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Filling a Gap in Our Understanding of Chinese Strategy

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Thank you, members of the Commission, for the honor of addressing such a distinguished and thoughtful panel. It's also an honor to be among such a distinguished group of witnesses.

A New Question?

The subject of Chinese military modernization encompasses not only technology or capabilities but also behavior. If we focus solely on the weapons platforms and other kinds of hardware and software that the People's Republic of China (hereafter, "PRC" – or just "China") is pursuing, or even on the size of the Chinese defense budget, then we risk failing to anticipate what China will actually do with its new arsenal. The PRC's behavior is a function of China's approach to strategy – its orientation to war and peace. If we want to know how China will act, we should be asking, What strategic tradition or orientation lies behind the modernization of the Chinese military?

We might think that we know, but the conventional understandings are deficient in that they fail to capture how China has actually behaved in the post-1949 period. On this grounds, we should not be so confident that we can use the extant theories to understand how China will behave in the future.

I'm going to present an alternative theory of Chinese strategy – one that may be new to us but is actually very old for the Chinese. In fact, it's based on ancient philosophical principles – or a particular way of looking at the world and man's place in it – that has shaped Chinese politics through the ages. An approach that is derived from what I believe to be the Chinese understanding of strategy casts strategy as a matter of aligning with dominant tendencies, or the propensity of things, as the French scholar François Jullien has suggested.

The Chinese term for this is *shi*, which figures prominently in Sun Zi's *Art of War*. A *shi* strategy depends on the possession of an intelligence advantage designed to allow for catching enemies off-guard through dramatic shifts in policy or sudden, crippling attacks.

This might seem vague, but in fact it differs from the prevailing perspectives on Chinese strategy with regard to the expectations it sets out for Chinese behavior. So let me first turn to these other theories – by way of explaining what *shi* is not – and then I'll say more about what *shi* is, how it has worked in practice, and what this implies for US policy.

A natural way to approach the question of strategy is to put ourselves in Hu Jintao's shoes and ask, What would we do? We have plenty of models about how states, including China, behave, and these frameworks are built largely on our own experiences. Perhaps the most popular model for understanding the PRC today is as a "rising power." If we were in China's shoes, we would choose policies that would serve our continued economic growth. As long as we were rising (and had not yet "arrived"), we would seek to avoid conflict, though we might hedge by investing in a minimal deterrent capacity, for instance, the military assets necessary to keep Taiwan from declaring independence or the US from intervening in the event of such a declaration. (The Princeton scholar Aaron Friedberg describes this outlook and some variations on it in his latest *International Security* article.)

A second perspective starts from a different idea of what drives China's strategy but leads to the same conclusion about Chinese behavior. This increasingly influential perspective, associated with the work of Allen Carlson and Taylor Fravel, is that fears of internal unrest will keep China's rulers preoccupied at home, determined to avoid conflict abroad in order to concentrate on putting the domestic house in order.

But the record of China's post-1949 behavior does not fit with either model. If the first framework suggests that China is sensitive to its relative power and will shrink from confrontation with militarily superior states, then how do we explain the PRC's aggression against the US in Korea or against the Soviets at Zhenbao Island in 1969? Taking on superpowers hardly seems like the product of a generic realist calculus. And the idea that China will not fight external wars while internal unrest looms large does not square with the record of Chinese initiation of conflict in 1949-1950, when Mao had yet to consolidate the Civil War victory, or in 1969, when China took on the Soviets at the height of the Cultural Revolution, or in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping attacked Vietnam shortly after taking power – before he had necessarily consolidated his position. In fact, Iain Johnston of Harvard once did a study showing that in the post-World War II period, of major powers, the Chinese were most likely to escalate in international crises.

The *Shi* Strategic Framework

So perhaps an alternative theory would better capture how China has behaved in the last half-century. The *shi* theory of strategy has the virtue of being an attempt to see the world in the way that the Chinese see it. Unlike our way of thinking about strategy as a matter of picking a goal – for instance, in the above examples, peace – and then figuring out how to achieve it, the Chinese approach does not feature such an overarching objective looming in the distance. Rather, acting strategically in China means taking actions that make sense in light of the predominant tendencies at any given moment. So as trends seem to be going – either favorably or unfavorably for China – so goes Chinese strategy. Effectively, again, this makes the Chinese capable of rapid shifts in alliances, diplomatic postures, and even states of war or peace. And it militates toward being ready at the outset of hostilities to inflict a debilitating blow – as a matter of exploiting the favorable propensity of things because if you are mindful propensity, by the time you fight, you should have already won, as Sun Zi says.

Where does this approach come from? Jullien traces the idea of *shi* to ancient Chinese philosophy, which downplays men's ability to master nature, holding that circumstances and events unfold inexorably according to a sacred, virtually unfathomable order. And Jullien traces the first concrete application of the concept of "the propensity of things" to the moment of China's political founding at the end of the Warring States period (c. 220 BC), when a school of philosophers known as the "Legalists" (even though their theory is tyrannical, not liberal) articulated how to confine subjects to the position of supplicants – according to the *propensity* of the sovereign's authority. Many of the texts now known as Chinese military classics, including Sun Zi's *Art of War*, date to this time and might be said to specify the mechanisms of rule in accordance with *shi* – from extensive surveillance to the wielding of punishments and rewards in an awe-inspiring way to keep the population in line. China's first unifier, Qin Shi Huangdi, founder of the Qin Dynasty, is supposed to have exploited these techniques to consolidate control over his own kingdom and then conquer the others. Emperor Qin and his successors were in the position of constantly deploying strategy against their own people, so the application of *shi* as a strategic precept spans categories that Westerners usually divide into the political on the one hand and the military on the other. This continuity means that the Chinese approach to external warfare features practices perhaps most easily employed at home – for instance, intelligence, bribery and other methods of cooption, and the targeting of leaders of hostile groups. It is not a coincidence that, among canonical works on strategy, Sun Zi's *Art of War* and other Chinese classics accord espionage and sabotage unusually prominent roles.

In terms of operational hallmarks, then, the lynchpin of the *shi* approach to strategy is superior information, an intelligence advantage. The PRC has to know, better than its rivals and enemies, what the dominant trends are. So Chinese strategy should place a large emphasis on spying and depriving competitors of equivalent information about itself – through concealment and deception. The evolving nature of China's strategy means that we cannot frame the PRC as either "status quo" or "revisionist" and leave it at that. The Chinese will be constantly revising their goals. And this should resonate with readers of Sun Zi because, as François Jullien points out, the *Art of War* is about using intelligence to figure out the propensity of things while keeping the enemy from doing the same.

So let me just suggest how this applies in practice. When we look at the record of Chinese behavior we should see 1) a willingness to make abrupts shifts; 2) an emphasis on information dominance and deception; and 3) plans designed to undermine enemies at the outset of hostilities.

Does this capture the PRC's history? I think the answer is "yes." In terms of shifting alliances and diplomatic postures, we can refer to the way that Mao entertained British and American overtures in 1949 only to take on the allied coalition in Korea. We could also consider Bandung in 1955, which appeared to be a charm offensive aimed partly at India, though by 1962, China had secretly built a road near the Sino-Indian border and completed preparations for war. Or, in very recent memory, we could observe how the

Chinese have shifted from a militarized policy toward Taiwan in the mid-1990s to, of late, a kind of sunshine policy involving courting Taiwanese opposition leaders.

The emphasis on intelligence superiority is difficult to find in the historical record because of the sensitive nature of the subject, but one way we can see it is in its association with the third pillar of *shi*, undermining enemies at the outset of hostilities, because this requires keeping targets in the dark about inimical intentions or modes of fighting. The Chinese have a record of initiating war by surprise – trying to undo the enemy with an opening gambit that will ensure victory. (For an exploration of examples from Korea and Zhenbao Island to offshore islands episodes, see my November 2005 Long-Term Strategy Project report on Chinese surprise attacks, “Regimes, Surprise Attacks, and War Initiation,” and a subsequent workshop report on the same subject.) For the sake of time, let me just take a few seconds on Korea now.

Korea – and the disaster that befell coalition forces in late November 1950 – has been seen as an example of American provocation or, at least, failure to heed a warning sent by the Chinese through the Indian ambassador on the eve of the Chinese intervention. We now know that the Chinese planned for entering Korea much earlier than we had earlier believed. In fact, the Chinese knew about Kim Il Sung’s intention to invade much earlier than we had previously known. And we now know that the word Zhou used at his meeting with the Indian ambassador, where the threat was relayed, was a deliberately vague term. So what happened in November 1950 looks less about American provocation and more about a Chinese effort to ensure success through surprise – manipulating our expectations and concealing preparations for the ambush.

Applications and Policy Implications

How ingrained is the *shi* approach to strategy? Maybe today the Chinese are becoming so wealthy or “free market”-ized that their strategic orientation is changing. But maybe not. I don’t think we know. An important clue will be what the Chinese government thinks about its position vis-à-vis its subjects. How domestically secure Beijing is is bound up with *shi* because, as I mentioned above, the *shi* approach grows out of the Chinese regime. If Chinese elite politics continues to be a province of close monitoring of the population and “surprise attacks” against key dissidents, then we should be attuned to the persistence of the *shi* approach abroad.

The first major policy implication is that we should not base our attempts to influence China on expectations based on linear projections from recent behavior. Rather, we should be humble and recognize that our signals could be misread because we are dealing with a different kind of regime, or, at least, depending on the persistence of *shi*, a regime with a different approach to strategy.

The second policy implication is that the *shi* approach creates an intelligence requirement for us to better understand – and, in particular at the classified level, investigate – Chinese concealment and deception efforts.

The bottom line, in a word, is that attempting to see the world through Beijing's eyes suggests that what the PRC can do by virtue of its military capabilities and what it has done in the recent past are not necessarily guides to what the PRC will do.

Thank you again for having me, and I look forward to your questions.