

To deter the PRC ...

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There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

—HL Mencken

This Strategic Insights report is the first 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 (CCP) and its People's Liberation Army (PLA). The series is a joint project between the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the US China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI). Over the coming months, ASPI and CASI, along with our research associates, will examine the concept of deterrence, how both democratic countries and the People's Republic of China (PRC) approach deterrence, what liberal democracies are doing to deter China and what China is doing to deter them, and assess the impacts of those efforts. The series will culminate in an in-person conference that will put forward policy options for Australia, the US 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'.



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During the Cold War, America and the Soviet Union developed their own organisations and networks, which were by and large segregated from the other. With a handful of exceptions, such as the United Nations, the two sides had little interaction, little trade, little commerce and relatively little overlap in their geographical spheres of influence. There was tension and conflict on the margins with clear escalatory potential, but the two sides managed to avoid direct or large-scale confrontations, albeit narrowly at times. That was in large part because the two sides developed a shared basic understanding of the world. Ideologically, there were vast differences, but those ideologies were at their heart competing Western ideologies, born from a shared historical basis and built on a generally shared way of framing and approaching issues. That's no longer the case. The CCP isn't the same as the erstwhile Communist Party of the Soviet Union; it doesn't share the same history with the West that the Russian-dominated Soviets did. It doesn't approach the world in the same manner, and thus its understanding of basic facets of international relations differs from that of the West in ways that the West largely hasn't had to contend with.

During the Cold War, the US and its allies were focused on the Soviet Union as a competitor and a rival. Everyone in the military and the broader defence and security establishment knew something about the Soviets and their military. People studied what the Soviets thought, how they spoke and the actions that they took, down to the smallest details. This was often referred to as 'Kremlinology', and at times that term was used disparagingly to denote a focus on minutiae and losing sight of the bigger picture. But, in any case, the West built a reasonable understanding of how the Soviets thought and what their actions meant, and each side developed a solid basis for understanding the signals the other side was sending, and typically sent clear signals of their own. To be sure, there were missteps, near misses (such as the Cuban missile crisis) and misunderstandings, any one of which might have resulted in conflict, but each side had a pretty clear understanding of how to deter the other from crossing any 'red lines'.

That isn't the case today. The CCP's understanding of the world, and thus its approach to it, is significantly different from Western views. It's neither right nor wrong, just a different perspective, and one that isn't common in Western liberal democracies; nor is it commonly taught in Western education systems, or indeed even in professional military education. Australian and US partners and allies such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have a historical appreciation and can help contribute to a better understanding of historical concepts. But, since 2001, the US and many of its partners have been focused on fighting terrorist groups and managing the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the broader Middle East. It was only during the later part of the Trump administration that the US truly focused the whole of government on addressing the competition with China, bringing in Congress as well as the military, the State Department, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States and others. It takes years to build a deep and wide group of specialists in any field, and that's certainly true of China studies. In fact, even today, the US Air Force has the same number of Foreign Area Officer billets for Chinese specialists as it does for Portuguese speakers. If the US and its network of allies and partners hope to successfully avoid conflict with the PRC, they must build a deeper shared understanding of how the CCP and the PRC see the world. That will require sustained effort over several years and involve a deep partnership with partners and allies who have knowledge and expertise that are vital.

With sustained effort, we can do better at understanding Chinese thought and concepts and the twists that CCP ideology gives them. In that way, we can maximise our opportunities to ensure that our strategic goals are met and our interests are protected. While Australia, the US, NATO and other allies and partners around the world seek to deter the PRC from taking actions that would lead to conflict, that won't come about on its own. To borrow a phrase co-opted by the CCP to restrict thinking and place the onus solely on the democratic nations, we must work to avoid Graham Allison's 'Thucydides trap'.¹ The geostrategic goals and interests of the PRC don't align with those of the majority of Indo-Pacific states or the broader collection of democratic countries globally that support the current international world order, underpinned by global institutions set up at the end of World War II. While the PRC has since joined many of those institutions, which it feels it had little hand in building, and actively assumed obligations under numerous international treaties, the current Chinese state is working to redefine the international order to meet its growing 'core interests'. Because those interests don't align with, and are often at odds with, democratic free market interests, we must, at times, deter the Chinese from acting in ways that are inimical to our goals or threatening to our interests.

In order to deter someone from acting in ways you don't want, or compel them to act in ways you do, you must understand them and how they see the world. And then you must develop and employ your deterrence methods in ways that the Chinese will understand and respond to accordingly. The starting point for that effort is to establish a baseline for how the PRC understands 'deterrence'.

Coercion theory and US doctrine

First, when dealing with such a complicated topic, it's necessary to set definitions. US Department of Defense (US DoD) Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 2-19, 'Strategy', defines coercion as the use of 'threats of force to shape the behavior of another actor'. JDN 2-19 notes that coercion is an 'umbrella term that encompasses two distinct forms: deterrence and compellence. Deterrence seeks to convince 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.'² Compellence, therefore, is telling the other side to 'stop' or 'go back'. Deterrence is simply telling them 'don't'. It's worth noting that while the JDN uses the term 'enemy', coercion can also be directed at neutral or even friendly parties.

There are three key elements to effective strategic coercion: credibility, capability and communication.³ Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, 'Joint Operations', explains those elements:

Deterrence should be based on capability (having the means to influence behaviour), credibility (maintaining a level of believability that the proposed actions may actually be employed), and communication (transmitting the intended message to the desired audience) to ensure greater effectiveness (effectiveness of deterrence must be viewed from the perspective of the agent/actor that is to be deterred).⁴

Thomas Schelling, the contemporary father of coercion theory, says that '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.'⁵ That bargaining includes threats of violence and assurances of accommodation. When the second half of that equation is forgotten, the bargain becomes all stick and no carrot.

As noted above, JP 3-0 says, 'effectiveness of deterrence must be viewed from the perspective of the agent/actor that is to be deterred.' 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.'⁶ In other words, effective coercion requires that threats be specifically tailored to the adversary and flexible in execution.⁷ Tailoring coercion to the adversary requires more than just changing the location of coercive activities. As all coercion 'occurs in the mind of the adversary', one must think about how one's own coercive actions will be interpreted by the target. This in itself is a large undertaking, made larger by the vast differences between the US and China.

Chinese concepts of deterrence and coercion

To study the PRC's view of coercion and deterrence, it's also necessary to start with definitions, but also with translations. Translations from Chinese on the subject often translate the Chinese term '威慑' (wēishè) as 'deterrence'. The *Chinese People's Liberation Army military terms* (often referred to by its Chinese name of 'Junyu') is a rough equivalent of US JP 1, as the PLA's official military dictionary. The 2011 *Junyu* only defines 'strategic deterrence', and not just 'deterrence', as 'a military strategy that shows or threatens the use of force to force the opponent to submit'.⁸ The PLA doesn't openly publish its doctrine, but its Academy of Military Science's *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS), which is an educational text used for teaching doctrine, offers outsiders the most authoritative insights into the PLA's thinking on coercion.

While neither the 2001 nor the 2013 edition of the SMS can be equated to US JPs, each SMS requires years of research and coordination by dozens of authors in the PLA working at the PLA's premier academic institutions. The 2001 SMS says, 'Strategic deterrence (wēishè) has two basic effects: to stop the other side from doing something, or to force the other side that it must do something.'⁹

The more recent 2013 *SMS* defines wēishè as follows:

Military deterrence [wēishè] is the strategic actions taken by a state or political group that threatens to use or use military power to influence its opponent's strategic judgement to achieve certain political goals, making it feel that it's difficult to achieve the expected goal or the gains are not worth the loss and to abandon hostile actions (放弃敌对行动), thereby achieving certain political goals.¹⁰

While the 2013 definition appears closer to Western concepts, it isn't entirely clear whether 'abandon[ing] hostile actions' is done before the action has started (deterrence) or after (compellence).

From these definitions, it appears that wēishè is closer to the broader Western concept of 'coercion' and shouldn't be considered simply 'deterrence'. For that reason, this article will translate wēishè as 'coercion', unless it's specifically used as simply 'don't'. But the implications go beyond which word is used in a paper such as this. While the US may view the word 'coercion' similarly to 'blackmail'¹¹ and 'deterrence' as a softer hand, if the PRC sees no split between 'coercion' and 'deterrence', then it probably also fails to see deterrence as a 'softer' approach.

The 2001 *SMS* states:

To bring strategic deterrence into play, one must have three fundamental conditions: First, sufficient strength for deterrence that can affect the whole strategic situation ... Second, the determination and will for using strength for strategic deterrence ... Third, a way to let the opponent know and believe the two aforementioned conditions.¹²

Those three conditions reflect the three key elements of coercion in Western theories and US doctrine. While capability and communication stay the same as the Western definition, the third, credibility, becomes closer to 'political will'.¹³ It further states that communication is the most important of the three: 'If there is only coercive will, and the coerced party does not really understand the meaning of the signal, then coercion will not work.'¹⁴

The 2013 *SMS* lists six main characteristics of military coercion:

1. Coercion is an extension of politics.
2. The fundamental goal of coercion is to stop the harmful activity of the opposite.
3. The foundation of using coercion is violence. It is not a friendly negotiation.
4. The basic method of coercion is to threaten.
5. Coercion is to influence the other's psychology [心理, *xīnlǐ*]
6. Coercion is a combination of all kinds of power: political, diplomatic, military, economic, technological, etc.¹⁵

Most, if not all, of those 'characteristics' match Western thinking. For example, numbers one, two, and four are reflected in Schelling's idea that 'The power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy—vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy.'¹⁶ And number six could be stated as a 'whole-of-government approach' to coercion. However, there are deeper implications for the idea that a whole-of-government approach is a main characteristic of coercion.

Just as Western audiences tend to view the PRC as a monolith in which any and every action is a part of the vast party-state apparatus and must have been directed and approved by General Secretary Xi Jinping himself, the PRC probably also views the disparate actions of different US agencies, and actions of US partners and allies, as centrally unified and planned. While both sides are implementing policies determined by their leaderships, significant breakdowns can occur in implementation, particularly in timing and messaging, leading to erroneous signalling. As the PRC views coercion as a combination of all kinds of power, similarly timed and messaged actions by US agencies—regardless of whether they're dissimilar, unrelated and uncoordinated on the US end—will be factored into the PRC's calculations of US intentions. For example, while the US DoD may be attempting to reinforce a longstanding coercive policy, actions taken at the same time by another US department or agency could either make otherwise routine US military activities seem far more hostile, or, conversely, make it appear to Beijing as if the DoD were acting contrary to the US leadership's intentions. This breakdown in intent and message can occur from major policy announcements, but occurs

more often in the day-to-day implementation of policies. Over the course of the previous two administrations in the US, there have been multiple disconnects in supposedly whole-of-government approaches. And because we enjoy a free and open press, those disconnects are reported and commented on openly in the media, which Beijing pays attention to. When the State Department wanted to criticise Beijing for repression in Hong Kong, religious persecution in Xinjiang and going back on promises made by Xi Jinping himself,¹⁷ it found itself at odds with Trade and Commerce, which wanted to promote economic ties and exchanges. Even President Trump struggled with this balance, understanding the threat that the PRC's strategic-level military–civil fusion policy poses to the international liberal democratic order but at the same time striving to achieve a trade deal and increase American farm exports. To improve the efficacy of coercion attempts, they must be coordinated throughout the interagency process, be synchronised with the actions of other agencies and, just as importantly, demonstrate cohesion with the actions and directions of key US partners and allies in the circumstances of the particular issue.

Similarly, the PRC will use all of the instruments of national power to coerce and to signal its will in other areas. For example, in response to a series of Australian decisions affecting Chinese interests, culminating in an Australian resolution at the World Health Assembly calling for a transparent, independent investigation into the origins of Covid-19, the PRC imposed coercive trade sanctions on multiple Australian exports to China, such as barley and wine, and a 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' push on Twitter about Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, along with a range of other tactics dating back to Australia's decision to ban Huawei from providing part of Australia's 5G digital network, a key element in the nation's critical information infrastructure.¹⁸ This also serves as a good reminder that not everything is about the Washington–Beijing relationship. The PRC acts according to its own world view regardless of the country on the other side of the issue, and, indeed, sees the relationships and interactions among nations as yet another overarching system. If US and partner and allied decision-makers and military planners aren't looking at the PRC's actions holistically, those signals could be (and often are) missed.

Both versions of the *SMS* show that, while some of the PRC's views on coercion theory are the same as Western ideas, there are some key points of divergence. For example, the *Junyu* says that strategic deterrence is 'divided into offensive deterrence [coercion] strategy and defensive deterrence [coercion] strategy'.¹⁹

Zhao Xijun of the PRC's National Defense University defines 'offensive deterrence' in his book *Coercive warfare: a comprehensive discussion on missile deterrence* as 'a military deterrence that mainly aims at attacking', and writes that 'the characteristic of offensive deterrence is to use "pre-emptive strike" to deter the other side.' Zhao also states that this concept is "using war to stop war" by [using] small war to constrain large war'.²⁰ The 2001 *SMS* says:

we must pay attention to combining attack and defence. In war, preserving self and annihilating the enemy is dialectically unified and attack and defence complement each other. Strategic deterrence must follow this law as well. In the deterring actions for self-defence, we also need to take the form and means of offensive deterrence when necessary in order to enhance the effect of deterrence.²¹

And an article in the March 2014 issue of *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* says that 'high-intensity strategic deterrence ... uses small battles to deter the enemy'.²²

While planners often pay lip service to the idea that the PRC will 'escalate to de-escalate', it goes beyond rhetoric. The 2001 *SMS* says, 'When the opponent begins to carry out escalation or deterrence, we must do the same, using similar escalation or greater escalation to defeat the opponent's escalation and deterrent.'²³ The PLA admits that 'limited strikes as warning signals' are the most escalatory of the eight methods of communicating a coercive threat,²⁴ but our decision-makers must understand that the PRC may conduct *what it expects to be* limited strikes in order to deter the US and its partners and allies. The PRC may strike without the intent to spiral into a war.

This idea of offensive deterrence becomes more appealing if you believe your opponent suffers from weak resolve. In the view of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, 'Beijing, in projecting its own deep strategic realism onto Washington, has concluded that the United States would never fight a war it could not win, because to do so would be terminal for the future of American

power, prestige, and global standing.²⁵ As if to illustrate that very point, in December 2018, Rear Admiral Lou Yuan of the PLA Navy said, ‘What the United States fears the most is taking casualties,’ and suggested that sinking two US aircraft carriers would be sufficient to expel the US from the South and East China seas. ‘We’ll see how frightened America is.’²⁶ So planners must take this into account both when seeking to deter the PRC and also when thinking through what actions the PRC might take, or how it might react to our actions.

It’s with this understanding—that the PLA conceives of deterrence more along the lines of what Western militaries think of more as coercion—as a baseline that one can better determine what courses of action might be more effective when attempting to shape the PRC’s actions. Likewise, this can now be a lens through which to view Beijing’s attempts to coerce other nations to acquiesce to its demands and interests. Australia and the US, along with our allies and partners, some of which can provide insights that we don’t have, need to take this into account when thinking through the implications of certain policies and actions. All sides want to avoid major conflict and keep hostilities from breaking out due to misperceptions or misunderstandings. The follow-on to this report *To deter the PRC ...* is titled ‘... *You Cannot Think Like a Westerner*’. That report and others in this series will attempt to examine both of those issues, and will rely on this understanding of ‘wēishè’ as a starting point. There are, however, a few implications that immediately stand out.

Implications

The biggest implication, briefly discussed above, is the concept of ‘offensive deterrence’ and how that will manifest in the PRC’s attempts at deterrence. In an effort to deter the US, Australia or their allies, the PRC may conduct strikes on our assets. Put another way, the PRC may kill Americans or Australians in an attempt to deter. That wouldn’t have the deterrent effect that the PRC seeks or expects, and the risks of escalation from such a deterrent effort are extremely high.

However, the threat of escalation from misperception of the target isn’t necessarily limited to the PRC. Terms such as ‘direct action’ and ‘limited strike’²⁷ gained prominence in the US DoD due to the over two-decades-long conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the US may think that a strike is ‘limited’, the PRC might not view any strike as such. It’s a thought similar to blowing up someone’s house and expecting them to be grateful that you didn’t also blow up their car.

The second implication is also related to misperceptions. While the US and its partners and allies may perceive ‘coercion’ as in line with terms such as ‘blackmail’ and ‘manipulation’,²⁸ and ‘deterrence’ as relaying a softer tone, the PRC doesn’t make that split. It remains unclear where the PRC feels the term ‘wēishè’ falls on a spectrum of hostility, but we must understand that any subtlety we might hope to portray through ‘deterrence’ versus ‘coercion’ could be lost on the PRC. As with all concepts, and even definitions of words, we must be careful not to mirror ourselves onto our analysis of PRC thinking and action.

Notes

- 1 Graham Allison, The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for war?, *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.
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- 5 Thomas C Schelling, *Arms and influence*, Yale University Press, 1966.
- 6 David E Johnson, Karl P Mueller, William H Taft. 2002. *Conventional coercion across the spectrum of operations: the utility of US military forces in the emerging security environment*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, [online](#).
- 7 See Jack S Levy, 'Deterrence and coercive diplomacy: the contributions of Alexander George', *Political Psychology*, 2008, 29(4):508.
- 8 中国人民解放军 军语 (全本), 军事科学出版社出版, 2011.
- 9 Academy of Military Science, *Science of military strategy (SMS)*, 2001.
- 10 '军事威慑是国家或政治集团为达到一定的政治目的·以威胁使用或使用军事力量来影响对手的战略判断·使其感到困难以实现预期目标或得不偿失而放弃敌对行动·从而达成一定政治目的战略行动' Academy of Military Science, *SMS*, 2013, [online](#).
- 11 Tami Davis Biddle, 'Coercion theory: a basic introduction for practitioners', *Texas National Security Review*, 2020, 3(2), [online](#).
- 12 *SMS*, 2001.
- 13 It's been argued that the Western model's 'credibility' would be better defined as 'political will'. For example, Schelling says that 'War no longer looks like just a contest of strength. War and the brink of war are more a contest of nerve and risk-taking, of pain and endurance.' This puts the three Chinese key elements in line with Western models. Special thanks to Anthony Bell for this observation.
- 14 '如果只有威慑一方的决心·而被威慑方并没有真正理解信号的含义·则威慑就不会发生作用.' *SMS*, 2013.
- 15 *SMS*, 2013, 134–135.
- 16 Schelling, *Arms and influence*.
- 17 'Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in joint press conference', transcript, The White House, 25 September 2015, [online](#).
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- 22 '高强度战略威慑是以对战略威慑力证的警示性运用为主·通过小战慑敌的一种战略威慑行动' [High-intensity strategic deterrence is based on strategic deterrence. It is a strategic deterrent action that focuses on the precautionary use of the certificate, and uses small battles to deter the enemy.] Cai Yequan, Liang Liang, '战略威慑体系的构成·运用及其效用评估研究' [Study on the composition, application and effectiveness evaluation of strategic deterrence system], *军事运筹与系统工程 [Military Long-Term Planning and Systems Engineering]*, March 2014, 28(1).
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- 24 *SMS*, 2001.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
CASI	China Aerospace Studies Institute
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
JDN	joint doctrine note
JP	joint publication
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SMS	<i>Science of military strategy</i>
US DoD	US Department of Defense

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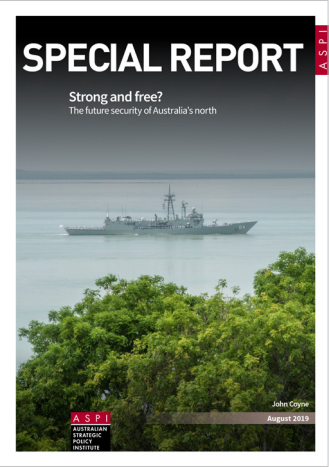
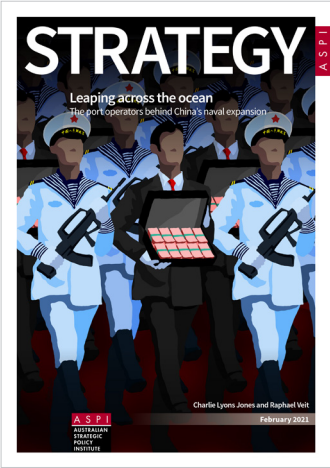
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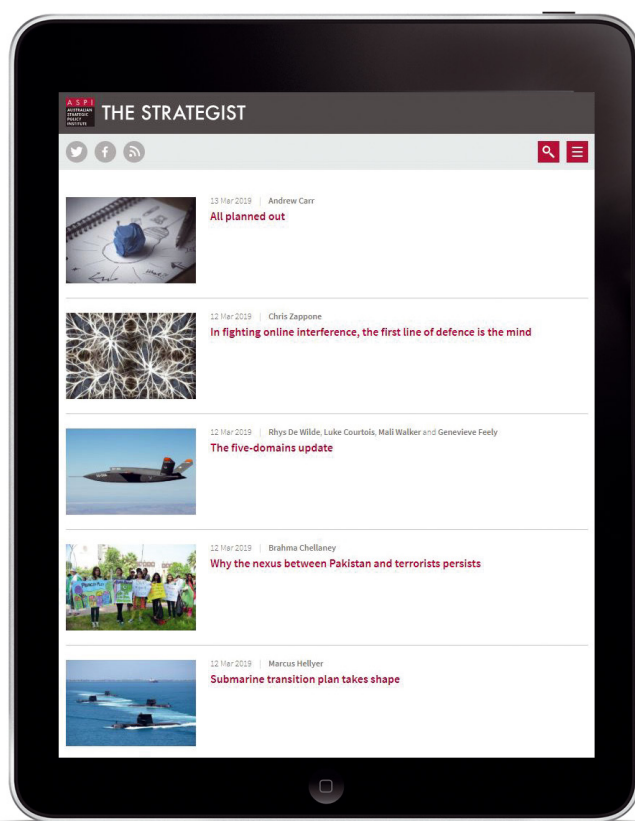


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