International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

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ARTICLE TITLE	UNDERSTANDING CHINESE STRATEGY
DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4(48).2025.4227
RECEIVED	07 October 2025
ACCEPTED	03 December 2025
PUBLISHED	17 December 2025
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UNDERSTANDING CHINESE STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the roots of Chinese strategic culture and how it influences China's current military and foreign policy decision-making. It examines China's unique geographical position as a "fenced island" bordered by twenty countries, historical experiences of containment by major powers, and deep-rooted cultural traditions to show how these factors shape China's strategic behavior. The study explores two main paradigms in Chinese strategic culture: the Confucian-Mencius focus on defensive warfare and moral justification, and the Parabellum paradigm advocating proactive use of force.

By analyzing China's "four rings" security framework, the Island Chain Strategy, and historical military interventions, the paper argues that Chinese strategic culture is a blend of defensive and opportunistic elements. It highlights how China's strategy is influenced by its concerns about territorial integrity, regional influence, and global order restructuring. Understanding this complex strategic culture is crucial for interpreting China's military modernization, regional assertiveness, and long-term geopolitical goals.

The paper concludes that China's strategic behavior demonstrates strategic flexibility is maintaining a defensive stance while seizing opportunities to advance its interests when circumstances permit.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Strategic Culture, Confucian-Mencius Paradigm, Parabellum Paradigm, Active Defense, Geopolitical Rings, Island Chain Strategy, Just War (Yizhan 义战), Self-Defense Counterattack (ziwei fanji 自卫反击), Strategic Flexibility

CITATION

Erdenechimeg Bor, Zandan Tsetsgee, Khongorzul Mijiddorj (2025) Understanding Chinese Strategy. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 4(48). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.4(48).2025.4227

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Introduction

Anyone who wants to understand China's strategy needs to know its strategic culture, which is rooted in China's history, geography, culture, and mentality. Geographical location is the most important factor determining China's strategy. The People's Republic of China, located on the western coast of the Pacific Ocean, has a land area of 9.6 million square kilometers, of which 3 million square kilometers are occupied by the ocean. It is a country with a unique geographical combination of mainland and ocean, with 6,500 islands with an area of more than 500 square kilometers and a coastline of 18,000 kilometers.

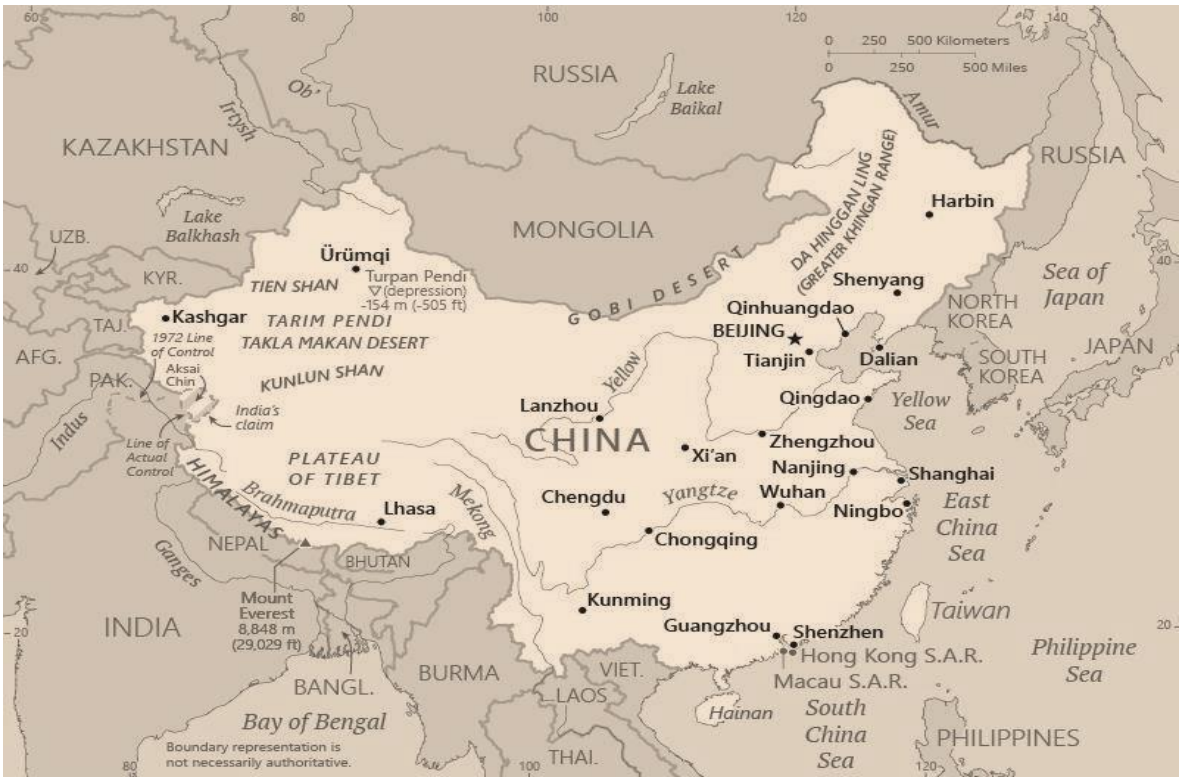

Fig. 1. *People's Republic of China. Source: CIA World factbook*

The US-based Stratfor Research Center's examination of China's geopolitical situation characterizes mainland China as a "fenced island." The mainland is split into two sections: the core and the buffer zone. The core encompasses the Han Chinese area, where the majority of China's population resides, and totaling over 1 billion people. The buffer zone consists of Tibet, the non-Han ethnic group surrounding the core, as well as Xinjiang, the region of the Muslim Uyghur's, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria.[1] This distinctive geographical layout has led to China being referred to as a "fenced island."[2]

China's unique geographical position as the "Middle Kingdom" in the center of Asia, surrounded by 20 countries, including Taiwan, plays a crucial role in shaping its foreign and security policies. This central location offers both advantages, such as facilitating trade and economic development with neighboring countries, and challenges in ensuring security amidst complex regional dynamics. To comprehend China's security, military, and defense strategies, one must consider its geographical context and the implications it has on its policies.

In their book "China's Quest for Security," American China scholars Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell discuss China's security policy and strategy in relation to its unique geographical features. They categorize potential threats to China into four geopolitical zones or "rings."

1. The first ring pertains to mainland China and includes domestic threats as well as regions like Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet.
2. The second ring encompasses 20 countries bordering China, including Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, India, Central Asian countries, and Russia. Taiwan is considered part of both the first and second rings, and the United States is also included in this ring.
3. The third ring consists of regional systems made up of multinational states, such as Northeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, the Southeast Asian mainland, the Southeast Asian Ocean, and Central Asia.
4. The fourth ring covers other regions like Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas.[3]

[1] Ibid.

[2] "The Geopolitics of China: A Great Power Enclosed," March 25, 2012, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-china-great-power-enclosed

[3] Nathan Andrew J and Andrew Scobell. 2014. China's Search for Security Paperback ed. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dividing the geopolitical landscape into four "rings," Nathan and Scobell outlined four strategic objectives for China:

1. *Ring one:* Ensuring territorial integrity by reclaiming lost territory and safeguarding existing territory;
2. *Ring two:* Preventing foreign powers from dominating Asia and enhancing China's influence in the region;
3. *Ring three:* Fostering economic growth;
4. *Ring four:* Reconfiguring the global order to align with China's interests.

Among these regions, the most strategically significant area for China is its "periphery." With its unique geographical position bordering approximately twenty countries, one of China's primary security priorities is to uphold its sphere of influence in its neighboring countries and regions near its borders, while also preventing adversaries and rivals from expanding their influence in the areas adjacent to China's borders.

China's historical context is another crucial factor shaping its current strategy. Since its establishment in 1949, China has been engaged in a fierce competition with the United States and Russia to maintain its sphere of influence in the region. Following its inception, China became involved in the Korean War, where the two Koreas were unified under American leadership, thwarting China's potential encirclement by the United States along its northeastern border. From the 1950s onwards, the United States intensified its efforts to contain communism in the Asia-Pacific region, forging security agreements with countries like Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and Taiwan, as well as multilateral pacts such as SEATO and ANZUS with Australia and New Zealand.[1] By the mid-1960s, the United States had escalated its involvement in the Vietnam War. To counter American influence on its southern border, China provided assistance to North Vietnam and eventually deployed troops. This led to China's military intervention in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, challenging America's geopolitical containment strategy.

Since the mid-1960s, China has had a strained relationship with Russia, leading to an armed conflict on the island of Zhenbao in the Ussuri River in 1969. For China, straining relations with Russia or becoming hostile is costly and risky due to the need to build up military presence along its 4,000-kilometer border with Russia and the potential risk of nuclear war, as demonstrated by Soviet threats during the Cold War. Despite the nuclear embargo, Russia, as a neighboring country, could potentially inflict more harm on China than the United States. Russia's proximity to China allows it to quickly deploy troops, offer security guarantees to China's smaller neighbors, and contain China both on land and at sea.[2]

During the Sino-Soviet conflict, the Soviet Union effectively implemented a military-political "containment strategy" by encircling China, strengthening ties with North Korea, stationing troops in Mongolia, occupying Afghanistan, supporting India with military aid, forming alliances with Vietnam and Laos, deploying naval forces in Vietnamese ports, and backing Vietnam in its invasion of Cambodia, highlighting the threat it posed to China.

Therefore, since its establishment, the People's Republic of China has had to adopt intelligent and efficient tactics to uphold its sphere of influence in the region and diminish the influence of other major powers like the United States and Russia.

Another crucial element that influences Chinese strategy is the unique characteristics of Chinese culture and mindset. David Lai, an American expert on China, has pointed out that Chinese strategic behavior is distinct from that of Western nations. He used the traditional board game Weiqi (围棋) or Go as an illustration. Chinese Weiqi (围棋) is believed to embody Chinese cultural values in strategic thinking. The saying goes, "The world is as unpredictable as a board game, and we laugh at the brave heroes."[3]

[1] Bor, Erdenechimeg, and Narantsatsral Enkhbat. 2022. "China``s Breakout from Encirclement: Belt and Road Initiative". Mongolian Journal of International Affairs 23 (1):55-60. https://doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v23i1.2432.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "围棋 黑白子点缀莫测的乾坤"http://dzwww.com/2011/dqmjzgh/cfzz/dhz/ys/201112/t20111220_6827523_1.htm

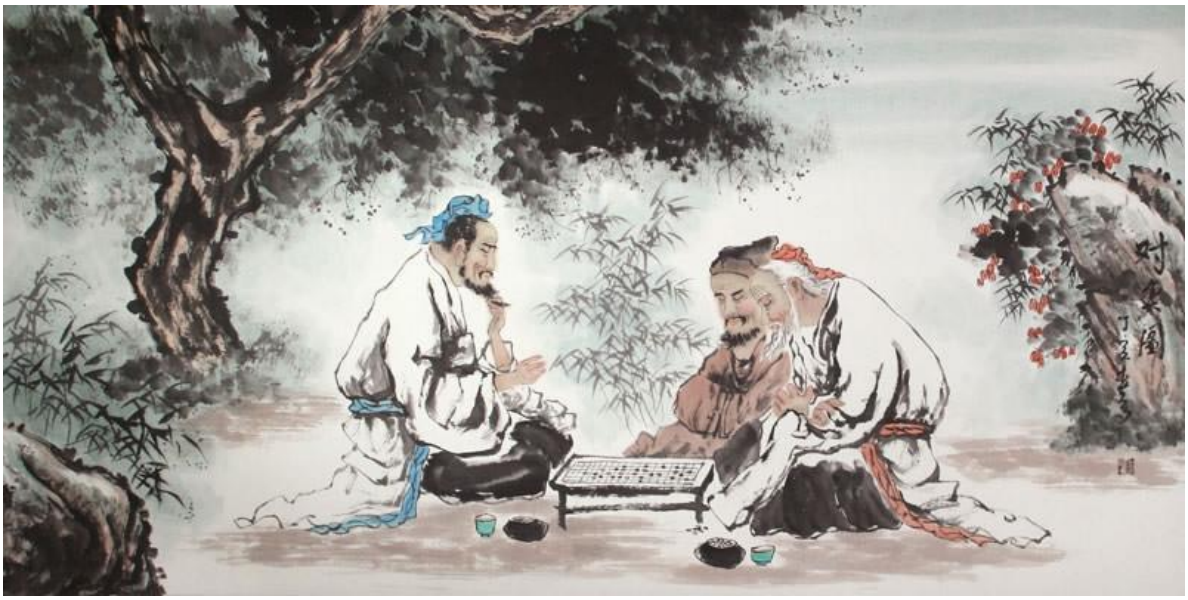

Fig. 2. *People playing board game Weiqi. Source: CGTN, 2017*

The world is always evolving, making it challenging to anticipate future events, and many occurrences are beyond human control. Therefore, the game of Weiqi (围棋) serves as a means to navigate the unpredictable future, formulate strategies and tactics, and analyze the moves of your adversary.[1] To gain insight into Chinese strategic thinking, it is advisable to learn how to play Weiqi (围棋), as endorsed by Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State and National Security Advisor.[2] The "One Belt, One Road" initiative, spearheaded by current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, can be viewed as a methodical and assertive approach to expanding Chinese influence in the Western arena through trade, investment, infrastructure, and other avenues, akin to strategic moves on a weiqi (围棋) board game.[3]

In contrast to Western chess, where the objective is total annihilation of the opponent, in weiqi (围棋), players vie for strategic positions and territories to enhance their sphere of influence, employing a strategy of encirclement.[4] David Lai has analogized the Sino-American rivalry in the Asia-Pacific to weiqi (围棋) or checkers, illustrating China's maneuvers in territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan crisis.[5]

If we view the Asia-Pacific region as a game of weiqi (围棋), the East and South China Seas as well as Taiwan serve as the forefront of China's military-strategic maneuvers. The Chinese military's "Island Line Strategy" can be likened to a strategic game of weiqi (围棋). According to the "Science of Military Strategy (zhanlue xue 成法学) (2013)," an official publication outlining China's military strategy by the PLA Academy of Military Science, China's active defense strategy is centered on "frontline defense."[6] This concept entails positioning the battlefield and battle area far from China's borders and coastlines. Since 2013, a significant shift in China's military strategy has been observed, moving away from the traditional focus on defending the country's borders and coastlines towards organizing combat operations in distant locations from the mainland, national borders, and coasts.[7]

[1] Ibid.
[2] David Lai, "China's Strategic Moves and Counter-Moves," Parameters 44, no. 4 (2014):12.
[3] "How China is beating the US in geopolitical board game," January 31, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3119753/how-china-beating-us-geopolitical-board-game
[4] David Lai, "China's Strategic Moves and Counter-Moves," Parameters 44, no. 4 (2014):12.
[5] Ibid.
[6] McReynolds, Joe, ed. China's Evolving Military Strategy. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
[7] Ibid.

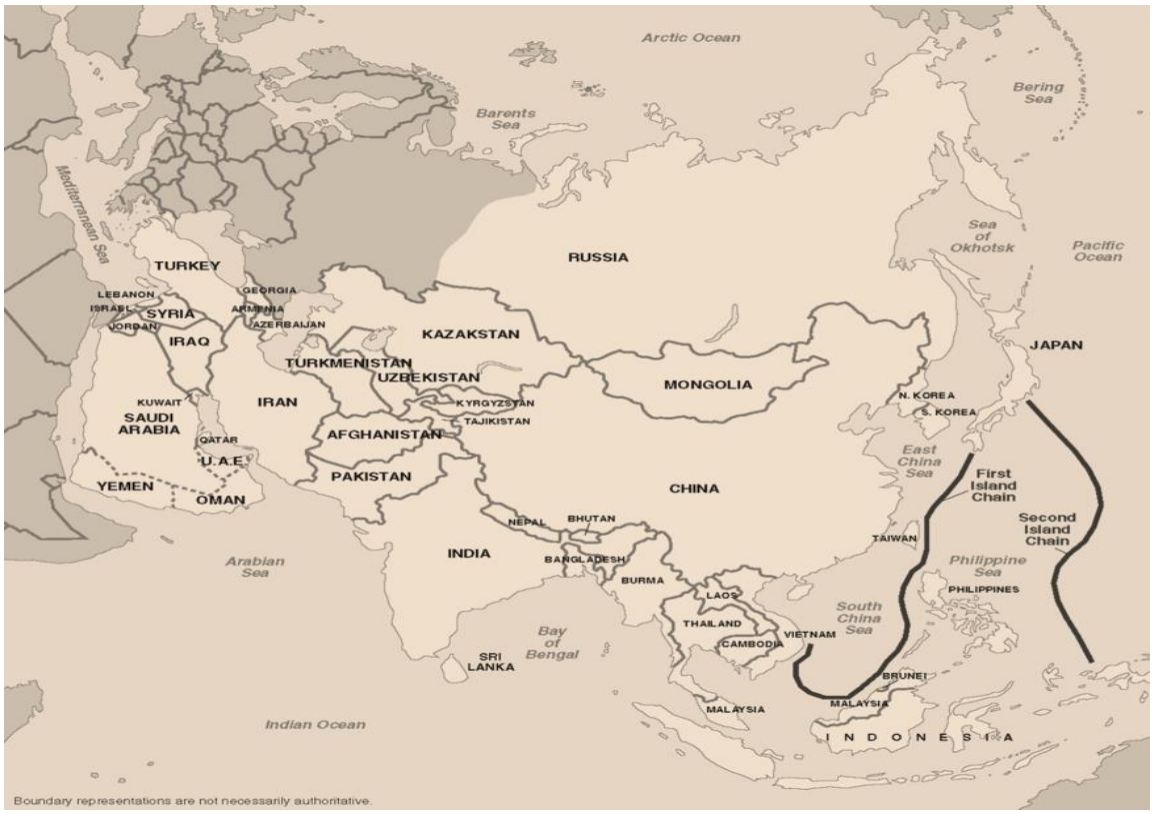

Fig. 3. *Island line strategy. Source: Wikipedia 2006*

The first island chain includes the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia (from Borneo to Natuna).[1] The second island chain starts from the Kuril Islands and passes through Japan to the Bonin Islands, the Mariana Islands, the Caroline Islands, and Indonesia.[2] The two island chains are 3,333 km (1,800 nautical miles) from the Chinese coast.

The PLA Navy has been increasing its combat capabilities in the "two island chains" in line with the military reform under the "offshore defense" strategy. According to the classic strategy of Weiqi (围棋), China aims to gain strength and strategic advantages in the first island chain and gradually strengthen the second island chain.

Thus, factors such as geographical location, historical experience, lessons, and cultural thinking determine China's strategic landscape. Most importantly, it is important to understand how China views itself and others.

Chinese Strategic Culture

Strategic culture (**zhanlüe wenhua (战略文化)** plays a crucial role in determining a country's response to external threats. Understanding China's military strategy requires a deep understanding of its strategic culture. According to Lieutenant General Li Zhijun, former vice president of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, "Culture forms the basis of strategy. Strategic thinking is ingrained in a nation's strategic culture through its historical development." The strategic culture of a nation reflects its cultural traditions and shapes its strategic approach.[3]

Alastair Ian Johnston defined strategic culture as a coherent system of symbols that shape a conception of the role of military force in international political relations. This system creates a common, long-term strategic vision by framing this conception with facts that make strategic choices appear real and effective. [4]

[1] "People's Liberation Navy - Offshore Defense" https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/plan-doctrine-offshore.htm

[2] Ibid.

[3] Andrew Scobell, China and Strategic Culture (Carlisle, PA: U.S. War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2002)

[4] Johnston, Alastair Iain, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China," in P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996),

Johnston identified two main components of strategic culture. The first component involves understanding the chaos of the strategic environment, including the role of war in human relations, the nature of conflict, the level of threat, and the effectiveness of military force. These elements form the main paradigm of strategic culture. The second component focuses on practical strategic choices within the threat environment described in the main paradigm. At this level, strategic culture directly influences a country's behavior.

There are two prevailing currents in Chinese strategic culture: the Confucian-Mencius paradigm and the Parabellum realpolitik paradigm. The Confucian-Mencius paradigm emphasizes non-aggression, peaceful approaches, and the use of military force only when necessary, advocating for "suppressing the enemy without fighting." In contrast, the Parabellum paradigm, derived from the Latin phrase "Si vis pacem, para bellum" or "If you want peace, prepare for war," promotes aggressive and offensive strategies. Some scholars view China as a peaceful and gentle strategic actor based on the Confucian-Mencius paradigm, while others argue that China's peaceful image is a facade for its underlying aggressive nature. This debate has sparked ongoing discussions among scholars analyzing China's security and military strategies.

In recent years, a new trend has emerged that challenges the dominance of one paradigm and views China's strategic culture as a blend of both preemptive and parabellum approaches. Studying strategic culture is crucial for gaining insight into Chinese policy and strategy by considering the unique characteristics of Chinese history, culture, and tradition. In essence, comprehending China's strategic culture is essential for understanding its military defense policy and strategy.

Confucian-Mencius Emphasis on Self-Respect.

Chinese strategic culture has its roots in the Warring States period, a time when military strategy texts like Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" were written. Scholars of the time debated ways to prevent war and improve rulers' governance strategies, with some becoming state advisors. This era is known as the "Age of Philosophers" or the "School of Hundred Orders." The Confucian-Mencius paradigm in Chinese strategic culture emphasizes prioritizing peace and resolving conflicts through non-violent means. Confucius, born in 551 BC, advocated for a government based on compassion, justice, and morality as the key to national security. His teachings were continued by Mencius, who was revered as the second sage.

Huiyun Feng,[1] an expert in Chinese strategic culture, noted that Confucianism emphasizes peaceful resolution of conflicts through diplomacy and negotiation, rather than resorting to force. He highlighted that Sun Tzu, a renowned military strategist, advocated achieving political objectives without engaging in direct combat, as seen in his famous quote "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." Sun Tzu's influential work, The Art of War, written around 400 BC during the Warring States Period, is considered to embody both military strategy and Confucian principles. Chinese military texts emphasize that a state's strength is not solely derived from power but also from ethical conduct.

If morality is absent, one will not be in alignment with heaven and will not achieve success in warfare. Therefore, warfare is deemed immoral, and it is only justified to engage in war under necessary circumstances and for just causes. Leaders who engage in war for just causes are assured of divine blessings and victory, with just causes including defending the country from invasion and destruction. However, waging war for the purpose of conquest is not well-received by the populace. Engaging in war for just causes is valued by the people and promotes internal harmony. Maintaining domestic peace and stability has been a crucial concern for Chinese rulers and leaders throughout history. Sun Tzu also emphasizes the importance of resorting to military force as a last option in unavoidable situations, "attacking the enemy's strategy," and achieving victory through strategic means.

In his book "Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making," Huiyun Feng emphasized the significant influence of Confucius on Chinese strategic culture, describing it as a deep-rooted philosophical foundation and a systematic process. He noted that Confucius' influence has shaped Chinese strategic thinking since the Sun Tzu era, manifesting in three key principles: non-aggression (feigong 非攻), defense (fangyu 防御), and just war (yizhan 义战), which together form the core of Chinese strategic culture.[2] Furthermore, Feng argued that the Confucian-Mencius paradigm does not always advocate for pacifism, but rather supports the idea of engaging in "just" wars to punish aggressors and protect one's own interests.

[1] Huiyun Feng, Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 18-20.

[2] Ibid.

Parabellum Paradigm

The Parabellum paradigm suggests that China's strategic approach is aggressive and willing to use military force. According to American strategist Michael Pillsbury, China's strategy is characterized by deception. The Confucian-Mencius paradigm is seen as a deliberate effort to mask China's true intentions and make others believe it is self-centered.[1]

Alastair Ian Johnston argues that Chinese strategic culture encompasses both the Confucian-Mencius self-centered and the parabellum paradigms, with the latter being more dominant. He asserts that the parabellum paradigm is China's primary strategy, while the Confucian-Mencius self-centered paradigm serves as a precursor.[2]Johnston emphasizes the importance of "flexibility" in understanding China's strategic behavior.

Strategic flexibility is the capacity to capitalize on opportunities by transitioning from defensive to offensive strategies. The Chinese term for "crisis" **(weiji 危机)** combines the characters for "danger" and "opportunity." Within Chinese strategic culture, this signifies the inclination to generate opportunities amidst perilous circumstances while confronting external challenges. Essentially, Chinese strategic culture is marked by a degree of adaptability, aiming to anticipate worst-case scenarios while pursuing optimal outcomes in response to threats.[3]

Therefore, Alastair Ian Johnston determined that China's soft strategy is a result of China strategically evaluating its environment and recognizing advantageous circumstances for its offensive strategy. When these circumstances are present, China transitions from a soft approach to a more assertive one. An opportune period, for instance, is when China is at least as strong as its opponent.

As China's military strength grows, there is increasing speculation about the level of aggression it may exhibit. While Beijing promotes "peaceful development," some realist perspectives suggest that China could become more assertive as it gains power. This has led to neorealist theories about a power shift between China and the United States, potentially leading to conflicts for dominance in the international system.

Alastair Johnston conducted a study on the potential for China to participate in armed conflict, utilizing the University of Michigan's "Correlates of War" database to examine China's involvement in interstate armed conflicts from 1949 to 1992. The study aimed to assess the probability of China resorting to military action against another country or becoming embroiled in armed conflict. According to the study, China is inclined to use military force or engage in armed conflict when dissatisfied with the existing international order, particularly in cases involving territorial disputes or conflicts. Essentially, China employs military force to uphold regional stability and safeguard its influence.[4]

Scholars like Huiyun Feng and Scobell have challenged Johnston's study, contending that China's strategy is defensive in nature, as it primarily employs military force to safeguard its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Scobell further argues against characterizing China's strategic culture within a singular paradigm, proposing instead that it is a blend of the ei-oriented and parabellum paradigms. In this perspective, China utilizes military force for self-defense (ziwei fanji 自卫反击) rather than offensive purposes.

China's involvement in the Korean war is perceived by other countries as Chinese intervention on the Korean Peninsula, while China views it as a "self-defense counterattack" (ziwei fanji 自卫反击) in response to the United States' actions in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. Similarly, in 1979, China justified its attack on Vietnam as a "self-defense counterattack" (ziwei fanji 自卫反击) to initiate the Sino-Vietnamese war.[5] Scobell highlights that China's military strategy is primarily defensive, with a preference for using force in self-defense rather than engaging in belligerent or aggressive behavior like other major powers.[6] In Chinese strategic culture, there is a traditional concept of a "just" or "righteous" war, which involves striking into

[1] Yasuhiro Matsuda, "China's Strategic Culture Hypothesis: Pursuing the Mystery of a Unique Idea," July 27, 2022, https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/column/2022/07/china-fy2021-11.html#sdendnote2sym

[2] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China," in P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), the Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Johnston, Alastair Iain. 1998. "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behavior 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data." The China Quarterly 153 (March): 1–30.

[5] Andrew Scobell, China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[6] Ibid.

enemy territory first to defend one's homeland and territory.[1] This concept, known as just war (yizhan 义战) in China, is rooted in the Confucian-Mencius paradigm of yi, which emphasizes the use of military force based on righteous standards when it is deemed "inevitable." The goal of such a war is to combat aggressors who have initiated hostilities or to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak. According to Confucian principles, maintaining high moral standards (yi) is crucial for garnering public support and fostering unity among the people. Chinese political and military leaders firmly believe that engaging in war without a just cause will ultimately lead to defeat (buyi zhi shi, bi zibi 不义之师，必自毙)and that the use of force should be justified by a righteous purpose (shichu youming 师出有名). In the event of conflict, China's strategic approach remains defensive, with a focus on using force to punish, deter, and subdue the enemy rather than seeking total destruction.[2]

In China's concept of just war **(yizhan 义战)**, the notion of "punitive war" **(fazhan 伐战)** holds significant importance. This traditional belief portrays China as a nation that values peace and only resorts to military action to suppress perceived threats. The idea of using "punitive war" to quell aggressive and violent elements suggests that China is not inherently inclined towards warfare, but rather employs military force as a means of discipline when provoked by external forces. This traditional perspective evolved into a more modern form during the communist era in China, shaping the fundamental principle of the country's current military strategy known as "active defense," which emphasizes a defensive approach. For instance, the 1979 Vietnam War is viewed as a lesson for Vietnam, which was accused of acts deemed as "treasonous," such as violating China's borders and mistreating and expelling ethnic Chinese residents.

The 1962 India-China border conflict has been characterized as a "punitive war," a military campaign aimed at teaching India a lesson for what China perceived as repeated violations of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. This perspective is primarily held by Chinese scholars, though there are differing interpretations of the conflict. Essentially, a "punitive war" involves military actions intended to educate a nation that China views as aggressive and obstinate.

Therefore, there is an increasing tendency in research to analyze China's foreign policy and security decision-making through the lens of strategic culture. Whether China's strategic heritage aligns with the Confucian-Mencius concept of harmony or the Parabellum approach of using force to further its interests, the key is to comprehend China's self-perception and its perception of others in order to grasp its strategic actions.

Conclusions

Understanding China's strategy requires a comprehensive analysis of the interconnected factors that influence its strategic culture: geography, history, and cultural traditions. China's geographical position as a continental-maritime power surrounded by twenty countries creates opportunities and vulnerabilities that impact its security calculations. The "four rings" concept illustrates how China prioritizes threats and opportunities in concentric zones, with territorial integrity and regional influence as key concerns. Historical experiences have significantly influenced Chinese strategic thinking. Encounters with American containment policy, border conflicts with the Soviet Union, and military interventions in Korea and Vietnam have reinforced the importance of maintaining influence in its periphery while deterring rival powers. This has shaped a strategic mindset that is defensive yet opportunistic.

The analysis of Chinese strategic culture challenges the notion of a strict Confucian-Mencius versus Parabellum dichotomy. China's strategic culture embodies flexibility, allowing for a defensive posture while seizing offensive opportunities when favorable. Concepts like "crisis" (weiji 危机) and "just war" (yizhan 义战) demonstrate this strategic adaptability.

China's military strategy of "active defense" blends defensive and offensive elements. The Island Chain Strategy and emphasis on "frontline defense" show China's intent to position potential battlefields away from its borders while extending operational reach. Concepts like "self-defense counterattack" (ziwei fanji 自卫反击) and "punitive war" (fazhan 伐战) frame offensive actions within a defensive narrative.

[1] Andrew Scobell, China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Huiyun Feng, Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 27.

The traditional game of Weiqi (围棋) serves as a metaphor for Chinese strategic behavior, emphasizing gradual expansion through strategic positioning. Initiatives like "One Belt, One Road" and approaches to territorial disputes reflect this patient approach to influence expansion.

As China's economic and military power grows, understanding its strategic culture becomes crucial for international relations. China's strategy is contextual and adaptive, shaped by its assessment of the strategic environment and relative power. When core interests are threatened, China is willing to use military force justified as defensive action.

To anticipate and respond to Chinese strategic behavior, policymakers and scholars must grasp these cultural and historical foundations. China's actions should be interpreted through its strategic culture, which values patience, moral justification for force, and strategic advantage accumulation. Appreciating this complexity is key to assessing China's intentions and managing great power competition effectively. Chinese strategy blends ancient wisdom with modern realities, combining moral philosophy with power calculations. As China rises as a major power, its strategic culture will continue to shape regional and global security dynamics. Understanding this culture is essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary international relations.

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