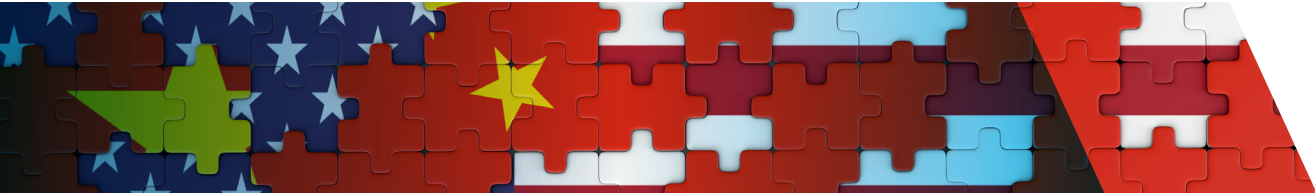




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America's Reactive Foreign Policy:

How U.S. Organizational Culture and Behavior Advantages China

ELLIOT M. SECKLER & TRAVIS ZAHNOW

WINNERS OF THE ANDREW W. MARSHALL PAPER PRIZE ON THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IN COMPETITION



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Foreword

Does the United States understand the competition in which it is engaged? Using China as an example, Elliot Seckler and Travis Zahnow make a critical contribution to understanding how America's organizational and cultural behavior might negatively impact the long-term competitions facing the United States. In the authors' words, "If no one addresses the questions raised by this paper, U.S. decision makers may continue with a reactive foreign policy, leaving the United States vulnerable to being shaped by its adversaries in disadvantageous ways."

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.





Terminology

Organizational behavior: the study of the impact of the behavior of individuals, groups, and structures within organizations.¹

Organizational culture: a pattern of shared basic assumptions that is learned by a group as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration; works well enough to be valid; and therefore, taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.²

Competitive strategy: a method of developing one's own strategy and evaluating an adversary's strategy in long-term competition. The key is to identify and pit enduring friendly strengths against enduring adversary strengths and weaknesses, while executing the strategy over a time horizon of five to 15 years into the future.³

Inverted strategy: a strategy in which the strategist defines their interests in terms of perceptions of the adversary's threats. Perceived threats shape the strategist's interests and expose the strategy to manipulation by changes in the adversary's threat perceptions and/or actions.⁴

This paper critiques the U.S. foreign policy community's approach to strategic competition with China and raises a crucial question: Is the U.S. government basing strategic competition with China on U.S. interests, or is it reacting in ways that advance the strategic goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?

This paper argues that, because of its organizational culture, the U.S. foreign policy community approaches strategic competition in ways that disadvantage the United States. Through an analysis of the political, military, economic, and psychological condition of U.S. foreign policy, this paper posits that the United States has formed a reactive strategy toward China that leaves it vulnerable to China's own competitive strategies. Through exploring historical examples and contemporary issues such as Taiwan and integrated deterrence, an underlying pattern emerges. Because it has ill-defined objectives and definitions of success, brought about largely by organizational factors, the United States is developing a reactionary foreign policy that is susceptible to CCP strategies, interests, and advantages. While this paper does not provide a definitive answer, it diagnoses American susceptibility to Chinese strategic manipulation and highlights the need for the United States to develop a more proactive and well-defined strategy to counter China's competitive strategies effectively.⁵



“The issues addressed in this paper will hopefully give pause to the U.S. foreign policy community and engender discussions and debate about the current momentum of decisions and the direction of foreign policy making.”

Preface

The United States is engaged in a complex, long-term competition with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Xi Jinping and the PRC are the greatest threat to the United States, which needs to think of the competition in terms of decades, not years. The challenge of competing in an uncertain future must shape future U.S. strategies and plans.

A paper that explores whether U.S. strategy toward China is based on U.S. interests or whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is shaping how it wants the U.S. government and its leaders to operate is a momentous task. The issues addressed in this paper will hopefully give pause to the U.S. foreign policy community and engender discussions and debate about the current momentum of decisions and the direction of foreign policy making. If articulated sufficiently, this paper should spur the designs of future assessments that will test the merits of the arguments laid forth here. In an ideal world, further studies will prove the arguments in this paper to be wrong—only then will the current course of U.S. actions prove to have been the appropriate strategy and policy for dealing with China. If no one addresses the questions raised by this paper, U.S. decision makers may continue with a reactive foreign policy, leaving the United States vulnerable to being shaped by its adversaries in disadvantageous ways.

This paper calls for the United States to shake off organizationally incentivized impatience and short-term thinking and to conceptualize a long-term strategy for U.S. foreign policy. It will be difficult to get the foreign policy community to understand the essence of this paper and become interested in discussing its questions, arguments, and diagnoses. This is because the organizational culture and behavior of the foreign policy community has become homogeneous through successive generations of analysts, strategists, and policy makers. We need to have this conversation.

Our goal is not to provide a prescription for policy makers, but to diagnose the susceptibility of the United States to its adversaries’ competitive strategies. We are trying to follow the example of Andrew Marshall and ensure the right question is being asked. We hope to focus the discussion on first-order questions that underpin any competition and to establish whether the United States understands all aspects of the competition in which it is currently engaged.

By design and necessity, this conceptual paper relies more on contemporary policy examples than on quantitative studies. The questions it raises and analyzes are not being discussed at the moment, nor have they been for some decades. Therefore, the essential task of the paper is to define and explain the problem. Using quantitative studies and data-driven examples to support the claims in this paper would have confused more than clarified.

The work uses scholarly literature where appropriate, including journal articles, books, speeches, news articles, and primary source material from U.S. and Chinese government databases. It synthesizes a broad array of information from multiple sources to mitigate bias and to develop a more complete analytical picture.

This paper diagnoses the current condition of U.S. foreign policy making as being shaped by organizational culture and behavior. Congressional and executive branch initiatives and policies illustrate the current foreign policy psyche. They are an accurate representation of what the nation's decision makers and foreign policy community are thinking and doing.

This paper has two major limitations. Neither author speaks nor reads Chinese. We worked to overcome this by relying on translated and published work. Further, the paper uses no classified material. An unclassified paper is more available to a wider audience, and regardless of where the sources of information lie, the question being raised in the paper merits national consideration.

“If no one addresses the questions raised by this paper, U.S. decision makers may continue with a reactive foreign policy, leaving the United States vulnerable to being shaped by its adversaries in disadvantageous ways.”



Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the greatest current challenge to the United States and the international order it established after 1945. Despite the foreign policy community's recognition of this challenge and the mounting evidence that supports this conclusion, the United States still lacks a clear set of objectives for dealing with China. Instead, the U.S. foreign policy community has taken a short-term, reactive approach rather than creating an active plan that supports long-term U.S. interests. A fear of not responding to China's threats guides U.S. interactions with China more than anything else. This causes the United States to execute its foreign policy through a negative criterion of what to preserve and deny from happening now, rather than on how to secure its own future interests.

Accurately identifying the challenges that the United States faces in its competition with China is crucial if the United States hopes to compete effectively in the coming decades. U.S. administrations, bureaucratic organizations, and seasoned analysts have framed their strategies, policies, and plans toward China primarily on scenarios involving Taiwan or the Indo-Pacific region. But instead, they must first ask questions about the underlying principles on which the United States has developed its national and military policies and strategies—and toward what end.

The argument advanced here is that the U.S. foreign policy community, driven by the PRC and reinforced by its own organizational behavior, approaches strategic competition in ways that are not helpful to the United States. While some have explored long-term competition from a PRC perspective, few have explored it from a U.S. organizational perspective and its impact on the U.S.-PRC competition.⁶ We assess the role that government organizations play in forming foreign policy and strategy within the context of strategic competition with China and explore historical and contemporary examples of organizational culture. In doing so, this paper builds upon what Graham Allison identified about the behavior of governments and their organizations:

Governments perceive problems through organizational sensors. [They] define alternatives and estimate consequences as their component organization's process information; governments act as these organizations enact routines. Governmental behavior can therefore be understood... less as deliberate choices and more as outputs of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior.⁷

In developing the argument, this paper makes four contributions. First, we identify the role that U.S. organizational culture plays in strategy formulation. Second, we highlight how organizational culture and behavior lead to a reactive foreign policy that the competitive strategies of the United States' adversaries can shape. Third, we discuss the connection between organizational culture, reactive foreign policy, and competitive strategies. Finally, we offer implications for the future and areas for additional research.

“... the U.S. foreign policy community has taken a short-term, reactive approach rather than creating an active plan that supports long-term U.S. interests.”

“... is the CCP manipulating what the United States believes is in its national interests in disadvantageous ways for long-term competition?”

The Current State of Strategy Formation

The foreign policy community, comprising both analysts and senior government leaders, has focused its policy making, as well as military and diplomatic contingency planning, on a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific, centered on Taiwan. Most U.S. foreign policy decision makers believe the defense of Taiwan is in the United States’ interests. They cite the strategic need to maintain the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments and the economic importance of Taiwan to the United States and the region (including reliance on microchips). However, the question remains: is the CCP manipulating what the United States believes is in its national interests in disadvantageous ways for long-term competition?

Admiral Phil Davidson’s convincing remarks before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2021 stated that China could invade Taiwan by 2027. What is now known as the “Davidson Window” of vulnerability has become the central reference point and tangible justification for foreign policy planning and attention.⁸ President Joe Biden said China is “already flirting with danger right now by flying so close and all the maneuvers that are undertaken.”⁹ When asked during a May 2022 press conference in Tokyo whether the United States would defend Taiwan if China used military force, President Biden explicitly affirmed this to be U.S. national policy, contradicting the understood position of strategic ambiguity.¹⁰

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin also affirmed a U.S. military commitment to defend Taiwan within this window of vulnerability and noted: “Our policy hasn’t changed, but unfortunately that doesn’t seem to be true for the PRC.... We see growing coercion from Beijing. We’ve witnessed a steady increase in provocative and destabilizing military activity near Taiwan.”¹¹ Secretary of State Antony Blinken has expressed that it is imperative the United States defend Taiwan because China’s provocative military actions threaten global peace and regional stability.¹²

It might seem simple or obvious to acknowledge that this is the current sentiment among the heads of the organizations in charge of developing and executing U.S. foreign policy. However, it implies something quite significant about how default behavior, influenced by organizational culture, is shaping a reactive foreign policy. The fixation on Taiwan is now the central element upon which America’s strategic competition with China is being formed and executed. The Russian invasion of Ukraine only reinforced thinking in the U.S. foreign policy community that the rivalry with China will be determined by contingency planning centered on the traditional use of force.

In every formal strategy over the past five years—the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the 2021 Interim NSS, the 2022 NSS, and the 2022 NDS—U.S. national policy is based on the actions of the Chinese government and the threats it perceives from those actions. Chinese island building, creation of Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) systems, diplomatic and economic engagement with key small



Indo-Pacific states, and consistent harassment of Taiwan's territory have prompted this heightened investment of attention and resources into preparing for and deterring a conflict.

The germination of this national framing is apparent within the military, which is rethinking its organizational force structure, operational concepts, and investments in capabilities. The Marines, for example, are redesigning their force with smaller, more lethal, and more distributed units. According to General David Berger, the Marines intend to "[haul] ground-based anti-ship missiles around island chains... or [shoot] down aircraft or even [detect] and [fire] upon submarines going through chokepoints."¹³

The Military Services are undergoing significant changes, driven by the Joint Warfighting Concept's operational element. Their aim is to revitalize the U.S. military's organization, training, and equipment, as well as to develop new war-fighting concepts and doctrines. According to General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, these changes are necessary to "address strategic conflict," particularly China's military actions, including those of the People's Liberation Army in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.¹⁴ The key issue is not the reorientation of military operations and doctrine per se but the speed and scale at which it is being pursued with elements such as long-range strike capabilities or Joint All-Domain Command and Control.

This concurrent spending of time, attention, and resources illuminates a broader issue. Because there is no overarching aim to strategic competition from a national policy perspective, the organizational culture of the military has, more or less by default, led it to concentrate on planning to deter or win a Taiwan contingency. This should be expected, since the Department of Defense is executing its mission to prepare for and fight wars, if necessary.

This issue is not only apparent in the military. Congress has also dedicated a large amount of its attention to strategic competition with China. It is driving legislation and funding toward deterring or planning for a Taiwan scenario. Through oversight and its power of the purse, Congress is directing strategic competition by setting requirements for the Defense and State departments to follow. For example, the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) not only has language to ensure China cannot execute a fait accompli in Taiwan, but it also tasks the military to provide adequate defensive weapons systems, capabilities, and training to the Taiwanese. The NDAA includes a section "to expedite military assistance to Taiwan in the event of a crisis or conflict."¹⁵

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The Problematic Relationship Between Organizational Culture and Ambiguous Objectives

The military, Department of State, and Congress have shaped the United States' preoccupation with China through an entrenched organizational culture. Organizational culture is an enduring, patterned way in which groups acquire fundamental assumptions and transmit them to new members. The process of cultural transmission continues across successive generations within the organization and can be resistant to change.¹⁶ The development of organizational culture is contingent on how an organization addresses questions such as "What shall we do?" and "What shall we be?"¹⁷ An organization may exhibit more than one dominant culture and may foster multiple subcultures, each arising from a combination of circumstances, beliefs, and interests.¹⁸ Its members, technology, and situational demands shape the distinctive ways in which an organization perceives and responds to the external environment (how it sees and responds to the world), influencing its overall behavior.¹⁹ This holds true if the organization's stated objectives are imprecise or absent. The impact of organizational culture is threefold:²⁰

"... the foreign policy community often defines U.S. national interests through the lens of maintaining the status quo."

1. Organizations prioritize attention to problems they see as significant.
2. Multiple competing sub-cultures may emerge within the organization.
3. Organizations resist undertaking new tasks that challenge their perceived core duties.

The current national foreign policy of the United States is to maintain the status quo. This national policy is meant to safeguard the post-1945 international and regional order that prioritizes rules over force, enables open trade and market access, encourages democratic values, and respects territorial sovereignty.²¹ In fact, the foreign policy community often defines U.S. national interests through the lens of maintaining the status quo. Top officials, including General Mark Milley, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have emphasized this objective, with Blinken best articulating that "[the U.S. stands] strongly against anyone taking unilateral action to disrupt the status quo by force."²² The U.S. foreign policy community encapsulates this aim as the pursuit of "great power peace" and "managed competition."²³

While the status quo might seem to be a clear objective for the competition, it does not define a policy with a clear end state. What is the metric for success at maintaining the status quo, and who benefits the most from it? The ambiguity of U.S. national policy in what it wants out of maintaining the status quo leaves the bureaucracies that execute that policy free to determine how to achieve an end state or avoid determining it entirely.

"While the status quo might seem to be a clear objective for the competition, it does not define a policy with a clear end state."



American senior policy makers view maintaining peace as synonymous with upholding the existing status quo, which has been favorable to, and has benefited, the United States and most of the world. However, the fundamental flaw in basing foreign policy on the status quo is it forces the United States to use strategies learned in a more stable environment, even when confronted by a more anarchic one. It inherently creates tension with anyone or any state who wants change. The consequences of this approach are two-fold. First, the United States may struggle to adapt to the transforming nature of the international order, too complacent with what has been and unable to see emerging new global dynamics.²⁴ Second, there is a psychological impact and inherent disadvantage associated with adhering to the status quo, where an overreliance on past successes leads to failure when confronting unfamiliar challenges.²⁵ This could also lead to an underestimation of the capabilities and intentions of emerging actors, putting the United States at a major disadvantage in long-term competition.

Simply trying to maintain the status quo has resulted in initiatives and strategies that respond to the actions of the country perceived as the most significant threat to the U.S. national security. In this context, the U.S. foreign policy community has identified the loss of Taiwan as the ultimate threat to the status quo, and it has made identifying the means to prevent this outcome a top priority. Driven by organizational culture, this has led to a disproportionate focus on the scenarios involving Taiwan. Because of this focus, U.S. strategies and initiatives aimed at deterring China's actions in the Indo-Pacific region have been military in nature, with non-military elements of national power relegated to a more subordinate position.

Integrated deterrence, the strategic approach the U.S. foreign policy community adopted from the military, is a prime example of organizations defaulting to the familiar in the absence of defined objectives. While the strategy of integrated deterrence aims to coordinate all elements of national power, its focus on the Taiwan contingencies reflects the inherent challenges of strategic competition in the absence of clear objectives.²⁶ This narrow focus on the Taiwan contingency has resulted in the subordination of nonmilitary elements of national power, such as diplomatic and economic initiatives, to the military component.

Meant to reduce cost and increase interoperability, integrated deterrence aims to increase U.S. capacity by allowing the United States to rely more on allies and partners. While allies and partners help keep China in check, they also create a paradox: the United States reduces some of its own military capabilities while increasing its security commitments to Taiwan and regional allies and partners. This happens as it incorporates new war-fighting concepts and capabilities to respond to contingencies across multiple domains and geographic areas. The problem here is that doing so likely diminishes all other elements of national power, particularly the diplomatic component. CCP leadership understands the vulnerabilities of U.S. deterrence strategy and will maneuver the United States into responding with its time, attention, and resources mainly through military means. Doing so will continue degrading U.S. relative national and economic power.

The paradox in U.S. strategic planning in the Indo-Pacific arises from the process by which integrated deterrence was formed. The Biden administration began implementing the National Defense Strategy in March 2022 before the full National Security Strategy became public in October of the same year. Without a well-defined objective for strategic competition with China, U.S. foreign policy makers focused on Taiwan as the most tangible and significant

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Chinese threat. Worst-case scenarios of military invasion or operations became the framework around which policy makers made investments. As a result, U.S. planning leadership defaulted to the military, the organization best equipped to develop deterrent and war-fighting capabilities for a Taiwan scenario. Secretary of State Blinken even stressed the subordinate role of the Department of State in providing the means for Taiwan to defend itself.²⁷

Integrated deterrence is an example of a policy that does too much with the means, such as commitments, without attempting to respond in a way that aligns those means to more limited resources. The very process by which the United States formed its integrated deterrence approach highlights that it is based on perceptions of what the CCP might do, without consideration at the analytical or strategic level of whether China was seizing the initiative. In order to shape American actions, attention, and investments in the region, the CCP need only understand that ill-defined objectives lead the United States to default to contingency planning. Although integrated deterrence acknowledges that U.S. relative power has decreased to where reliance on allies has become crucial, it extends beyond their ability to fill the perceived gaps. Therefore, it is important to ask how much deterrence is enough. Without fundamental objectives, U.S. commitments could increase in response to PRC threats to upend the status quo.

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Contemporary Inverted Strategy and Organizational Behavior

The United States' current strategy for dealing with China suffers from the same strategic inertia that defined early Cold War strategy formulation. The current order more closely resembles the dynamics that characterized the 1950s than it does something new, so it is useful to recall that period. In April 1950, the National Security Council Study Group released NSC-68, which became the blueprint for U.S. Cold War militarization and the plan to defeat the Soviet Union in strategic competition.²⁸ NSC-68 encouraged the militarization of the theories presented by George Kennan.²⁹ But NSC-68's authors did little to define U.S. interests in terms of the United States, choosing instead to relate them to the threat the Soviet Union posed.

NSC-68 inverted the process of developing strategy.³⁰ The new U.S. grand strategy became an end to itself when it should have been a means to some end. NSC-68 drew its view of American interests from the perception of Soviet threats, not as independently established concepts of basic American interests in the world. NSC-68 solidified a reactive foreign policy. For example, one major consequence of using military force in Vietnam was that doing so transferred control of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. strategic interests to the Soviets.³¹

Current strategy makes many of the same intellectual mistakes as the authors of NSC-68 made in the 1950s. James N. Rosenau explored these arguments when he looked at incremental procedures, innovative outcomes, and environmental change related to habit-driven actors in international environments.³² He argued that individuals, and therefore organizations, are driven by habits shaped by experiences. These habits script the way individuals react and respond to environmental change. Applied to China, this strategy is based on the experiences of the Cold War and its playbook and leaves little room to innovate away from the reactive strategy of that era.

The inversion of strategy stems from a status quo organizational culture and leads to reactive strategy. While the foreign policy apparatus of the United States is complex and dynamic, its policy makers and influencers (i.e., political and military leaders, analysts, and strategists) prefer to maintain and use policies that have worked in the past. They often resist changing or introducing "innovative thinking into the organizational decision-making process."³³ Organizational theory shows that innovation often comes only in reaction to changes in the international environment.³⁴

The U.S. foreign policy community is currently left to ask: What is China going to do next? This mindset of waiting for China's first move cedes the initiative and leaves the United States reacting rather than acting. Reactivity leads to

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being caught unaware of changes in the strategic environment because change only becomes clear after an adversary creates it. Reactivity fits a status quo equilibrium, one that aims only at balancing an adversary’s actions. What Michael Moran asserted 20 years ago remains true: America is adrift on the world stage, lacking ideas and consensus about how it should operate.³⁵ The United States has blurred the lines that define its vital interests. This has led U.S. foreign policy bureaucracies to develop abstract policies that leave the U.S. open to exploitation.

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) system is one example of an organizational culture that can lead to a reactive strategy. The JCS structure places a premium on equal representation for each individual service, forcing them to compete among each other for decisions about strategy, budget, etc. These high-level officers never lose their distinctive service identities, so they often base policy and strategy arguments on what is good for their service before also considering national security interests. The JCS organizational culture can lead to bureaucratic conflict and infighting as the services compete for resources.

The 2022 USINDOPACOM posture statement exemplifies a reactionary foreign policy based on a reactive strategy.³⁶ Although written under the strategy of integrated deterrence, the document focuses on Chinese and U.S. military capabilities, less on integration, and even less on the true nature of the regional threat. This is problematic because the document does not represent a solid understanding of the environment, and it is not guided by an overarching strategy for dealing with China. Instead, it seeks to dissuade the CCP from doing bad things, reducing deterrence to a reactive foreign policy in the region.

The posture statement’s objective is to maintain a stasis or equilibrium, which assumes that China will soon want a more equal balance of power with the United States. However, such an enduring equilibrium can only arise through mutual acceptance of the norms and rules underpinning it, including not resolving disputes by coercion or force. But, the CCP wants to be neither liberal nor a responsible stakeholder. Even if the United States could maintain equilibrium by making China unwilling or unable to upend the regional order, doing so does not lead to “peaceful coexistence.” This flawed assumption leaves the door open for Chinese manipulation because its primary focus is to avert aggression, which cedes the initiative to the CCP.

The USINDOPACOM posture statement constructs its strategy from the U.S. perception of the China threat rather than from U.S. interests. Forming interests as a function of threats is problematic, as it establishes interests as contingent upon threats. It creates a strategy that exists to simply counter their strategy. Consequently, the posture statement’s strategic orientation centers on comprehending its adversary, rather than U.S. interests. Such a perspective could potentially allow Beijing’s leadership to exploit this strategic imbalance by exerting pressure on the United States to allocate time and resources to areas that do not align with U.S. national security interests.



Chinese Doctrine and Perceptions of U.S. Strategy

The U.S. foreign policy community has acknowledged that China has been studying the U.S. military for the past three decades and that China's asymmetric investments in countering U.S. capabilities exposes U.S. vulnerabilities. What is less acknowledged is the likelihood that the CCP and PLA have studied the way the United States conducts its foreign policy comprehensively, as well as the organizational idiosyncrasies that shape U.S. strategy and policy. In effect, Chinese leaders know that the United States defaults to viewing most of its foreign policy engagements through the lens of military considerations.³⁷ From this, they develop methods and measures to shape U.S. perceptions of the threat they pose in order to dictate the terms of strategic competition from positions of strength.

For example, Taiwan is of the highest importance to the CCP for both domestic and international legitimacy. However, it is worth assessing whether China uses this situation and other contingencies in the Indo-Pacific to their advantage by shaping threat perceptions and prompting U.S. reactions that require investments in time, resources, and attention. It is crucial to assess China's organizational culture.

It is well documented that the CCP dictates the organizational culture and behavior of how China executes foreign policy. All organizational reforms of Chinese foreign policy institutions since 2013—the creation of the Chinese National Security Commission and the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs and the restructuring of the Central Military Commission—have consolidated Xi Jinping's control over government policy.

The CCP is a Leninist entity with underlying Marxist principles that remain intact. This makes its institutions adept at providing effective coordination and autonomy, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, outpacing similar institutions in some other nations.³⁸ Many U.S. strategic plans fail to recognize that the contemporary CCP, along with its subordinate organizations such as the Politburo and the PLA, operate on Soviet-era foundations.³⁹

The importance of these implications for strategic competition and U.S. foreign policy-making is immense. The conception of conflict differs between the two countries. U.S. foreign policy organizations consider peace as a desirable end whereas the CCP views peace as a perpetual struggle to achieve their objectives.⁴⁰ Even though the U.S. foreign policy community acknowledges this difference, they have not yet linked it to the actions and intentions of China. Early Cold War assessments of Soviet organizational culture and tendencies explored the concept of correlation of forces or balance of national power, but the CCP has not received the same level of analysis.

Since assuming control over the culture and behavior of CCP organizations, Xi has introduced ideological concepts into regular descriptions of China's worldview. Within this analysis, the doctrine of correlation of forces, or what Xi refers to as "the international balance of forces" (*guoji liliang duibi*), plays a significant part.⁴¹

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Given the recent reforms and Xi's position as Chairman, it is very important to understand his conception of China's interests and priorities. One of these ideological maxims is historical materialism, which emphasizes "the inevitability of progress through ongoing class struggle."⁴² The other is dialectical materialism, which follows "an approach to politics that focuses on how change occurs when contradictory forces collide and resolve."⁴³ Together, these ideological concepts "place China on the right side of history and [portray] the United States as struggling in the throes of inevitable capitalist decline, consumed by its own internal political contradictions and destined to fall by the wayside."⁴⁴

If this is how the CCP views the international system, then it is not unfounded that their true intentions are "to manage the inevitable flow of history, to bring about the attrition of the enemy by gradual increments, and not to stake everything on a single throw of the dice."⁴⁵ In the contemporary context, Xi's metaphorical "single throw of a dice" may refer to a scenario related to Taiwan or a similar contingency in the South China Sea or in the broader Indo-Pacific region where the United States and China would confront one another militarily.

It has recently been well documented that the CCP faces several challenges as it seeks to maintain consistent growth in its economic, financial, and political power, which the CCP refers to as China's "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*).⁴⁶ For example, CCP leadership has to factor elements of demographic decay and continuing impacts of their drastic COVID-19 policy responses into the balance of national power.⁴⁷ China must also handle increasing domestic social concerns and the costs of environmental degradation.⁴⁸ Thus, the proponents of power cycle theory may not be correct when they argue that the most dangerous time for a contingency on Taiwan is when China is declining and when the international balance of forces still favors the United States.⁴⁹

This assessment of China's doctrine and organizational nature is not meant to claim the CCP has no intention of seizing or reclaiming Taiwan or of using force in any other contingency around which the United States has shaped its foreign policy engagements and national policy. The value of using organizational culture to assess their doctrine is that it enables a more complete understanding of the likelihood of such circumstances and prompts the U.S. foreign policy community to approach strategic competition in a more nuanced way. Then, the distribution of time, attention, and investments would be more holistic rather than reactive to threat perceptions and Chinese actions—beholden to the CCP's competitive strategy and initiative.

An illustration of this is how China's Navy reacts to U.S. efforts to maintain the status quo. China's buildup of naval capabilities over the past two decades of military modernization has been impressive. China has pursued naval modernization since the 1990s, improving their near sea fleet to challenge adversaries in the region. The PLA Navy (PLAN) poses a threat to the U.S. Navy as it develops a force capable of dealing with Taiwan militarily, dominating its near sea region, controlling China's 200-mile maritime exclusion zone, patrolling sea lines of communication, and ultimately displacing U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁰

China's military budget is not readily available. Open-source information from Janes and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute suggest China allocated around \$290 billion to its military in 2022.⁵¹ This was a 7.1% increase in military spending from 2021.⁵² It is also considerably less than what the United States spends on its military. While there is no public information available on how much of the total military budget goes to the PLAN, we presume it is considerably less than what the U.S. Navy receives.

U.S. analysts know the PLAN already has a bigger Navy, but it is hard to assess its likely growth because the PLAN does not release force-level goals like the U.S. Navy does. Assessing capabilities from ship numbers is faulty, but it is useful to think about how each Navy spends its money. The PLAN spends a large part of its budget on naval construction to achieve its goal of regional preeminence, but does little to control the regional seas because it does not need to.



This reality raises an important question: if the PLAN is already larger than the U.S. Navy, then why has the CCP not directed the PLAN to take control of the sea lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific from the United States? If it is because the costs of doing so are exorbitant, then this might be a conscious decision by the CCP to let the United States continue to ensure freedom of navigation on the ocean. This indicates that the CCP knows that the U.S. foreign policy objectives are often tied to maintaining the status quo. The CCP is willing to let the U.S. Navy spend resources on readiness and sustainment to remain patroller of the seas, while allowing the United States to believe it is ensuring the credibility of U.S. security commitments to regional allies and partners.

Effectively, the CCP can permit the United States to undertake the role of providing security for the global commons for a certain period because the CCP understands that the United States' perpetual military readiness benefits China. Despite U.S. diplomatic efforts to strengthen allies and partners to enhance its capabilities via integrated deterrence, the cost and attrition will be challenging to ignore in the coming decade. It is not necessarily in China's interest to engage in an all-out test of force when the correlation of forces in the Indo-Pacific are more relatively equal to the United States. Instead, the CCP can allow the United States to expend large amounts of capital to provide security for the global commons for a certain period of time in order to more easily achieve its aim of regional naval supremacy later.

This example illustrates how China's own competitive strategy can prepare the strategic environment. This approach applies across the entire spectrum of conflict. During peacetime, this could entail inducing an adversary to allocate resources to areas that pose less danger to oneself. In long-term competition, a competitive strategy acknowledges that an adversary's prior successes may drive organizations to fixate on modes and methods of execution that led to past successes. The lessons learned from past victories can result in organizations falling into routines that not only lead to errors or missed opportunities to evolve but also present prime opportunities to be exploited later.

The goal of this approach is not to compel adversaries to undertake actions that do not align with their interests. Rather, the objective is to motivate adversaries to engage in more of what they are already doing. The purpose is to get the adversary to play one's own game, thereby making it easier to win.⁵³ This approach often depends on the adversary being unaware that their strategy is playing right into the objectives of their opponent. It works for a few reasons.⁵⁴ First, the adversary chooses the optimal strategy for themselves, even if it is also the strategy that most benefits the other side. Secondly, large bureaucratic organizations are difficult to change, and heavily structured and siloed subunits leave organizations open to this approach. Thirdly, elite interests, crowds, organizational routines, and patterns create information asymmetries that make it challenging to ensure that the organization makes the best decisions.

“The goal of this approach is not to compel adversaries to undertake actions that do not align with their interests. Rather, the objective is to motivate adversaries to engage in more of what they are already doing.”

“The United States approaches transnational issues with China, particularly climate change, as isolated goals and diplomatic ends in themselves. . . CCP leadership uses such negotiations to strengthen or shape the military correlation of forces to its advantage.”

Differences in Foreign Policy Conceptions

Culture and Behavior Shape Diplomatic–Military Relations

In order to analyze how U.S. foreign policy decision makers conceive of strategic competition, it is useful to understand the differences in how the United States and China’s organizational culture and behavior link diplomatic and military engagements. The United States approaches transnational issues with China, particularly climate change, as isolated goals and diplomatic ends in themselves. Where U.S. administrations treat climate change as a global challenge that the world should agree to combat harmoniously, CCP leadership uses such negotiations to strengthen or shape the military correlation of forces to its advantage.⁵⁵

For example, on August 5, 2022, China suspended all climate discussions, two security meetings, and a call between military leaders with the United States based on opposition to a visit by the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives to Taiwan.⁵⁶ The National Security Council leadership was “surprised that China [had] linked geopolitical competition with transnational issues.”⁵⁷ This surprise with how CCP leaders conceive of the relationship between diplomatic, political, and military engagements is evidence that the U.S. foreign policy community perceives and is acting through a U.S.-centric lens rather than with an appreciation of how Chinese organizational behavior impacts actions. This bias against linking diplomatic and military interests leaves U.S. foreign policy in a disadvantageous position.

In this environment, the United States’ range of foreign policy options will consistently be reactive to the decisions and maneuvers of the CCP. U.S. decision makers will continue to be frustrated by their inability to achieve singular success with climate change or other transnational issues. Moreover, U.S. policy toward Taiwan and military contingency planning will continue to be defined more by China’s initiative. This increases the risk that U.S. policy and strategies are being manipulated by China’s own goals and strategies.

The Economic Domain (A Snapshot of Strategic Myopia)

The U.S. foreign policy community’s organizational culture and behavior illustrate a similar reactive tendency in economics. Given the past 30 years of engagement and integration, one might anticipate that all U.S. economic policies will continue being reactive moving forward. While this may be true, there is a difference between what constitutes proactive and reactive policies under that broader, reactive 30-year umbrella. Current economic policies are justified as being pursued on U.S. terms, couched within its interests, and portrayed as the right way to compete with China’s economic moves.

China’s implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (yīdài yīlù), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and its potential relationship with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership



“The default behavior and culture of the U.S. foreign policy community is to approach the economic domain mainly through the lens of competition, whereas CCP organizational culture views the economic component of foreign policy through the lens of warfare.”

have challenged U.S. global and regional economic dominance. In a direct response, the United States announced its May 2022 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity meant to “advance resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth fairness, and competitiveness for [the] economies.”⁵⁸

The United States presented this policy as a proactive counter to Chinese pursuit of global market share. Instead, it is a direct counter to block China’s efforts to constrain U.S. market access. This same dynamic is apparent in U.S. policies to end China’s theft of U.S. intellectual property, actions in the United Nations to thwart Chinese telecommunications cables in the oceans, competition over rare earth metals, and Congress’s attempt to ban the TikTok app, owned by Chinese-held company ByteDance.⁵⁹ The latter policy makes sense as a direct response to U.S. social media companies being banned from operating in Chinese markets or as a security risk. But it does not address Chinese social media companies’ revenue from access to U.S. markets.

The one-for-one strategy of U.S. economic countermoves is rooted in the ambiguity of the objective and end state of U.S. competition with China. A status quo objective is meant to deny China from altering the post-1945 order. From an economic perspective, that means stopping China from taking global and regional market share away from the United States and rewriting the economic rules of engagement that have benefited the United States.

The default behavior and culture of the U.S. foreign policy community is to approach the economic domain mainly through the lens of competition, whereas CCP organizational culture views the economic component of foreign policy through the lens of warfare.⁶⁰ America’s range of economic options is circumscribed by these initial beliefs about how to define engagement.⁶¹ This has strategically meaningful results, especially when the U.S. foreign policy community is not aware that its framing of engagement has this disadvantageous effect. Organizational culture drives the U.S. foreign policy community to concentrate its time, attention, and resources on the situations with the highest potential of upending the status quo. These situations then are handled through scenario planning in the military context rather than by shaping the economic domain or being linked tangentially to integrated deterrence.

This analysis is significant because it illuminates the United States’ susceptibility to a CCP competitive strategy. The U.S. political and economic strategies have been subject to one for the past thirty years with China. The foreign policy community is coming to terms with the argument that U.S. policy of engagement with the CCP, beginning with the opening to China and ending with its inclusion into the global economy, laid the groundwork for the predicament that the United States is in today.

The economic policy of granting permanent most favored nation status to China in the late 1990s, followed by China’s accession into the World Trade Organization in 2001, was understood at the time as a U.S.-led policy. U.S. foreign policy decision makers concluded that giving China access to U.S. and global markets would lead to the liberalization of the Chinese political system. Organizational culture and behavior led most of the U.S. foreign policy community to argue that China would become a “responsible stakeholder.”⁶²

However, Chinese foreign policy makers understood how the U.S. foreign policy community thought about international affairs. They slowly drew the Department of State, successive presidential administrations, China analysts,

and the broader foreign policy community into believing the CCP had similar long-term interests in economic and political progress. It did not. The CCP applied its hide-and-bide strategy by slowly creating global dependency on its manufacturing sector and financial relationships, to the advantage of its own interests and to the detriment of long-term U.S. interests.

Chinese foreign policy leaders convinced the U.S. foreign policy community that CCP interests were aligned with political liberalization and had U.S. administrations double down on their grand strategy, all while having the United States believe it was leading the interaction. A foreign policy community's blindness to its own behavioral and cultural predilections can silently be exploited by its adversaries or even neutral partners.

This example illustrates that such a dynamic between the United States and China could happen again—it may even already be occurring. U.S. foreign policy makers must understand that their organizational behavior and culture, combined with an ill-defined end state, creates the conditions for a reactive foreign policy that is vulnerable to manipulation by its adversaries.

What U.S. Foreign Policy Misses: The Center of Gravity in Competition

The United States' threat-focused organizational culture has led to a strategy focused on contingency planning that currently centers on a potential conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, defaulting to the military component of strategy. Influenced also by no defined end-state for the competition, the United States has adopted a reactive mindset, making investments based on PLA actions. The U.S. Navy recently stated in its Force Design 2045 that it needs more than 350 manned ships to deny the PLAN a dominant role in the Indo-Pacific (China has roughly 355 ships).⁶³

Because the United States is vulnerable and perhaps unaware of how China's competitive strategy is manipulating its reactions, U.S. leaders in the administration, bureaucracy, and Congress are not allocating enough attention and resources to elements that might prove more consequential for success in the coming decades. After all, the very term "strategic competition" implies a long-term interaction between two countries and their organizational dispositions.

While the United States is planning for scenarios in which the use of force is central, Chinese leaders are focusing on the longer-term relationship between politics and military outcomes. With disproportionate organizational attention paid to scenarios and the military component in them, the United States focuses little on the psychological component that would be present in any scenario involving Taiwan, let alone other contingencies.

This presents a challenge if the PLA believes that the U.S. center of gravity is the U.S. decision-making process and thus targets America's political-military-civilian relationship. The PLA has been developing new concepts of warfighting known as intelligentized warfare, which is the targeted use of artificial intelligence to weaponize information aimed at U.S. decision-makers and the American voter's cognition of foreign policy. Considering this, the development of mostly military capabilities to achieve long-term U.S. political objectives might be based on the wrong assumption of what the long-term competition looks like. Even if the porcupine strategy⁶⁴ of Taiwan is successful, the U.S. military's offensive and defensive measures will have less utility.

"While the United States is planning for scenarios in which the use of force is central, Chinese leaders are focusing on the longer-term relationship between politics and military outcomes."



Over the past few years, the foreign policy community and analysts have increasingly illuminated that U.S. financial and corporate interests in CCP-controlled Chinese markets might constrain the conditions under which the United States makes political and military decisions. There needs to be deeper analysis of how the psychology of the American citizenry drives the decision making of senior political and military leaders. One of the greatest challenges facing the U.S. homeland may not be PLA missiles but threats to the American voter's mind and their understanding of the international environment and America's place within it.

By the time the U.S. military believes a kinetic conflict is likely, the PLA might have already precluded U.S. leaders from taking certain decisions; thus, a kinetic conflict may be less likely to occur. Through methods discussed above, the PLA could condition the American public and target those who influence decisions about whether to engage in the first place. The PLA's different conception of the cognitive element of warfare might prevent the U.S. military from even getting to the point of deploying its systems against the PLA's A2/AD systems.

“One of the greatest challenges facing the U.S. homeland may not be PLA missiles but threats to the American voter's mind and their understanding of the international environment and America's place within it.”

Implications for the Future

The United States' approach to the Cold War was rooted in a long-term outlook of competitive strategies that extended over decades.⁶⁵ It is reasonable to assume that adversaries, too, will pursue competitive strategies that give them an advantage. The question is whether the United States wants to compete purposefully.

This paper has addressed its central question by examining the manner in which the U.S. government engages in strategic competition with China and arguing that the U.S. foreign policy community tends to adopt a reactive foreign policy due to its threats-focused organizational behavior and culture. This leaves the United States at a disadvantage, as the CCP has developed specific strategies for peacetime competition. Further research is needed to explore these questions and identify potential gaps in current U.S. strategies:

1. A more rigorous approach to measuring and recognizing China's competitive strategy is needed. How does one measure and recognize the competitive strategy of one's adversary? This could involve developing metrics and analytical tools to better study, and directly measure, the CCP's actions and its potential effects on the United States.
2. A quantitative assessment of the economic risk China would face if it used force against Taiwan, weighed against the projected relative power of the United States, could inform a more comprehensive risk assessment. Doing this in one-year intervals over the next five to ten years may help to inform risk. Such an analysis would allow policy makers to better concentrate their resources and attention on areas of highest risk.
3. Case studies of China's competitive strategies toward other countries could help identify patterns of similarity and difference, providing insights into the CCP's broader approach. This would enable U.S. foreign policy bureaucracies to recognize whether the CCP is using a specific approach against the United States.
4. There is undoubtedly a role for U.S. allies, but how can the United States and its organizations implement integrated deterrence in such a fashion as to not open themselves to manipulation by China's competitive strategy? Further research on this topic could provide useful insights into how to strengthen U.S. alliances and minimize risks associated with integrated deterrence.

As Stephen P. Rosen described in his chapter in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, competitive strategies only look successful after the fact.⁶⁶ We cannot be sure the CCP is undertaking such a strategy on purpose, and we hope they are not. But, given China's close monitoring of U.S. actions, it is crucial to analyze and adapt current strategies to stay ahead in this strategic competition. The United States faces a decision: whether to exert its influence in an advantageous manner to shape China or allow China to exert its influence and shape the United States. The outcome of this strategic rivalry may very well hinge on this critical choice.

“The United States faces a decision: whether to exert its influence in an advantageous manner to shape China or allow China to exert its influence and shape the United States. The outcome of this strategic rivalry may very well hinge on this critical choice.”



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65. Deal, "China's Approach to Strategy," 159.
66. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, 32.



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