

War is What States Make of It:
A Comparative Analysis of US and Chinese Conceptualizations of War

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Abstract

The idea that war invariably involves a violent clash of arms is deeply embedded within American academic and military psyches. As a result, studies of war typically assume that Western precepts are universally held. The question this raises, however, is whether other nations hold different conceptualizations of war and, if so, the implications this creates for US strategies, plans, and operations. To examine this puzzle, this article uses the lens of strategic culture to conduct a comparative case study of US and Chinese perceptions of what war entails. Based on an examination of the academic literature, official documents, statements, media reports, and the states' behaviors, this article finds that the US and China have fundamentally different temporal, material, and normative frameworks on war that not only undermine their ability to communicate, but also create significant risks for national security decision-making based on Western cognitive frameworks. Collectively, these findings directly challenge the commonly held wisdom on the universal applicability of the US definition of war and raise important questions about the strategies, policies, doctrine, and plans that flow from it.

Introduction

Is the concept of war as a violent clash of arms a universally held idea? In *Thucydides Trap*, Graham Allison argues that, due to their diverse strategic cultures, the United States and China have different perceptions of what war entails. As such, while the US sees war as a definitive event occurring primarily in the military realm, China's perspective is more holistic and focused on achieving its aims over time and primarily through psychological effects.¹ Although scholars have long argued that states have different ways of war, Allison's claim raises questions about whether states hold different conceptualizations of war and how these differences could impact international security.

Unfortunately, while scholars and military analysts have engaged in extensive and detailed analyses of war, conflict, and peace, they have typically failed to define the topics of their study. Instead, they have assumed that countries hold the same ideals of what the terms entail. As a result, since most of them were from US and European backgrounds, the scholars' and analysts' ambiguity inadvertently embedded unstated biases derived from Western theories, legal principles, and norms. Not only has this created a substantial gap in the literature, but it also raises fundamental questions about the soundness of US strategies, policies, and doctrine based upon their findings.

To address these issues, I will conduct a comparative analysis of current US and Chinese strategic cultures to explore whether they hold different conceptions of war, and to understand the implications if they do. This analysis will involve three-steps. First, I will briefly review the extant literature to demonstrate the gaps. Second, I will analyze US and Chinese perceptions of war through the lens of their respective strategic cultures as reflected in current literature, official documents and statements, and their behaviors. Finally, I will compare the results to identify

differences and explore their potential impacts. Through this process, I will demonstrate that the United States and China have fundamentally different conceptualizations of war that not only increase the potential for miscalculation but also create critical risks for national security decision-making based on Western cognitive frameworks.

Defining War

War has been a major topic of study for millennia. From Sun Tzu's classic tome to the present day, scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers have long sought to understand the sources of conflict, the ways to win in war, and how to create the right conditions for a lasting peace. Unfortunately, despite these extensive studies, there is no agreed upon definition for what war involves. Instead, those analyzing war typically employ a broad range of descriptions that contain implicit assumptions based upon Western perspectives. As a result, although they have conducted in-depth analyses of war, analysts have rarely provided more than implicit frameworks for what it is.

In addition, when scholars explicitly delimit war, they typically follow a rigid conceptualization of Clausewitz' definition as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."² In the process, they either implicitly or explicitly propagate a dichotomous framework of war and peace that acknowledges no space between the two conditions.³ Unfortunately, this rigidity is reinforced by extensive and often acrimonious debates about the nature of war versus its character. Collectively this has led to a widespread acceptance of the idea that, while the *character* of war changes over time, its *nature* does not.⁴ Thus, from the perspective of most scholars and practitioners, the Clausewitzian definition is both timeless and universally applicable.

Although a tremendous amount of literature has been written debating the extent of Clausewitz' wisdom, the above conclusions and their underlying assumptions have not been sufficiently challenged. Rather than continuing the semantic arguments, however, I will instead use the lens of strategic culture to examine US and Chinese conceptions of war and assess how the states themselves delimit the concept.

Strategic Culture

Before analyzing US and Chinese strategic cultures, it is important to first understand the concept's background. Jack Snyder is widely credited with first articulating the idea in a 1977 RAND report in which he argued that US nuclear limited response options were based on a faulty assessment of Soviet thinking.⁵ While US planners predicted that the Soviet's would follow a rational choice approach in responding to a limited nuclear attack, Snyder posited that they were more likely to engage in a unilateral, unconstrained response.⁶ Therefore, US doctrine was based on a dangerous assumption that overlooked the impact of strategic culture on Soviet thinking.

Since Snyder's work was published, the volume of writing on strategic culture has exploded as scholars have refined, criticized, and applied the concept. Although it is still controversial and there is no agreed upon definition, much like the idea of power in realist literature, strategic culture nonetheless has demonstrated utility when clearly defined and carefully applied. As used in this article, therefore, strategic culture is an evolving set of beliefs founded on shared history, geography, and values, reflected in a state's behaviors, official documents, statements, structure, and doctrine, that shapes how its leaders perceive and employ the use of force as a tool for achieving their national security objectives.⁷ Thus, strategic culture

is not limited to states' ways of war, but also includes their broader conceptualizations of what war is.

To gain an understanding of US and Chinese conceptualizations of war, I will use this definition as a framework for providing an overview of their current strategic cultures as captured in the literature, recent government reports, foreign policy executives' statements, and other official products. Moreover, to mitigate the impact of propaganda, I will also analyze the states' behaviors, with a focus on the past ten years. Collectively, this will provide a solid foundation for assessing the states' views on war, although the analyses are truncated for simplicity and space.

The Meaning of War

Chinese Conceptualizations

Based a review of over fifty sources from multiple Western and Chinese scholars, the literature reflects an active debate over whether China's strategic culture reflects *realpolitik* or Confucian ideas. While some argue that China is unabashedly *realpolitik* and therefore is driven by power and national self-interest, most scholars fall along a spectrum of thought.⁸ At one end are those like Johnston and Scobell, who argue that Chinese strategic culture is a blend of *realpolitik* and Confucian-Mencian ideals.⁹ At the other end of the spectrum are scholars who find that China's strategic culture is mostly if not entirely idea-based and therefore largely outside Western conceptions and norms.¹⁰ However, scholars within this latter group differ over whether these ideals are inherently revisionist, or reflect the norms of a pacifist, historically exploited state returning to its rightful, destined place as a peaceful power pursuing global harmony for everyone's benefit.

Unsurprisingly, this latter image is the one propagated by Chinese government statements and publications. Whether contained in an official document, public speech, or a government sponsored You Tube video, the message consistently centers on the ideals of peace and harmony, but with uncompromising tones on its exceptionalism and sovereignty claims.¹¹ While China portrays itself as a well-intentioned, non-exploitive state seeking “win-win” relationships based on mutual benefit, this shining image has a darker side reflected in its behavior. For instance, China’s territorial claims on Taiwan, Tibet, and the South and East China Seas, as well as its notoriously aggressive industrial espionage, and use of economic coercion and manipulation to gain influence over other countries, raise questions about its real intentions and how people should interpret its ostensible goals of “peace and harmony.”

Although a deeper exploration of this tension is beyond the scope of this article, resident within it is evidence of how China sees the idea of war. Specifically, in the scholarly literature as well as China’s official products and behaviors, three relevant themes are evident. First, is pragmatism. From this perspective, Chinese leaders avoid war not due moral pacifism, but because they see the use of force as a risky tool that should be employed only when it is likely to be successful.¹² Intuitively this is sensible, considering China’s experiences in armed conflict over the past century, which have generally been negative. Similarly, Chinese leaders do not consider themselves to be constrained by Western-imposed international norms, but apply a pragmatic, traditional interpretation based on an “Eastphalian” view of “one civilization, many systems.”¹³ “Peace and harmony,” therefore, are contingent upon the rightful order, not a lack of conflict, which means that any use of force to restore the system is justified.¹⁴

Second, for many Chinese leaders, Sun Tzu’s writings are highly respected texts, the tenets of which are embedded within their strategic thought and military doctrine. Although Sun

Tzu alone does not explain Chinese strategic culture, and the texts' influence should not be overstated, Sun Tzu's precepts nonetheless manifest in the importance current leaders place on psychological manipulation and deception.¹⁵ As such, focusing on destroying the opponent's "harmony" plays a central role in Chinese strategic thought, training, and force development.¹⁶ The "Three Warfares" strategy, involving psychological, media, and legal manipulation, as well as the ongoing activities of the United Front Work Department, are emblematic of this mindset.¹⁷

In addition, reflecting the pragmatic perspective discussed above, Chinese leaders have traditionally prioritized victory at the bargaining table over a risky, decisive clash of arms. This is clearly evident in their military doctrine, which frames armed conflict in terms of limited, local "informatized warfare" involving a highly networked force specifically trained and equipped to attack vulnerabilities and employ psychological and political manipulation to unbalance enemies, wear down their resolve, and set the conditions for diplomats to gain the ultimate success.¹⁸ Although China is actively investing in force modernization and expansion to offset US combat power, that does not mean party leaders see war in the same terms as the US.¹⁹ Rather, winning the kinetic fight is but one component of the larger strategic victory in which China reshapes the international system, its alliance structures, and norms.

Finally, are the ideas of active defense and seizing the initiative. These concepts are reflected in China's military modernization and doctrinal evolution which focus on striking perceived US weaknesses, such as its casualty aversion, heavy reliance on technology, and long logistics lines.²⁰ Although ostensibly disavowing first strike or offensive actions, the Chinese leadership defines defense broadly, to include responding to perceived infringements on the nation's internal security and expansive notions of sovereignty, which blurs the distinction

between offense and defense.²¹ Considering that party leaders' believe the US is actively containing China's influence and undermining its internal security vis-à-vis Taiwan, the South China Sea, human rights programs, and liberal propaganda, it is likely they view themselves as already under attack. For the US, and international security in general, this has tremendous implications that will be explored in the next two sections.

US Conceptualizations of War

While the literature on Chinese strategic culture is both extensive and divided, that relating to the United States is limited and largely consistent. Specifically, scholars generally agree that US strategic culture is embedded within the context of two inherently conflictual principles: the inevitability of liberal expansionism and a preference for limited overseas commitments.²² These two elements, which compete for primacy, create a deep-seated casualty aversion, a conflicted view of legal norms, and a heavy reliance on technology to address perceived security risks.²³ Thus, while the US defines its national security interests broadly within the Westphalian model, and consistently pursues a global strategy to protect them, competing pressures to avoid costly commitments incline decision-makers toward technologically-enabled, rapid battlefield victories with limited need for boots on the ground.²⁴

From the standpoint of conceptualizing war, these characteristics play out in three significant ways. First, although the US at times takes a pragmatic view of the law, it also attempts to embed its behavior and perspectives within liberal international norms. This not only influences how it operates, but also its definition of war, which is the equivalent of armed conflict as reflected in international law.²⁵ For the US, therefore, war is delimited by violence, which means that it is dichotomous with peace.²⁶

Second, and closely related to the above, Clausewitz' writings are highly influential in US military training, doctrine, and behavior. As a result, the US model prioritizes victory on the battlefield through a linear approach to warfare that focuses on the physical destruction of critical vulnerabilities that tie into the enemy's perceived centers of gravity.²⁷ The primary aim of military operations, therefore, is to gain dominance by rapidly imparting the greatest level of physical destruction through the precise application of force to critical nodes that are expected to create the greatest effects on the enemy's ability to continue fighting.²⁸ Thus, as reflected throughout US history, victory on the battlefield is the highest priority. Diplomats clean up the mess.

Finally, this emphasis on force means the US has limited regard for sociocultural and psychological considerations in its military operations.²⁹ Although the Department of Defense has attempted to change this inclination to meet post-911 requirements, this effort has met with limited success, as reflected by the infrequency with which the terms "sociocultural" and "psychological" are used in relation to "center of gravity" (or COG) in doctrinal publications. As a result, activities to influence others' minds are typically under resourced and treated as secondary efforts.³⁰

Differences and Similarities in US and Chinese Strategic Cultures

Differences

Based on the above, US and Chinese perspectives on war diverge in three significant ways. First, they have fundamentally distinct temporal frameworks. As such, while the US focuses on winning quickly within war, China pursues a long-term victory outside of it. For the US, this typically means prioritizing success in the kinetic fight, even if it complicates the

conflict's aftermath. As a result, it is often said that the US tends to win the war but lose the peace. China, on the other hand, prioritizes the role of the diplomat over the warrior. Thus, the Chinese seek to minimize the negative aspects of war by setting the optimal conditions before fighting occurs, thereby leaving the enemy with limited, unfavorable choices. Quick, limited victory on the battlefield is a means to the end, it is not the goal.

Second, and closely related to the above, is the material component. For the US, this translates into a focus on destroying the enemy's military through the precise and overwhelming use of force targeted against its perceived centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities. As reflected by its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, this approach can be highly effective against a conventional foe, but it loses effectiveness when applied in a counterinsurgency or other less linear environment.³¹ China's strategy, however, focuses on upsetting an enemy's harmony and balance, which is a more nuanced, indirect, and multipronged approach that readily supports its goal of rapid, localized military success that enables multi-pronged strategic victory over time.

Third, is the normative aspect. Specifically, for the US, war and peace are antithetical conditions with distinct beginning and ending points, reflected in domestic and international law. This dichotomous framework has become increasingly problematic as adversaries have exploited the United States' bureaucratic and intellectual blind spots to gain power, resources, and leverage at its expense. From Russia's active measures to China's coercive gradualism, the US has struggled for ways to effectively respond, turning to the "grey zone" moniker and other labels to help fill the void.³²

For China, however, this problem does not exist. Rather, due to their broader normative constructs and Eastphalian lens, the Chinese see peace and war as fluid conditions that are mutually supporting. Therefore, in Chinese eyes, there is no "gray zone," but rather a broader

strategic space defined by opportunities and risks that inform their behaviors and selection of appropriate tools to achieve the long-term objectives of “peace and harmony.” Where force is used, therefore, it is seen as part of a continuum within the context of the Eastphalian order.

These differences are evident in the pattern of each country’s use of force over the past ten years. Specifically, where China has used force, it has typically done so when it felt disrespected, encircled, or at a negotiating disadvantage.³³ In the process, even as its power has grown, China has continued to rely primarily on economic measures, coercive gradualism, and psychological operations to gain its strategic objectives. The US, on the other hand, has used force extensively and globally, mainly in response to perceived strategic threats and to enforce international norms.³⁴ Thus, even though the United States has employed soft power as well, it used force far more frequently and for substantially different reasons than China. This not only reflects how each nation sees its role and position within the current international order, but also where it prioritizes the use of force as an element of national power.

Moreover, this characterization is further buttressed when we examine general foreign policy approaches. Specifically, US foreign policy tends to treat problems as discreet situations, often overlooking their complex interconnectivity and long-term prospects. Even US shaping operations are typically focused on problems that have largely manifested. This is evident with North Korea, Iran, China, Russia, and terrorism. While the US does seek to address problems short of war, its decision-makers are largely reactive, responding to challenges as they arise. Oftentimes, the response is to use hard power, which is readily available and creates an immediate impact. China, on the other hand, pursues a holistic approach that seeks to create long-term opportunities rather than primarily responding to perceived threats. This is evident in

the South China Seas, Road and Belt initiative, global economic and cultural engagements, and their efforts to undermine European unity and corner the market on rare earth metals.

Similarities

Despite these differences in US and Chinese strategic cultures, there are three similarities. Specifically, both states see themselves in an exceptional light, take a pragmatic view of the law, and define national security interests broadly. In these similarities, however, there are important differences.

First, US exceptionalism is reflected in its continued assertion of leadership over the global liberal order, while China perceives itself as a victim of Western imperialism that is now regaining its rightful position at the center of the East Asian hierarchy. Second, US pragmatism is anchored in liberal ideals founded in Wilsonian principles and reflected in the international regime it leads. As discussed above, however, China is not beholden to these laws, but is guided by ancient norms founded in an Eastphalian framework that is resistant to Western-imposed constructs. Finally, and a direct outgrowth of the other similarities, the US defines its national security interests in direct relation to the liberal international order, while China sees its interests in terms of broadly defined sovereignty and internal security.

Collectively, these differences reflect a fundamental disagreement between the United States and China over the future of the international order and the principles on which it should be based. Although the possibility still exists that China will shape its behavior to fit within liberal norms, this outcome is becoming increasingly unlikely. Rather, as US relative power is perceived to be abating, and China's star appears to be on the rise, the points of friction between the states will likely expand in ideological and geographical scope.

The Implications

Based on the above, four implications are immediately apparent. First, is the risk of miscommunication. Where two states have fundamentally different perspectives on the meaning of peace, harmony, and war, and contradictory strategic objectives, the potential to misunderstand each other is high. As such, it is likely the United States is failing to comprehend the full context of China's statements and behaviors. Considering that China perceives that the US is currently encroaching upon its claimed sovereign territory and attempting to contain its growth, activities that exacerbate these fears carry the growing risk of generating an armed response. If that was to happen, the US may very well mirror image its own doctrine onto the Chinese, thereby greatly increasing the chances of escalation.

Second, and a direct outgrowth of the above, it is evident the US does not understand that China is already executing a global war strategy designed to create the optimal conditions for a victory in which the use of force plays a minor role. This lack of perceptiveness is aptly reflected in the US National Security Strategy, which naively interprets the ongoing conflict as a "competition." Meanwhile China is engaged in a gradual but aggressive campaign to erode Western maneuver space, displace the United States' hard and soft power advantages, undermine its defensive capabilities, damage its social unity, and maneuver it into a blind alley where all but unfavorable options exist.³⁵

Third, the United States' resistance to giving sociocultural factors their due weight is harmful not only in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism activities, but it also significantly undermines its broader strategy and conventional operations as well. Unfortunately, this is a lesson that continues to be relearned at significant cost in blood and treasure as the culture of kinetic dominance maintains precedence regardless of past experiences and objective changes in

the security environment.

Finally, the United States' perspective of modern conflict is a harmful, self-imposed paradigm that is more a reflection of its bureaucratic and policy frameworks than reality. While paradigms are notoriously difficult to break, the US has a history of success when dire security risks became evident. Fortunately, some thought leaders are challenging embedded concepts, which offers hope that the national security establishment will take greater action to address them holistically.³⁶

A Way Forward

Overall, the above demonstrates that the United States and China have significantly different conceptualizations of war, and that these differences create critical risks of over or under reacting with potentially dire consequences. As such, US national security leaders and their staffs must reexamine their assumptions on war and critically question resistance to lessons that do not match their cultural proclivities. From a practical perspective, this will involve four major areas of change.

First, the US national security community should drop the naïve idea that we are engaged in a global competition and embrace the reality that China is implementing a long-term, purposeful, and aggressive campaign to reorient the international order to degree historically obtained through great power war. While there is a growing recognition of China's malign behavior and designs, official documents and statements reflect a limited appreciation for the depth and purpose of what the Chinese leadership are attempting to achieve and the measures the US must take to protect the international order it has so painstakingly protected at great cost.

Second, to effectively address this growing threat, the US should adopt a counter strategy approach designed to actively deny Chinese leaders the ways and means to achieve their long-term goals. In some ways, this will parallel the Cold War containment strategy, although it should be even more extensive. While containment focused on limiting Soviet geopolitical and ideological expansion beyond its sphere of influence, a counter strategy approach would be tailored to prevent Chinese attempts to remake the international order through coercive gradualism, psychological operations, economic manipulation, and militaristic expansion in all hemispheres and domains.

Third, and as an outgrowth of the above, the US must shift priorities from deterrence and preparation for kinetic warfare to focus more heavily on those instruments of power that are playing a central role in the ongoing conflict. This will not only entail increased material investments but also legislative action to reform the current national security structure and provide the requisite authorities and maneuver space for organizations to effectively implement their responsibilities. In particular, the US must reenergize its ability to effectively engage in the ideological battlespace through diplomatic, cyber, electronic, and other measures, which have atrophied terribly since the end of the Cold War.

Finally, the US national security community must embrace the idea that war is neither precisely defined nor limited to a specific temporal, material, or normative framework. At a philosophical level, this means moving beyond the self-imposed idea of a “grey zone.” Despite the concept’s widespread adoption in national security parlance and the attending avalanche of associated literature, the grey zone nonetheless represents an archaic, segmented understanding of modern warfare. Rather than creating new terms to fill gaps in the US national security community’s misunderstanding of how to operate against non-linear foes, leaders should instead

challenge their own cognitive restraints and assumptions and examine how the West can successfully institutionalize a holistic, long-term approach to war in which strategy, policy, and resources are integrated across time, space, the operational domains. Otherwise, the US will spend the next decades debating how to best defend its interests and deter its adversaries while constantly responding to evolving threats and missing critical opportunities.

Conclusion

While there is a growing recognition within the national security community that US efforts to counter China are proving ineffectual, we nonetheless continue to pursue a reactive, segmented competition strategy. China, meanwhile, is actively conducting a campaign of maneuver, through which it seeks to reengineer the global order to a degree that historically required great power warfare. In the end, even though few shots will likely be fired, China nonetheless expects its enemies to be soundly defeated. This fundamental difference in how the US and China conceptualize war unfortunately reinforces the former's inherent institutional resistance to change and lack of strategic vision which have repeatedly led it to the brink of disaster. The question remains as to whether the inertia will predominate or if the US will change its historic patterns and make the necessary adjustments while still there's an opportunity to save the global order without extensive loss in blood and treasure.

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