing nuclear weapons, while also offering a negative security guarantee to states not possessing nuclear weapons. The PRC has explicitly declared that it will refrain from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against nations and regions lacking nuclear capabilities. However, its deterrence strategy is limited in scope, as it aims solely to deter nuclear attacks and does not consider deterring non-nuclear hostile military activities. Additionally, China's approach is defensive, as it commits to using nuclear weapons only in response to a nuclear strike. This NFU policy necessitates a robust retaliatory capability to inflict significant and unsustainable nuclear damage on the adversary.³¹

29. Yao Yunzhu, "Chinese Nuclear Policy and the Future of Minimum Deterrence," *Strategic Insights*, 4, no. 9, 2005.

30. Dellios, n.10, p.9.

31. The Science of Military Strategy 2013, pp. 216-217.

China insists that before considering arms control, it must enhance its nuclear capabilities to ensure a stronger bargaining position.

China currently possesses approximately 410 nuclear warheads, with additional ones being manufactured. Forecasts suggest a substantial increase in the stockpile over the next decade, though it will still be considerably smaller than that of Russia or the United States.³² Given China's comparatively smaller nuclear arsenal, compared to Russia or the United States, it is imperative for China to grasp nuclear deterrence tactics to uphold the credibility of its deterrent. One crucial tactic is ambiguity. By deliberately keeping aspects of its nuclear deterrence strategy ambiguous, China forces potential adversaries to speculate about its actual nuclear capabilities. This uncertainty surrounding China's nuclear strength enhances the effectiveness of its deterrence.³³ The second tactic involves ensuring that China's adversaries genuinely believe and fear the capabilities of its nuclear forces. Achieving this necessitates a well-executed strategic communications effort during both peace-time and crises, aimed at conveying China's unwavering determination. Lastly, these tactics must be customised for each specific nation, event, and circumstance, recognising the nuances and complexities of each situation.³⁴

Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament: China is currently hesitant to engage in nuclear arms control efforts, believing that the conditions are not suitable for its participation. It asserts that the responsibility for further reductions in nuclear arsenals lies with states possessing the largest nuclear stockpiles. China's main worry is that the dominant states might use arms control agreements to uphold their nuclear supremacy and weaken the nuclear capabilities of their adversaries. Although pressure mounts for China to join disarmament talks, it emphasises that its nuclear forces are relatively modest compared to those of other nations, placing it at a disadvantage in negotiations. China insists that

32. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2023.2178713?src=recsys>

33. Ibid., p. 218.

34. Ibid., pp. 218-219.

before considering arms control, it must enhance its nuclear capabilities to ensure a stronger bargaining position. This approach aligns with China's aim to lead negotiations and progressively assert control in the disarmament process. China perceives arms control as a contentious arena where gains for one party may result in losses for another.³⁵ Above all, China prioritises safeguarding its security and advocates for caution, emphasising the importance of prudent decision-making when circumstances are unfavourable or uncertain.³⁶

INFLUENCE OF CHINESE STRATAGEMS

The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent.

— Sun Tzu

Deception and Ambiguity: Chinese strategic culture exhibits a clear inclination towards secrecy and deception, a characteristic that finds roots in the teachings of Sun Tzu, who famously declared, “All warfare is based on deception.” This emphasis on cunning and strategic ambiguity has deeply influenced Chinese approaches to statecraft and military strategy over centuries.³⁷ In the realm of arms control, effectiveness hinges on the establishment of a verification mechanism to ensure that all the parties adhere to treaty obligations. However, such a system inherently requires a level of transparency that may clash with the cultural norms and practices ingrained within the Chinese leadership. Given the historical propensity for secrecy and the strategic value placed on ambiguity, the Chinese authorities may resist or find it challenging to fully embrace the transparency necessary for robust arms control measures. This tension between the demands of international

35. Henrik Stalhane Hiim and Magnus Langset Troan, “Hardening Chinese Realpolitik in the 21st Century: The Evolution of Beijing’s Thinking about Arms Control”, *The Journal of Contemporary China*, May 25, 2021, vol. 31, issue 133, 2022, p. 88.

36. n. 31, p. 224.

37. Sun Tzu, *The Illustrated Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 96.

This tension between the demands of international agreements and deeply entrenched strategic traditions poses significant challenges in fostering trust and cooperation on matters of arms control involving China.

agreements and deeply entrenched strategic traditions poses significant challenges in fostering trust and cooperation on matters of arms control involving China.³⁸

Concept of Indirect Approach – Arming Rogue Nations: In the realm of foreign relations, China traditionally adheres to the principles of engaging independently with weaker states, forming alliances to confront stronger ones, fostering ties with distant nations to manage conflicts with neighbouring states, and safeguarding its

own interests by leveraging foreign powers against potential threats—a strategy akin to the Chinese concept of “to kill with a borrowed knife.” The expansive and interconnected region spanning North Korea, China, Pakistan and Iran holds considerable geostrategic importance today. Particularly, Iran and North Korea, situated on the outer fringes of this region, have renewed collaboration on a project focussed on long-range missiles, which involves the exchange of critical components.³⁹ The arming of North Korea, Pakistan, and now Iran represents efforts to strategically counter-balance India and the US by establishing a contiguous territorial alliance with these nations that are considered rogue by global standards. The nuclear armaments of Pakistan and North Korea serve as clear illustrations of how China has executed this strategy. China equipped Pakistan with the capacity to develop nuclear weapons utilising highly enriched uranium cores while concurrently supplying ballistic missile technology to North Korea. Subsequently, China acted as a crucial facilitator in the exchange of the respective technologies between these countries, thereby bolstering their nuclear programmes.

38. Jennifer Bradley, *China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion* (National Institute for Public Policy, July 2022), vol 2, no 7, p. 7.

39. Lieutenant Colonel (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham, “The Quadruple Threat: North Korea, China, Pakistan, and Iran”, November 2, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/threats-north-korea-china-pakistan-iran/>

Ridiculing the Enemy Strategically:

Regarding the application of a people's war strategy in today's era of advanced technology in warfare, it is important to highlight that Mao emphasised the importance of adapting to evolving circumstances while staying true to fundamental strategic principles.⁴⁰ In his era, Mao exemplified this approach by referring to the American atom bomb as a "paper tiger". He didn't undermine the weapon's potency and ensured that China

adapted to the evolving global landscape of the post-World War II era by developing its own nuclear arsenal. His ridicule of such power was primarily at the strategic level due to it being morally incorrect and detached from the interests of the people.⁴¹ Here lies another resonance with a strategic lineage that prioritises ethics, societal morale, and other factors beyond purely military concerns at the outset of texts on warfare. This underscores the enduring significance of prioritising human factors over weaponry, a concept deeply rooted in China's historical traditions dating back to figures like Mencius and continuing into the present day, as exemplified by the *Handbook of Military Knowledge for Commanders*, which features the sub-heading, "Despise the Enemy Strategically and Respect the Enemy Tactically".⁴² The psychological aspect influencing the outcome of war, distinct from technological and military factors, essentially reaffirms the classical belief that "the human element holds greater sway than material considerations."⁴³

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40. *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, , 1966), p.72.

41. "All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers" (November 1957), *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 5, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), p. 517.

42. Parts of this are translated in US Joint Publications Research Service, *China Report*, March 7, 1988, pp. i-439.

43. Chong-Pin Lin, *China's Nuclear Weapons Strategy: Tradition Within Evolution* (Lexington, and Toronto: Lexington Books, 1988), p. 18.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INSECURITIES

Threat Perception of Internal and External Environment: China's political and military leadership perceives threats in various forms across multiple domains. The profound sense of a siege mentality among China's leaders is often underestimated. This mentality leads the elites to regard both foreign and domestic environments as hazardous territories, rife with dangers and potential conspiracies. The handling of the Tiananmen unrest, the crackdown on the Falun Gong sect, the quelling of the pro-democracy Hong Kong protests, the campaign against corruption in China and the excessive lockdown for the zero COVID policy suggest the depth of the regime's fear of domestic threats. China consistently perceives itself as encircled by adversaries. This was the case during Mao's era and remains true for Xi Jinping's China as well. Xi has fostered suspicion within the Party, the state, and even among the officers of the armed forces. The entire nation is under constant surveillance through advanced monitoring systems that track individuals' movements and whereabouts, intruding into their private lives.⁴⁴ Establishing over fifty unauthorised police stations across five continents to surveil, intimidate, and instill fear in Chinese nationals residing abroad vividly demonstrates the profound insecurity of the establishment.⁴⁵ The recent restructuring of China's Strategic Support Force into the Information Support Force, Aerospace Force, and Cyberspace Force, along with the establishment of the Joint Logistics Support Force as the 'fourth arm,' is perceived as a move by the CCP to consolidate its control over the military. This echoes historical instances such as Mao Zedong's elimination of ranks and grades in the 1960s, Deng Xiaoping's critique of the PLA's inefficiency in 1979 leading to a drive for a more efficient military, and Xi Jinping's crackdown on corruption which saw the removal or arrest of thousands of officers and soldiers, including those associated with Jiang

44. Priyadarśī Mukherji, "The Strategic Culture of China and the Era of Xi Jinping", March 1, 2023, <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/the-strategic-culture-of-china-and-the-era-of-xi-jinping/>

45. Ibid., p. 8.

Zemin. This restructuring allows for greater specialisation under Xi's direct leadership.⁴⁶

Due to the PLA's limited transparency, it is challenging to anticipate whether additional purges will occur within the "four services and four arms" of the PLA. The true motives behind this restructuring—whether aimed at bolstering military effectiveness or exerting increased political oversight and direct authority over different sectors—will become clearer over time. Nonetheless, it is evident that Xi will wield greater influence over the information domain.⁴⁷ This likely indicates a sense of insecurity within the leadership, driven by a constant pursuit of absolute control. It is evident that the CCP leadership prioritises the consolidation of information and network operations.

Organisational Culture and Lack of Domestic Debates: China consistently underscores its perceived "moral high ground," attributing responsibility for any issues or problems solely to other nations, a stance evident from its "New Security Concept" to its use of force. By extensively promoting this narrative through its propaganda channels, China has effectively instilled these beliefs in its populace, leading to minimal questioning of the government's narrative by its own people.⁴⁸ Moreover, the organisational ethos of socialism is believed to have played a significant role in shifting total responsibility onto external factors. Embedded within Marxism is the idea that as long as one's intentions are pure, no individual can be held liable for outcomes. Furthermore, the bureaucratic system offers minimal opportunity for self-correction. Given the absence of opposition parties or independent media outlets in China that freely critique government authorities, the society is inundated with self-congratulatory rhetoric and criticism of foreign nations solely

46. Srikanth Kondapalli, "How Xi Jinping is Consolidating his Power by Revamping Chinese Military", <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-xi-jinping-is-consolidating-his-power-by-revamping-chinese-military-13765509.html>

47. Air Marshal Anil Chopra, "Why China Disbanded Once-Touted Strategic Support Force: Implications for India", <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/why-china-disbanded-once-touted-strategic-support-force-implications-for-india-13764659.html>

48. Matsuda, n. 22, p. 4.

propagated by the state-controlled media. Consequently, the Chinese government avoids taking responsibility for the repercussions of its perceived righteous actions, instead, attributing blame to others, even in cases of failure. Further, due to the lack of domestic debates on such sensitive strategic matters, the political leaders remain bereft of sound policy advice from their nuclear experts.

INFLUENCE OF LEADERS ON THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF A STATE

The strategic inclinations of a nation are shaped by its strategic culture, which intertwines with the operational principles embraced by its current leadership. What attitudes toward conflict and collaboration do the present leaders of China embody? It is essential to consider both the broader societal ethos and the psychological make-up of individual leaders. When there is a divergence between these levels, does the personal disposition of a leader supersede the overarching cultural norms? Indeed, external factors such as situational circumstances, conditional limitations, and the actions of other nations also impact the decision-making of the Chinese leaders. The strategic culture remains dynamic, significantly influenced by the personality traits and perspectives of its leaders. After all, culture is sustained by living individuals, thus, emphasising the significance of who these individuals are and what they believe in as pivotal aspects of a country's strategic culture.⁴⁹

The regime under Xi Jinping demonstrates nefarious characteristics across various aspects, where Beijing has shown a growing tendency towards coercion, sometimes resorting to violence, in its interactions with neighbouring countries such as the Philippines, Japan, and India. Additionally, Beijing periodically showcases its capability to exert pressure, enforce blockades, and potentially even launch military actions against Taiwan.⁵⁰ China's relentless aspiration to supplant the USA as a global superpower, thereby creating a unipolar world, is driving humanity perilously close to a looming

49. Valerie M Hudson, "Where is Strategic Culture to be Found? The Case of China", Brigham Young University, *International Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 4, December 2008, pp. 782-785.

50. Michael Beckley, "How Primed for War Is China?", <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/04/china-war-military-taiwan-us-asia-xi-escalation-crisis/>.

Chinese threat. This ambition is accompanied by widespread exploitation of natural resources worldwide to fuel China's advancement. Xi Jinping's hostile and malevolent approach to international relations, characterised by sheer military and economic prowess, is widely condemned by the majority of people globally, save for a few corrupt and power-hungry politicians and dictators.⁵¹

Perception of Strategic Culture of Other Nations:

China's security strategies and its inclination towards military actions are shaped by not just its own strategic culture, but also its comprehension of the strategic cultures of other nations, particularly the perceptions held by influential groups. These cultural perceptions play a significant role as China evaluates both current threats and potential ones on the global stage. A considerable portion of Chinese strategic analysts regard the United States as the foremost threat to China. This perception of the US extends beyond direct military concerns to encompass broader security implications. China perceives the US as attempting to restrain and weaken China under the guise of a "peaceful rise" policy, as well as thwarting its attempts at reunification with Taiwan.⁵²

According to the Chinese perspectives, the fundamental aspects of US strategic culture include tendencies towards expansionism and hegemony. Additionally, a notable characteristic of this cultural outlook is the American inclination towards "strategic misdirection."⁵³ This term describes tactics involving deceptive manoeuvres aimed at misleading opponents. Star Wars, also known as the Strategic Defense Initiative, is seen primarily as a ploy; Washington's true intentions did not involve its actual implementation. However, the concern it raised, prompted the Soviets to escalate their defence spending, which ultimately played a role in the downfall of the

According to the Chinese perspectives, the fundamental aspects of US strategic culture include tendencies towards expansionism and hegemony.

51. Mukherji, n. 44.

52. Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 2, Summer 2000, p. 241.

53. This paragraph is drawn from Li Jijun, "lun zhanlue wenhua," pp. 14-15. See also, Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future*, pp. xlv-xlvi.

The US-China rivalry, Taiwan Strait tensions, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and border disputes with India, a growing regional power, shape Beijing's nuclear calculus.

Soviet regime. Likewise, the United States deliberately conveyed to Saddam Hussein the impression that there would be no US intervention if Iraq attacked another nation. The Chinese are convinced that the US is determined to adopt a similar approach with China. For instance, a significant number of Chinese analysts expressed considerable doubt regarding the United States' characterisation of "intelligence failures" surrounding the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy

in Belgrade a year later.⁵⁴ A prevalent belief among many Chinese is that these incidents were deliberate schemes aimed at destabilising China. This suspicion stems from the assumption that Washington's ultimate objective is perceived to be the weakening or fragmentation of China.

STRATEGIC CULTURE AND NUCLEAR STRATEGY CORRELATION

The correlation between Chinese strategic culture and nuclear strategy underscores the intricate interplay between historical legacies, ideological beliefs, and geopolitical imperatives. China's approach to nuclear weapons is shaped by its desire to safeguard national security, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic autonomy. Understanding this correlation is essential for assessing China's nuclear intentions, managing strategic stability, and promoting arms control measures in the Asia-Pacific region. As China continues to assert its influence on the global stage, its strategic culture will remain a key determinant of its nuclear behaviour and international security dynamics.

China's strategic culture is further influenced by its geopolitical environment, characterised by regional rivalries and great power competition. The US-China rivalry, Taiwan Strait tensions, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and border disputes with India, a growing regional power, shape

54. Scobell, n. 7, p. 19.

Beijing's nuclear calculus. China's nuclear strategy aims to deter potential adversaries while maintaining strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept of "*winning without fighting*" aligns with the Chinese strategic culture, emphasising the importance of psychological deterrence and avoiding direct confrontation.

China's nuclear doctrine reflects its strategic culture and national interests. The policy of "minimum deterrence" underscores China's emphasis on possessing a credible nuclear deterrent rather than engaging in an arms race. The NFU policy, rooted in China's historical aversion to preemptive strikes, reaffirms its commitment to nuclear restraint and defensive posture. However, China retains ambiguity regarding the conditions under which it might revise its NFU policy, reflecting its adaptability to evolving security challenges.

China feels that on the economic front it is able to stand up to the US, however, on the nuclear front, it still needs to bridge the wide gap and, hence, the relentless pace in its modernisation. To offset the disparity, presently China has adopted a sort of hedging strategy by fostering close alliances with Russia and collaborating with rogue nations to keep the US and its other potential adversaries in check. China's strategic culture has a distinct preference for secrecy and deception. Hence, it will always maintain ambiguity in nuclear deterrence issues which will keep the adversaries guessing its real nuclear strength. Since all warfare is based on deception, China will maintain effective strategic communication not only to make others truly believe in, but also truly fear, its nuclear forces.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

The unique strands of Chinese strategic culture of self-proclaimed civilisational supremacy, the mandate of heaven leading to a staunch notion of achieving its rightful place, a unrelenting desire to establish supremacy, and an unprecedented scale of weaponisation of rogue nations, along with hegemonic expansion are creating a highly unstable security situation.

55. Bradley, n. 38, p. 7.

This situation is getting exacerbated as, in the absence of mechanisms for internal debate, with inherent checks and balances, and with absolute powers vested in one leader, any strategic miscalculation can undermine the very existence of humanity. This elaboration delves into the assertion that there exists a distinctively Chinese approach to strategy, which endures despite China's evolution into a formidable nuclear-capable nation. This perspective suggests that, even as China wields significant power and possesses nuclear capabilities, its strategic decision-making may still be influenced by certain factors. These factors include an acute sensitivity to internal threats, a pronounced tendency towards suspicion and mistrust of external actors, and an overall mindset that may sometimes deviate from conventional global strategic norms. Consequently, there is a concern that in situations where these characteristics are heightened, there is a possibility of China making decisions related to nuclear weapons use that might seem irrational or unpredictable from a global perspective.