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## **Culture, Traditions, and Strategies China's Nuclear Approach Explained**

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**Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw**, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



Photographs courtesy: The Manekshaw family/FORCE

**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC**  
**1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

# **Culture, Traditions, and Strategies China's Nuclear Approach Explained**

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# Contents

• Abstract	1
• Introduction	2
• Cultural DNA: Weaving a Nation's Identity	3
• Decoding Strategic Culture: A Nation's Hidden Strength	4
• Key Drivers of Chinese Strategic Behaviour	5
• Philosophical Traditions Shaping China's Strategic Behaviour	6
• The Changing Landscape of China's Nuclear Posture	9
• Redefining the Concept of Chinese Deterrence	11
• China's Nuclear Deterrence by Indeterminacy	13
• Nexus of Chinese Stratagems and Nuclear Strategy	15
• The Security Paradox: Internal and External Insecurities	20
• Leadership's Role in Shaping the Strategic Culture of a State	22
• Interplay of Strategic Culture and Nuclear Strategy	24
• Conclusion	26
• Notes	27
• References	27



# Culture, Traditions, and Strategies

## China's Nuclear Approach Explained

### Abstract

A comprehensive examination of China's evolving nuclear strategy since the 1960s reveals a distinctly Chinese approach to strategy, shaped by its strategic culture. Given the evolving security landscape, China's future deterrence posture holds significant implications for global powers. It becomes crucial to understand how China's strategic culture shapes its worldview and elucidates its behaviour on the international stage. Central to understanding China's approach to nuclear deterrence is the concept of strategic culture, which encompasses the beliefs, norms, and values that shape a nation's strategic behaviour. The correlation between Chinese strategic culture and nuclear strategy underscores the intricate interplay between historical legacies, ideological beliefs, and geopolitical imperatives. China's approach to nuclear weapons is shaped by its desire to safeguard national security, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic autonomy. Further, the nexus of stratagems and nuclear strategy reflects a deeply integrated approach to leveraging traditional strategic thought in modern geopolitical and military contexts. Understanding these correlations is essential for assessing China's nuclear intentions, managing strategic stability, and promoting arms control measures in the Asia-Pacific region. As China continues to assert its influence on the global stage, its strategic culture will remain a key determinant of its nuclear behaviour and international security dynamics.

## Introduction

The emergence of China as a major global power is one of the most significant developments of the post-Cold War era (Rex Li, 2004). Over the past decade, strategic observers of China have taken note of its rapid economic growth and increasing influence with concern. Many analysts have highlighted China's substantial defence spending, prompting global policymakers to grapple with the potential consequences of a more powerful and assertive China for both the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large. While China's approach to nuclear strategy has remained largely consistent in recent decades, its nuclear arsenal appears to have undergone a rapid expansion in recent years (Bradley J., 2022). Furthermore, Beijing is actively engaged in the ongoing modernisation and diversification of its nuclear delivery systems (Suyas Desai, 2023). China's nuclear arsenal modernisation has rapidly advanced and broadened in recent years. Especially over the past five years, the country has notably intensified its efforts, introducing a wider variety and increasing the number of nuclear weapons to unprecedented levels (Kristensen et al., 2024). There is ongoing debate among international experts about whether China's nuclear expansion is a reaction to emerging military threats, like the U.S. missile defence systems and precision weapons, or if it stems from a broader revisionist security strategy (Zhao, 2024). This view suggests that China is gradually moving away from its conventional nuclear strategy and adopting a more assertive stance, with increased emphasis on the potential first use of nuclear weapons. China has consistently adhered to its 'No First Use'<sup>1</sup> nuclear doctrine and 'Assured Retaliation'<sup>2</sup> strategy. However, recent doctrinal publications suggest a potential shift towards using its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against conventional strategic threats. Additionally, China is actively upgrading and expanding its nuclear capabilities, including the deployment of mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and the development of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, for its new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. This represents a significant departure from its previous reliance on a smaller and potentially vulnerable nuclear deterrent, as China seeks to establish a more efficient and powerful nuclear force (Chase, 2013). As a result, the role of nuclear capabilities is anticipated to gain increased importance in the international landscape of nuclear power dynamics. Since taking office, President Xi Jinping has initiated a comprehensive campaign aimed at modernising China's military forces. This initiative includes significant improvements to the country's nuclear weapons stockpile, which are intended not only to serve as a deterrent against potential adversaries but also to provide a robust response mechanism to any threats. In doing so, China aims to fortify its national security and ensure its strategic interests are



well protected in an increasingly complex global environment. China's defence budget for 2024 increased by 7.2 percent to \$ 231.4 billion, prioritising the People's Liberation Army (PLA), in order to realise Xi Jinping's objective of establishing a modern and contemporary military by 2027, with a particular emphasis on Taiwan and enhancing strategic capabilities ("china-maintains-defence-budget", 2024).

Examining China's evolving nuclear strategy since the 1960s reveals a distinctly Chinese approach to strategy, shaped by its unique strategic culture. As the global security landscape continues to change, China's future deterrence posture has significant implications for other world powers. Understanding how China's strategic culture influences its worldview is crucial to interpreting its behaviour on the international stage (Johnson, *China's Strategic Culture a Perspective for the US*, 2009). The study of China's nuclear strategy has been a focal point for scholars and policymakers. To comprehend China's approach to nuclear deterrence, it is essential to delve into the concept of strategic culture. This encompasses the deeply ingrained beliefs, norms, and values that guide a nation's strategic outlook and actions. In China's case, its rich historical and cultural legacy significantly shapes its nuclear strategy. The relationship between strategic culture and nuclear strategy represents a complex and vital component of global security dynamics. For China, comprehending the interactions between its strategic culture and nuclear policy is essential, especially as it rises to prominence as a significant nuclear power. This paper seeks to explore the relationships between China's strategic culture and its nuclear strategy, focusing on the historical legacies, ideological beliefs, and geopolitical influences that have moulded its stance on nuclear armaments. By examining these elements, we can gain deeper insights into how China perceives its security environment and the rationale behind its nuclear posture, highlighting the broader implications for international stability and strategic relations.

### **Cultural DNA: Weaving a Nation's Identity**

Culture serves as a foundational element in the interpretation of individual and national identity. It acts as a unifying thread, binding individuals and nations together in their self-expression. History, in essence, chronicles the clashes of these identities and the subsequent power dynamics that ensue. Consequently, the significance of cultural conditioning in determining the trajectory of any nation cannot be overstated. To overlook the role culture plays in shaping both the individual and the nation would be a critical oversight (Chauhan, 2019). Although cultural evolution is a continuous process, significant shifts in behavioural norms often necessitate external

stimuli. As aptly observed, cultures condition their members to adopt specific cognitive frameworks and pre-established responses to given circumstances. Consequently, cultural constructs circumscribe our perceptions and the spectrum of available responses to events. A lack of understanding regarding a nation's history, culture, and politics can result in incomplete, inconsistent, and ineffective policymaking. This can lead to fundamental errors in how other nations are perceived. By comprehending the strategic implications of the cultures of both allies and adversaries, we can better understand their potential actions and formulate a strategic course. Ultimately, this helps us determine the most effective approach (Chauhan, 2019).

### **Decoding Strategic Culture: A Nation's Hidden Strength**

The concept of strategic culture refers to a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements, and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force. "Strategic culture" refers to the unique approach or mindset of a society when it comes to addressing and conceptualising issues related to national security. It encompasses the collective beliefs, values, historical experiences, and norms that shape how a nation perceives threats, formulates strategies, and makes decisions regarding its security posture and defence policies. Essentially, it reflects a nation's distinctive way of thinking about and navigating the complexities of security challenges within its geopolitical context (Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture*, 2002). Examining a nation's strategic culture is a relatively recent concept. Numerous strategists have sought to characterise it as intertwined with a nation's culture, heritage, history, and traditions. Most definitions generally revolve around two main ideas: firstly, how nations formulate strategic decisions during crises and challenges, and secondly, that these decisions reflect the nation's evolutionary past, ideology, culture, and traditions. Delving into a nation's strategic culture offers insights that enable planners and military analysts to anticipate the conduct of nation-states. Lt. Gen. Li Jijun, the former Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, believes: "Culture is the root and foundation of strategy. Strategic thinking is the process of its evolutionary history, flows into the mainstreams of a country or a nation's strategic culture. Each country or nation's strategic culture cannot but bear the imprint of the cultural traditions, which, in a subconscious and complex way, prescribes and defines strategy making" (Mahnken, 2011). China's strategic culture is deeply rooted in its millennia-old civilisation, marked by periods of imperial dominance, foreign invasions, and internal upheavals. Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism have all contributed to shaping Chinese views on statecraft,

warfare, and diplomacy. Additionally, China's experiences during the Cold War, particularly its isolation from both superpowers and its nuclear standoff with the United States, have left a lasting imprint on its strategic thinking.

### Key Drivers of Chinese Strategic Behaviour

Asia is known for being a fountainhead of great civilisations, giving rise to nations where people are deeply entrenched in their traditions, value systems, and cultural pride. India, China, and Iraq (formerly Mesopotamia) are all founded on a reverence for their culture and perceived glorious past, particularly China, one of the oldest civilisations, with archaeological evidence supporting its narrative of grandeur and conflict. To maintain its cultural and political dominance, China instils in its people a fear of the Thucydides Trap<sup>3</sup>. This imagined displacement and loss of honour influence China's strategic behaviour.

China's relentless pursuit of dominance has led to the development of a strategic narrative that has been effectively passed down through generations due to its long-standing civilisation, regional prominence, vast landmass, and relative isolation from the rest of the world. Four key cultural factors have significantly influenced China's enduring strategic narrative. These factors include a history of indirect and often, distant rule, over a substantial portion of humanity since feudal times; a deep-rooted fear among the Chinese elites that a dynasty's downfall is linked to the loss of moral virtues and subsequent internal turmoil; the enduring influence of ancient thinkers and their philosophies, which remain highly relevant today; and a tradition of extensive historical documentation spanning over five thousand years, which has shaped a focus on classical security strategies and stratagems (Chauhan, 2019).

Over the past decade, China has increasingly exhibited aggressive behaviour, contradicting previous perceptions that emphasised its purportedly weak military tradition, inclination towards non-violent problem-solving in governance, and preference for defensive strategies, such as fortified structures over expansionist endeavours. China's strategic outlook can be described as possessing a **dualistic strategic culture**. This comprises two primary elements: a Confucian-Mencian aspect, which tends to avoid conflict and prioritise defence, and a Realpolitik dimension, which leans towards military solutions and offensive strategies. Both aspects are active and interact in a dialectical manner, shaping what could be termed as a "**Chinese Cult of Defense**" (Mahnken, 2011). The "Chinese Cult of Defense" paradoxically inclines Chinese leaders toward prioritising offensive military actions as a primary means of achieving national objectives,

all the while justifying these actions as defensive measures of last resort. This idea, as expected, also exposes itself to potential misuse. For instance, while Confucian philosophy does not endorse the shooting of students, the events of June 1989 at Tiananmen Square demonstrate how easily the military could be deployed for such purposes, under the guise of restoring order, highlighting the dual nature of this concept of moral authority. In practical terms, it suggests that China's leaders, regardless of their moral standing, have had to wield control over power to ensure their own stability. This is evident in Mao Zedong's assertion that power, particularly that of the party, "emanates from the barrel of a gun". Similarly, Deng Xiaoping maintained his supreme authority with the support of the armed forces (Rosita Dellios, 2020). This strategy, so far, is related to the conventional domain. However, on analysing China's nuclear modernisation drive and posturing, clear reflections emerge wherein China reaffirms support for complete and total nuclear disarmament and simultaneously, is modernising and diversifying nuclear delivery systems for a robust second strike as also signalling ambiguity around its NFU stance and displaying reluctance to engage in disarmament measures.

Certain analysts propose that strategic culture should not be viewed as a straightforward single cause but rather as an ideational framework that influences how political leaders perceive feasible national objectives and the suitable strategies to attain them (Jeffrey W. Meiser, 2023). Additionally, some perspectives suggest that strategic culture comprises a backdrop of diverse "subcultures" that delineate various norms impacting the role and effectiveness of employing military force to accomplish national objectives (Bloomfield, 2012). Within the overarching culture, various subcultures exist, each fluctuating in prominence as different norms gain or lose influence over time. Examining the historical evolution of Chinese strategic culture highlights discernible strategic subcultures and indicates that norms regarding the use of force are subject to contention, thus contributing to uncertainty (Meiser, 2023).

## **Philosophical Traditions Shaping China's Strategic Behaviour**

*"The Chinese people don't have the gene for invasion and hegemony in their blood."*

*Xi Jinping (Jinping, Speech, 2020)*

In the realm of Chinese strategic philosophy, certain timeless elements persist, such as deterrence and psychological tactics, which remain relevant

across different epochs and cultural contexts (Rosita Dellios, 2020). China's strategic doctrine, historically and presently, can be understood to address two fundamental imperatives: the first is the assurance of inviolability, while the second involves the realisation of China's perceived rightful position in the world order. The notion of inviolability primarily emphasises defensive measures, while the concept of achieving China's "rightful place" entails a more expansive vision. These two imperatives are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected. Without ensuring inviolability, it becomes challenging to achieve the desired "rightful place". Similarly, without attaining the perceived rightful position, the assurance of inviolability cannot be fully guaranteed, as it aspires to a complete security that depends on broader geopolitical factors (Rosita Dellios, 2020). This aspiration should be understood from the Chinese viewpoint of pursuing purpose rather than courting disappointment, reflecting a moral strength advocated by influential Chinese philosophers, foremost among them being Confucius. The dual nature of Chinese strategic philosophy, encompassing both negative (or defensive) and positive (or expansive) attributes, resonates with the *yin-yang* concept central to various Chinese philosophical traditions, including Taoism. *Yin* and *Yang*, representing complementary forces, are foundational to understanding the dynamics of the universe and all its manifestations. *Yin* embodies the qualities of passivity, yieldingness, and nurturing, while *Yang* represents the attributes of activity, dominance, and creativity (Rosita Dellios, 2020). The harmonious coexistence of apparent opposites reflects the Chinese capacity to handle paradoxes with calmness. Since ancient times, the Chinese have perfected this "Yin-Yang" concept. This duality in all aspects of life taught the Chinese the importance of balance. Over time, this philosophy has strengthened, and it can be said that China's acceptance of such paradoxes has enabled it to navigate dramatic societal changes, economic fluctuations, and cultural shifts with resilience (Chauhan, 2019). Another key element of this philosophy is that the two forces are seamlessly interconnected, without any clear boundaries. These forces exist independently, yet remain unified, without the need for separation to maintain their distinct qualities. This concept has resonated with Party leaders throughout Chinese history. From Mao to Xi, each leader has implemented reforms and ideologies aligned with the Yin-Yang principle, drawing on its deep-rooted cultural and philosophical foundations, which require no external justification due to their intrinsic spiritual significance. Similarly, to Chinese strategy, there exists a dual motivation: to prevent something (such as aggression against China) and to achieve something (such as the goals articulated by Xi Jinping of becoming a moderately

prosperous society by 2021 (Jinping, Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary, 2021) and a fully developed, rich and powerful country to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation of Chinese nation" by 2049 (Allison, 2017)). The defensive stance in Chinese strategy has deep historical roots, dating back to the early imperial period. Throughout history, China has been wary of potential invasions from its northern borders. The construction of the Great Wall, which spans over 4,500 kilometres across northern China and is more than 2,000 years old, serves as a testament to this defensive mindset, aimed at repelling "barbarian" incursions. However, if China's strategic orientation were solely defensive, it would not have pursued strategies, such as demanding tributes from outlying "barbarian" nationalities or engaging in territorial expansion, as has been evidenced in history and recent past. China has historically viewed itself as superior to other nations, considering itself a beacon of civilisation amidst uncivilised barbarians. This megalomania led to a condescending foreign policy known as "barbarian management (Chauhan, 2019)". China has always perceived itself as the "Middle Kingdom", considering itself the focal point of the world. It organised its diplomacy based on Confucian principles, with a particular emphasis on the importance of filial piety. Within this hierarchical structure, led by the Chinese emperor, subordinate kingdoms were required to show submission in return for Chinese patronage and safeguarding. This adherence to the Confucian model continued into the modern era and was conspicuous during the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict of 1979. Beijing's objective was explicit: to impart a lesson to the Vietnamese so that they would be restrained from excessive actions as they desired (Nguyen, 'Chinese Aggression, 1979). Therefore, while a defensive cultural trait is evident throughout China's strategy documents and military white papers, this does not necessarily mean that China refrains entirely from offensive actions. Chinese leaders might justify such actions as defensive in nature, even if they appear to be offensive. Similarities can also be drawn from the Sino- India conflict of 1962 wherein the then Chinese President, Liu Shaoqi, post conflict, remarked, "to demolish India's arrogance and illusions of grandeur. China had *taught India a lesson* and would do so again and again" (to Sri Lankan leader, Felix Bandranaike) (Mastny, 2010). Therefore, while China's deterrence strategy might appear purely defensive on the surface, it is essential to approach this interpretation with some scepticism (Matsuda, 2022). China's recent belligerent actions in the South China Sea and aggressive border actions with its neighbours in South Asia completely contradict Xi Jinping's quote above. What the Chinese say, mean, and ultimately do continues to intrigue the world. Probably they have a firm

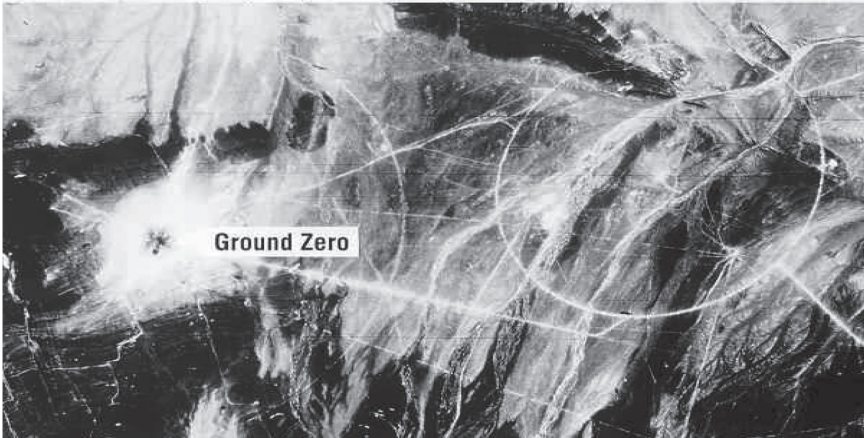
belief to justify that their actions are defensive in nature while it may seem to be contrary to the world.

**Mandate of Heaven to Justify Supremacy.** The Century of Humiliation galvanised China's ambition to eradicate discrimination and become a global power. The Chinese population possesses a deeply ingrained sense of being 'victims' because of historical encounters with aggression from imperialist forces. The PRC feels its actions are morally justifiable as it is seen as the "unilateral victim". As a result, China has developed a certain level of paranoia, fearing that foreign nations are constantly endeavouring to limit its rise in power, and that any lapse in vigilance could lead to invasion (Matsuda, 2022). Today, this narrative legitimises the CCP's power by portraying it as the only contemporary Chinese political party to effectively resist foreign aggression. The Chinese government and strategic thinkers want to overcome this so-called sense of unfairness and revenge the humiliation. They believe China has a historical mandate to restore its place in the world order. The Chinese world order is fundamentally rooted in *Sinocentrism*, a perspective that views China as the centre of the world. This notion has persisted for over five millennia. Undeniably, for China and its people, their legacy is the unwavering and deeply ingrained belief that theirs is one of the most exceptional civilisations, deserving of allegiance from neighbouring countries. This belief stems from the fear of harsh treatment that these countries could face if they refused to align with or comply with China's expectations (Chauhan, 2019). This ideology is spurring China to modernise its military and specifically, its nuclear capabilities.

### **The Changing Landscape of China's Nuclear Posture**

In 1951, China clandestinely engaged in an agreement with Moscow, trading uranium ores for Soviet assistance in nuclear technology. This partnership prompted China to commence its own nuclear weapons programme in the late 1950s, greatly aided by Soviet support. However, as tensions between China and the Soviet Union escalated during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviet Union halted the sharing of atomic bomb plans and data and started withdrawing its advisors. Despite this cessation of Soviet aid, China persisted in its determination to advance its nuclear weapons programme. During the 1960s, China achieved notable progress in nuclear weapons development. China carried out its inaugural nuclear test at Lop Nur on 16 October 1964, utilising a fission device fuelled by Uranium 235 with a yield of 25 kilotons in a tower shot. Surprisingly, in less than 32 months following, China achieved the successful detonation of its first hydrogen bomb on 14 June 1967 (Leveringhaus, 1964).

Nuclear Test Site, Lop Nur, China, 20 October 1964



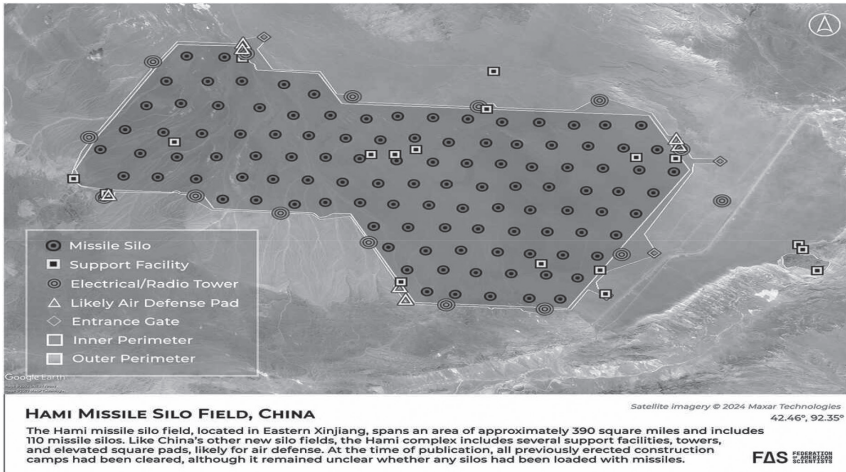
Source: <https://nuclearweaponarchive.org/China/ChinaTesting.html>

During the Cold War era, China's strategic outlook was shaped by its isolation from the rivalry between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong's revolutionary ideology and the experience of the Korean War reinforced China's perception of itself as a victim of external aggression, fuelling its commitment to self-reliance and strategic caution. This period also witnessed the development of China's nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against perceived threats from the United States and the Soviet Union. Additionally, the People's Republic of China has consistently viewed its nuclear arsenal as ethically justified, not just for defensive purposes against existing nuclear powers but also, during the Cold War period, as a means to challenge the dominance of the superpowers by positioning itself as a non-aligned nuclear entity outside the East-West divide. Furthermore, the Chinese nuclear test in 1993 and subsequently, in 1996, served as a clear message in the post-Cold War era that although 'coalition' forces may have been capable of halting nuclear programmes in Iraq and applying pressure (albeit unsuccessfully) on those in North Korea, they cannot reverse the formation of a closed nuclear club (Rosita Dellios, 2020). While Chinese actions might appear to align with the strategic calculations of classical realism—engaging in power dynamics—the fundamental motivation seems to be more closely tied to the idealistic pursuit of maintaining 'moral superiority'.

Presently, China perceives itself as susceptible to a pre-emptive nuclear attack from the United States. Despite having a second-strike capability, it is considered insufficiently secure, with analysts suggesting it remains highly



vulnerable to a first strike by the US. To mitigate this vulnerability, China is focused on enhancing the resilience of its nuclear forces to the extent that the US cannot be confident in executing a pre-emptive strike. Consequently, China is allocating resources towards bolstering its nuclear capabilities to achieve this objective (Art, 2010). China is also substantially enlarging its military capabilities. In a recent development, three new missile sites have been uncovered, indicating China's construction of potentially 360 additional long-range missile silos (Richard, 2022).



Source: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00963402.2023.2295206?src=getfr>

China's decision to focus on building silo-based ICBM capabilities highlights its urgency in showcasing greater military strength. Unlike other nuclear delivery systems, such as ballistic missile submarines or strategic bombers, ICBM silos can be constructed faster, especially given China's expertise in large-scale infrastructure projects. This indicates that the immediate goal of increasing its nuclear arsenal's size takes precedence over the long-term survivability benefits that mobile nuclear forces offer (Zhao, 2024).

## Redefining the Concept of Chinese Deterrence

Sun Tzu emphasised the importance of stratagem over physical force, stating that skill lies in subduing the enemy without fighting. A superior strategist attacks the mind of the opponent, considering actual fighting as not being the epitome of skill. To explore how traditional values of moral and psychological superiority can be aligned with the modern nuclear condition, we need to examine the concept of Chinese deterrence. "Deterrence" is the prevailing term in Western strategic discourse, referring to the defensive aspect of

strategy, often characterised as the *yin* facet. It involves developing the capacity to resist aggression and conveying the willingness to employ this capacity to dissuade a potential adversary from pursuing actions deemed detrimental to one's own interests. Deterrence operates on a psychological level. The aim is to wield physical force not on the actual battlefield but rather in the realm of perceptions. If physical force is utilised in direct combat, it signifies a failure of deterrence on the psychological front. This underscores the rationale behind possessing nuclear arms: **their utility lies in their non-utilisation**. If nuclear weapons are employed in physical conflict, they have essentially failed in their primary function of deterring aggression. Conversely, if an adversary is aware that you have no intention to use nuclear weapons, the effect of deterrence is likely to diminish. This necessitates a demonstration of both intent and capability to effectively maintain a deterrent posture. The adversary must be persuaded that you are genuinely ready to utilise nuclear weapons if required, and that your threats are not simply empty rhetoric. In essence, your deterrent threat must be perceived as credible (Fung Yu-Lan (trans.), 1989). Based on this view, it is believed that deterrence effectiveness hinges not on possessing extensive nuclear attack capabilities, but on being "invulnerable to nuclear strikes". China maintains that it does not need an extensive nuclear arsenal to dissuade potential adversaries. Instead, its second-strike capability must be both credible and capable of survival to effectively deter adversaries. Therefore, Chinese strategists view the concept of minimum deterrence as relative, not solely based on numerical quantity, but more importantly, on factors like the impregnability of nuclear forces, guaranteeing retaliation, and the credibility of counterattack (Yunzhu, 2005).

The recent event in September 2024, when China launched an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) into the Pacific Ocean, serves as a significant demonstration of the country's broader deterrence strategy. This action was clearly intended to establish a psychological deterrent while simultaneously delivering a potent message to the international community, particularly the United States, by highlighting China's ability to target American territory with nuclear weapons (What's behind China's launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile, 2024). The reliance on ballistic missiles plays a central role in China's strategic doctrine, as they are the primary delivery system for its nuclear arsenal. Compared to bombers or submarine-launched missiles, ICBMs stand as the most critical component of China's military capabilities. Through this act, China is not only showcasing its military strength but also signalling that there are distinct boundaries to its patience. The message underscores that China is fully prepared to deploy

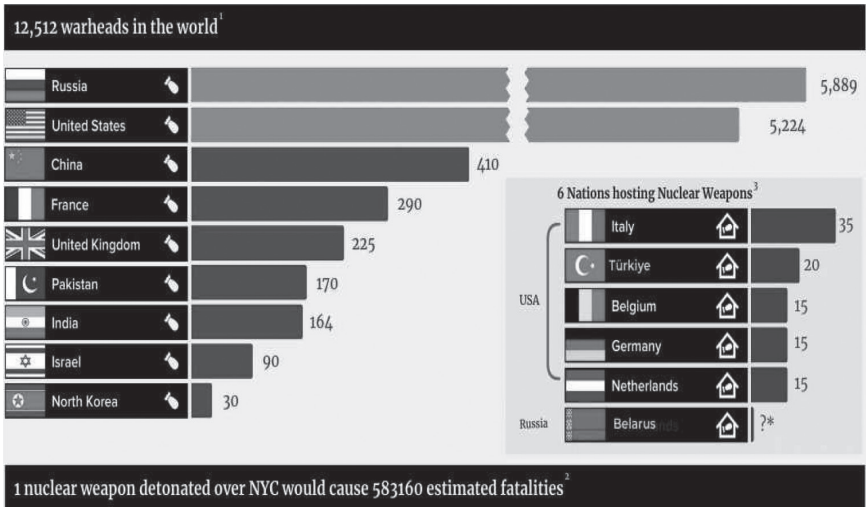
its most powerful assets to deter its adversaries and, if necessary, use them in retaliation if the situation escalates beyond the realm of deterrence (Lee Gim Siong, 2024).

Before the 1980s, China's nuclear arsenal was restricted to delivery systems based on land and air. However, the introduction of ballistic and cruise missile submarines marked a shift towards meeting the contemporary requirements for a comprehensive deterrence strategy. This shift reflects a strategic culture that, akin to its political counterpart, draws on internal principles to adapt to external circumstances. Rather than simply adopting new or foreign elements, the approach is to integrate or 'civilise' them within the existing framework. This pattern mirrors historical instances, such as the assimilation of Mongol and Manchu rulers into Chinese society, as well as the incorporation of communist and capitalist ideologies. The incorporation of 'Chinese characteristics' underscores the traditional practice of 'Sinicizing' novel or foreign concepts. This approach extends to defence-related matters as well (Rosita Dellios, 2020).

### **China's Nuclear Deterrence by Indeterminacy**

China's strategy of nuclear deterrence primarily focuses on other states possessing nuclear weapons, while also offering a negative security guarantee to states not possessing nuclear weapons. The PRC has explicitly declared that it will refrain from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against nations and regions lacking nuclear capabilities. However, its deterrence strategy is limited in scope, as it solely aims to deter nuclear attacks and does not consider deterring non-nuclear hostile military activities. Additionally, China's approach is defensive, as it commits to using nuclear weapons only in response to a nuclear strike. This "No First Use" policy necessitates a robust retaliatory capability capable of inflicting significant and unsustainable nuclear damage on the adversary (*The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013). China currently possesses approximately 410 nuclear warheads, with additional ones being manufactured. Forecasts suggest a substantial increase in the stockpile over the next decade, though it will still be considerably smaller than those of Russia or the United States ([http](http://); Hans M Kristensen, 2023). Given China's comparatively smaller nuclear arsenal compared to Russia or the United States, it is imperative for China to grasp nuclear deterrence tactics to uphold the credibility of its deterrent. One crucial tactic is ambiguity. By deliberately keeping aspects of its nuclear deterrence strategy ambiguous, China forces potential adversaries to speculate about its actual nuclear capabilities. This uncertainty surrounding China's nuclear strength enhances the effectiveness of its deterrence (Hans M Kristensen, 2023). The

second tactic involves ensuring that China's adversaries genuinely believe and fear the capabilities of its nuclear forces. Achieving this necessitates a well-executed strategic communications effort during both peacetime and crises, aimed at conveying China's unwavering determination. Lastly, these tactics must be customised for each specific nation, event, and circumstance, recognising the nuances and complexities of each situation (Hans M Kristensen, 2023).



Source: [https://www.icanw.org/nuclear\\_arsenals](https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_arsenals)

**Stance on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.** China is currently hesitant to engage in nuclear arms control efforts, believing that the conditions are not suitable for its participation. It asserts that the responsibility for further reductions in nuclear arsenals lies with states possessing the largest nuclear stockpiles. China's main worry is that dominant states might use arms control agreements to uphold their nuclear supremacy and weaken the nuclear capabilities of their adversaries. Although pressure mounts for China to join disarmament talks, it emphasises that its nuclear forces are relatively modest compared to other nations, placing it at a disadvantage in negotiations. China insists that before considering arms control, it must enhance its nuclear capabilities to ensure a stronger bargaining position. This approach aligns with China's aim to lead negotiations and progressively assert control in the disarmament process. China perceives arms control as a contentious arena where gains for one party may result in losses for another (Henrik Stalhane Hiim, 2021). Above all, China prioritises safeguarding its security and advocates for caution, emphasising the importance of prudent

decision-making when circumstances are unfavourable or uncertain (*The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013).

## Nexus of Chinese Stratagems and Nuclear Strategy

“The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent.”

– Sun Tzu

**Sun Tzu and China’s Nuclear Playbook.** The prominent role of the armed forces in China’s civil society is a distinctive aspect of modern China. Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* stands out among military classics by connecting power with militaristic strength. This idea of the military as a key tool to uphold national power has remained deeply ingrained in Chinese thought. Its influence is evident today, especially in China’s nuclear strategy, where, since 1955, the focus has been on using nuclear capabilities for military purposes. For the first thirty years, developing civilian nuclear technology was not a priority for China. Similarly, discussions on China’s nuclear strategies reveal a strong attachment to its historical roots, with Sun Tzu frequently cited to lend credibility to both tactical and strategic perspectives on modern nuclear warfare. China’s ambiguous nuclear stance can also be linked to Sun Tzu’s principles. Sun Tzu’s emphasis on deception is often highlighted as a key distinctive feature. While deception to create surprise is a common strategy worldwide, China’s use of it is said to be not only more frequent but also more complex and extensive. What truly sets China’s approach apart is the use of ambiguity in shaping the adversary’s perceptions, a tactic that might often be seen as blatant dishonesty (Chauhan, 2019). Chinese strategic culture exhibits a clear inclination towards secrecy and deception, a characteristic that Sun Tzu famously declared, “All warfare is based on deception.” This emphasis on cunning and strategic ambiguity has deeply influenced Chinese approaches to statecraft and military strategy over centuries (Griffith, 2005). In the realm of arms control, effectiveness hinges on the establishment of a verification mechanism to ensure all parties adhere to treaty obligations. However, such a system inherently requires a level of transparency that may clash with the cultural norms and practices ingrained within Chinese leadership. Given the historical propensity for secrecy and the strategic value placed on ambiguity, Chinese authorities may resist or find it challenging to fully embrace the transparency necessary for robust arms control measures. This tension between the demands of international agreements and deeply entrenched strategic traditions poses significant

challenges in fostering trust and cooperation on matters of arms control involving China (Bradley J., 2022).

**The Art of Ambiguity.** Chinese leaders are skilled at intentionally creating ambiguity in their statements and actions. This ambiguity is not meant to deceive the world but rather serves as a smokescreen to conceal their true intentions. While it may appear ambiguous to the rest of the world, it is perfectly clear to the Chinese people. The reason for this ambiguity lies in the nature of the Chinese language itself. As an ideological language with its unique morphological and phonological characteristics, Chinese can be deliberately manipulative in obscuring meaning and blurring intentions. China skilfully employs a strategy of ambiguity to conceal its true intentions. While this tactic might seem disorienting or confusing to others, it is a well-established part of China's strategic playbook. This approach is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese military strategies like "hide a dagger in a smile" and "battle of pride". The former involves presenting a calm, unconcerned, and self-satisfied exterior to lull adversaries into a false sense of security while secretly working to undermine them and the latter advocates a strategy of feigning humility and deference to make stronger opponents overconfident, thereby weakening their guard and revealing vulnerabilities that can be exploited. China's stance on global issues like climate change, nuclear proliferation, and sustainable development often involves a degree of ambiguity. This ambiguity can be seen as a continuation of the historical Chinese strategy of concealing true motives and intentions by creating a façade of cooperation while pursuing its own interests (Chauhan, 2019).

**China's Indirect Power Play—Arming Global Outliers.** In the realm of foreign relations, China traditionally adheres to the principles of engaging independently with weaker states, forming alliances to confront stronger ones, fostering ties with distant nations to manage conflicts with neighbouring states, and safeguarding its own interests by leveraging foreign powers against potential threats—a strategy akin to the Chinese concept of "Kill with a borrowed knife". The expansive and interconnected region spanning North Korea, China, Pakistan, and Iran holds considerable geostrategic importance today. Particularly, Iran and North Korea, situated on the outer fringes of this region, have renewed collaboration on a project focused on long-range missiles, which involves the exchange of critical components (Shoham, 2020). The arming of North Korea, Pakistan, and now Iran represents efforts to strategically counterbalance India and the US by establishing a contiguous territorial alliance with these nations considered rogue by global standards. The nuclear armaments of Pakistan and North Korea serve as clear illustrations of how China executed this strategy. China

equipped Pakistan with the capacity to develop nuclear weapons utilising highly enriched uranium cores while concurrently supplying ballistic missile technology to North Korea. Subsequently, China acted as a crucial facilitator in the exchange of respective technologies between these countries, thereby bolstering their nuclear programmes.



Source: <https://x.com/sayareakd/status/1282568344382529537>

**The Art of Strategic Derision.** Regarding the application of a people's war strategy in today's era of advanced technology in warfare, it is important to highlight that Mao emphasised the importance of adapting to evolving circumstances while staying true to fundamental strategic principles (*Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung*, 1966). In his era, Mao exemplified this approach by referring to the American atom bomb as a 'paper tiger'. He did not undermine the weapon's potency and ensured China adapted to the evolving global landscape of the post-World War II era by developing its own nuclear arsenal. His derision of such power was primarily at the strategic level due to it being morally incorrect and detached from the interests of the people (*All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers* (November 1957), *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 5, 1977). Here lies another resonance with a strategic lineage that prioritises ethics, societal morale, and other factors beyond purely military concerns at the outset of texts on warfare. This underscores the enduring significance of prioritising human factors over weaponry, a concept deeply rooted in China's historical traditions, dating back to figures like Mencius and continuing into the present day, as exemplified by the *Handbook of Military Knowledge for Commanders*, which features the sub-heading, "Despise the Enemy Strategically and Respect the Enemy Tactically"

(China Report, 1988). The psychological aspect influencing the outcome of war, distinct from technological and military factors, essentially reaffirms the classical belief that “the human element holds greater sway than material considerations” (Lin, 1988).

**The King, The Fool and The Fox Strategy.** China’s nuclear strategy, when viewed metaphorically, can be interpreted through the framework of “The King, The Fool, and The Fox”, each of which symbolises distinct facets of its broader approach (Chauhan, 2019). The “King” strategy, in particular, draws upon the wisdom of the ancient Chinese proverb, “Wait long, strike fast”. This proverb embodies a patient but calculated approach where intentions are carefully concealed, and actions are only taken once the opponent’s vulnerabilities have been precisely identified. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays this role, providing the overarching strategic direction and making ultimate decisions regarding nuclear policy. The CCP’s central authority and its emphasis on long-term planning align with the “King” concept. Moreover, this strategy also serves to illustrate China’s firm stance in affirming its sovereignty and exercising its influence, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. By doing so, China not only seeks to maintain and project its power but also aims to display its nuclear capabilities as a means of dissuading potential adversaries, while simultaneously fortifying its role as a dominant regional player.

The “Fool” strategy, rooted in the Samurai maxim that warns that “the angry man will defeat himself in battle as well as in life”, revolves around a calculated effort to confuse and mislead the enemy through constant movement and strategic messaging. Without ever revealing the true motive, this approach ensures that the adversary remains preoccupied with surface-level signals, causing it to become ensnared in endless interpretation and analysis. As a result, the enemy is prevented from uncovering the deeper, hidden intent behind the actions. China’s nuclear doctrine, particularly its emphasis on a “no first use” policy, can be seen as a “Fool” strategy. This policy, while seemingly defensive, can be interpreted as a way to disorient potential adversaries and create uncertainty about China’s intentions. This concept mirrors the essence of deception that is central to China’s military strategy. By utilising disinformation and maintaining a veil of strategic ambiguity, China effectively aims to sow confusion among potential adversaries regarding its nuclear capabilities and intentions. Consequently, this creates an environment of uncertainty, leading opponents to hesitate and question their own decision-making processes.

The “Fox” strategy draws inspiration from the ancient Chinese text, the *Tao Te Ching*, authored by Lao Tze, which teaches that “he who is fearless in being bold will meet his death, while he who is fearless in being timid



will stay alive.” This approach is considered the most challenging because it involves deliberately sending mixed signals to confuse the enemy. Essentially, the tactic is to manipulate the adversary’s strategy by revealing partial truths, thereby influencing their perception, planning, and actions in a way that serves the manipulator’s objectives. Without realising it, the enemy is compelled to act in ways that are advantageous to its opponent. This strategy embodies the art of cunning and strategic manoeuvring, placing significant emphasis on the need for flexibility and adaptability within China’s nuclear posture. It includes the maintenance of a second-strike capability, ensuring a credible deterrent is always in place, while simultaneously leaving room for diplomatic negotiations and arms control discussions. China’s flexible approach to nuclear development and its willingness to adapt to changing international circumstances can be seen as reflecting the “Fox” strategy. China has pursued a measured pace of nuclear modernisation, avoiding excessive reliance on any single delivery system or warhead type. Ultimately, this multifaceted strategy showcases how China skilfully manages to balance deterrence, deception, and diplomatic engagement, aiming to safeguard its national interests while carefully shaping global perceptions (Rickard, n.d.).

**The 13th Chinese Stratagem, “Beat the Grass to Startle the Snakes”** (打草惊蛇), refers to taking a seemingly aimless or indirect action to observe reactions, exposing hidden dangers or motives. This is followed when the enemy’s plan is not clear and there is a need to judge the reaction of the enemy and therefore, as a precursor, a brief and direct attack like a feint is launched to evaluate enemy reaction and create confusion in the enemy’s mind. In the context of China’s nuclear strategy, this stratagem can be seen in several ways:

- **Testing the Waters with Nuclear Modernisation:** China’s rapid buildup and modernisation of its nuclear arsenal, while often framed as a defensive measure, may be designed to gauge the responses of other global powers, especially the U.S. These moves allow China to identify potential countermeasures and gauge the global community’s stance without triggering full-scale conflict (Zhao, 2024).
- **Strategic Ambiguity:** China’s nuclear policies often involve a degree of ambiguity about its intentions, which can provoke reactions from rival nations. This indirect probing allows China to analyse its adversaries’ defensive postures and readiness, offering insights into their real concerns or weaknesses (Barbara Lippert, n.d.). These actions reflect the essence of the stratagem, where indirect steps aim to flush out strategic responses. The recent firing of the ICBM in the Pacific Ocean can also be seen as a deliberate act to fathom or invoke reactions from other world powers.

**The 20th Chinese Stratagem, “Trouble the Water to Catch the Fish” (混水摸鱼),** involves creating confusion or disorder to exploit opportunities. This tactic can be observed in several aspects of China’s nuclear strategy:

- **Creating Strategic Ambiguity:** China sometimes deliberately fosters uncertainty about its nuclear capabilities and intentions. This ambiguity causes rivals, such as the U.S., to struggle with understanding China’s exact capabilities and objectives, which, in turn, can be exploited by China to gain strategic advantage without clear confrontation (Temin).
- **Exploiting Global Tensions:** During periods of heightened international tension, China may accelerate or showcase its nuclear advancements. By doing so, it capitalises on the disorder and confusion in global power relations, thereby positioning itself more strongly in negotiations or geopolitical standing (Mancini, 2022).

These actions demonstrate how China applies this stratagem by leveraging global or regional instability to advance its nuclear interests.

### **The Security Paradox: Internal and External Insecurities**

**Security Perception Challenges.** China’s political and military leadership perceives threats in various forms across multiple domains. The profound sense of siege mentality among China’s leaders is often underestimated. This mentality leads elites to regard both foreign and domestic environments as hazardous territories rife with dangers and potential conspiracies. The handling of the Tiananmen unrest, the crackdown on the Falun Gong sect, quelling the pro-democracy Hong Kong protests, campaign against corruption in China, and excessive lockdown for zero Covid policy suggest the depth of the regime’s fear of domestic threats. China consistently perceives itself as surrounded by adversaries. This was the case during Mao’s era and remains true for Xi Jinping’s China as well. Xi has fostered suspicion within the party, the state, and even among the officers of the armed forces. The entire nation is under constant surveillance through advanced monitoring systems that track individuals’ movements and whereabouts, intruding into their private lives (Mukherji, 2023). Establishing over fifty unauthorised police stations across five continents to surveil, intimidate, and instil fear in Chinese nationals residing abroad vividly demonstrates the profound insecurity of the establishment (Mukherji, 2023). The recent restructuring of China’s Strategic Support Force into the Information Support Force, Aerospace Force, and Cyberspace Force, along with the establishment of

the Joint Logistics Support Force as the “fourth arm”, is perceived as a move by the CCP to consolidate its control over the military. This echoes historical instances, such as Mao Zedong’s elimination of ranks and grades in the 1960s, Deng Xiaoping’s critique of the PLA’s inefficiency in 1979 leading to a drive for a more efficient military, and Xi Jinping’s crackdown on corruption, which saw the removal or arrest of thousands of officers and soldiers, including those associated with Jiang Zemin. This restructuring allows for greater specialisation under Xi’s direct leadership (Srikanth Kondapalli). Due to the PLA’s limited transparency, it is challenging to anticipate whether additional purges will occur within the “four services and four arms” of the PLA. The true motives behind this restructuring, whether aimed at bolstering military effectiveness or exerting increased political oversight and direct authority over different sectors, will become clearer over time. Nonetheless, it is evident that Xi will wield greater influence over the information domain (Chopra, 2024). This likely indicates a sense of insecurity within the leadership, driven by a constant pursuit of absolute control. It is evident that the CCP leadership prioritises the consolidation of information and network operations.

**Inflexible Organisational Culture and Absence of Domestic Discourse.** China consistently underscores its perceived “moral high ground”, attributing responsibility for any issues or problems solely to other nations, a stance evident from its “New Security Concept” for its use of force. By extensively promoting this narrative through its propaganda channels, China has effectively instilled these beliefs in its populace, leading to minimal questioning of the government’s narrative by its own people (Matsuda, *China’s Strategic Culture Hypothesis: Pursuing the Mystery of a Unique Idea*, 2022). Moreover, the organisational ethos of socialism is believed to have played a significant role in shifting total responsibility onto external factors. Embedded within Marxism is the idea that as long as one’s intentions are pure, no individual can be held liable for the outcomes. China has an outlook of blaming others for any actions it takes wherein it justifies its power politics stance by blaming the U.S.’s hegemonic actions, which, it claims, forced China to adopt this approach. While this mindset does not align with China’s ideal worldview, it believes the U.S.’s reliance on brute power compels China to strengthen its material power to ensure peaceful coexistence. The growing sense of existential threats and fears of a power showdown with the U.S. have driven China to take swift, drastic measures, including accelerating its nuclear expansion (Zhao, 2024). Furthermore, the bureaucratic system offers minimal opportunity for self-correction. Given the absence of opposition parties or independent media

outlets in China that freely critique government authorities, the society is inundated with self-congratulatory rhetoric and criticism of foreign nations solely propagated by state-controlled media. Consequently, the Chinese government avoids taking responsibility for the repercussions of its perceived righteous actions; instead, it attributes blame to others, even in cases of failure. Further, due to lack of domestic debates on such sensitive strategic matters, the political leaders remain bereft of sound policy advice from their nuclear experts. Xi Jinping's consolidation of decision-making power marks a significant shift from the decentralisation efforts of past leaders like Deng, Jiang, and Hu. This centralisation has major consequences for China's nuclear policy, as Xi's demand for "absolute loyalty" pressures civilian and military leaders to fully support his vision. In such a system, dissent or questioning comes at a high cost, reinforcing alignment with Xi's policies (Zhao, 2024). Suffice to mention that dissenting voices from experts have diminished, firstly, due to the fact that there is strong incentive to amplify Xi's policy thinking, and secondly, increasing secrecy in decision-making processes reduces the experts' capacity to impact policy discussions at the official level as they remain isolated from internal policy deliberations.

### **Leadership's Role in Shaping the Strategic Culture of a State**

The past serves as a valuable teacher for future generations. By preserving history, people can gain insights into their past and use that knowledge to understand the present and shape the future. In China, the preservation of history, folklore, and ancient civilisational values has been a continuous process for over five millennia. This rich historical heritage continues to inspire and influence Chinese leaders and shape Chinese strategic thinking (Chauhan, 2019). The strategic inclinations of a nation are shaped by its strategic culture, which intertwines with the operational principles embraced by its current leadership. In order to understand what attitudes toward conflict and collaboration the present leaders of China embody, it is essential to consider both the broader societal ethos and the psychological makeup of individual leaders. When there is a divergence between these levels, does the personal disposition of a leader supersede the overarching cultural norms? Indeed, external factors, such as situational circumstances, conditional limitations, and the actions of other nations, also impact the decision-making of Chinese leaders. The strategic culture remains dynamic, significantly influenced by the personality traits and perspectives of its leaders. After all, culture is sustained by living individuals, thus emphasising the significance of who these individuals are and what they believe as pivotal

aspects of a country's strategic culture (Hudson, 2008). The regime under Xi Jinping demonstrates nefarious characteristics across various aspects, where Beijing has shown a growing tendency towards coercion, sometimes resorting to violence, in its interactions with neighbouring countries, such as the Philippines, Japan, and India. Additionally, Beijing periodically showcases its capability to exert pressure, enforce blockades, and potentially even launch military actions against Taiwan (Beckley, 2024). China's relentless aspiration to supplant the US as a global superpower, thereby creating a unipolar world, is driving humanity perilously close to a looming Chinese threat. This ambition is accompanied by widespread exploitation of natural resources worldwide to fuel China's advancement. Xi Jinping's hostile and malevolent approach to international relations, characterised by sheer military and economic prowess, is widely condemned by the majority of people globally, save for a few corrupt and power-hungry politicians and dictators (Mukherji, 2023).

Authoritarian leaders in China, particularly Xi Jinping, live with a persistent fear of internal instability. Consequently, any external pressure aimed at altering the regime prompts Chinese officials to be especially cautious about adhering to international standards that could potentially override the specific objections of sovereign nations. As Xi solidifies his position indefinitely, he is intensifying the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to reinforce its authority internally. By centralising power within his office, Xi is effectively eliminating any potential for dissent—whether political or otherwise—that could challenge his and the party's complete dominance. Under his leadership, the most significant change has been the total centralisation of government power, which Xi is using to reshape the CCP's future. His policy changes have significantly diminished global hopes for the liberalisation of China's political system, which had previously been associated with its economic reforms (Chauhan, 2019). Xi views nuclear weapons as a key element of China's status as a global power, indicating that he sees the country's nuclear strength as a vital measure of its strategic influence. He likely believes that possessing a strong nuclear arsenal shapes how the U.S. and the West perceive the international power dynamics, giving China a significant psychological edge (Zhao, 2024). Senior Chinese leaders are also susceptible to the effects of China's tightly regulated information environment. Even when given complete and unfiltered information, they tend to interpret it through their established ideological lenses, which go unchallenged within the peculiar controlled system. The state's propaganda and information control agencies further reinforce these perspectives across the government and society.

**Perceptions of Other Nations' Strategic Cultures.** China's security strategies and its inclination towards military actions are shaped by not just its own strategic culture but also its comprehension of the strategic cultures of other nations, particularly the perceptions held by influential groups. These cultural perceptions play a significant role as China evaluates both current threats and potential ones on the global stage. A considerable number of Chinese strategic analysts regard the United States as the foremost threat to China. This perception of the U.S. extends beyond direct military concerns to encompass broader security implications. China perceives the U.S. as attempting to restrain and weaken China under the guise of a "peaceful rise" policy, as well as thwarting any attempts at reunification with Taiwan (Scobell, *Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996*, 2000). According to Chinese perspectives, the fundamental aspects of U.S. strategic culture include tendencies towards expansionism and hegemony. Additionally, a notable characteristic of this cultural outlook is the American inclination towards "strategic misdirection" (Jijun). This term describes tactics involving deceptive manoeuvres aimed at misleading opponents. Star Wars, also known as the Strategic Defense Initiative, is seen primarily as a ploy; Washington's true intentions did not involve its actual implementation. However, the concern it raised prompted the Soviets to escalate their defence spending, which ultimately played a role in the downfall of the Soviet regime. Likewise, the United States deliberately conveyed to Saddam Hussein the impression that there would be no US intervention if Iraq attacked another nation. The Chinese are convinced that the US is determined to adopt a similar approach with China. For instance, a significant number of Chinese analysts expressed considerable doubt regarding the United States' characterisation of "intelligence failures" surrounding the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade a year later (Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture*, 2002). A prevalent belief among many Chinese is that these incidents were deliberate schemes aimed at destabilising China. This suspicion stems from the assumption that Washington's ultimate objective is perceived to be the weakening or fragmentation of China.

### **Interplay of Strategic Culture and Nuclear Strategy**

The correlation between Chinese strategic culture and nuclear strategy underscores the intricate interplay between historical legacies, ideological beliefs, and geopolitical imperatives. China's approach to nuclear weapons is shaped by its desire to safeguard national security, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic autonomy. Understanding this correlation is essential

for assessing China's nuclear intentions, managing strategic stability, and promoting arms control measures in the Asia-Pacific region. As China continues to assert its influence on the global stage, its strategic culture will remain a key determinant of its nuclear behaviour and international security dynamics. China's strategic culture is further influenced by its geopolitical environment, characterised by regional rivalries and great power competition. The US-China rivalry, Taiwan Strait tensions, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and border disputes with India, a growing regional power, shape Beijing's nuclear calculus. China's nuclear strategy aims to deter potential adversaries while maintaining strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept of "winning without fighting" aligns with Chinese strategic culture, emphasising the importance of psychological deterrence and avoiding direct confrontation.

China's nuclear doctrine reflects its strategic culture and national interests. The policy of "minimum deterrence" underscores China's emphasis on possessing a credible nuclear deterrent rather than engaging in an arms race. The "no first use" (NFU) policy, rooted in China's historical aversion to pre-emptive strikes, reaffirms its commitment to nuclear restraint and defensive posture. However, China retains ambiguity regarding the conditions under which it might revise its NFU policy, reflecting its adaptability to evolving security challenges. China feels that on the economic front, it is able to stand up to the US. However, on the nuclear front, it still needs to bridge the prevailing wide gap and hence, the relentless pace in its modernisation. To offset the disparity, presently, China has adopted a sort of hedging strategy by fostering close alliances with Russia and collaborating with rogue nations to keep the US and its other potential adversaries in check. China's strategic culture has a distinct preference for secrecy and deception. Hence, it will always maintain ambiguity in nuclear deterrence issues, which will keep the adversaries guessing about its real nuclear strength. Since all warfare is based on deception, China will maintain effective strategic communication not only to make others truly believe but also truly fear its nuclear forces (Bradley J., 2022).

China's nuclear doctrine is guided by the principles of effectiveness, sufficiency, and counter-deterrence. This three-phased approach reflects China's journey towards becoming a nuclear power. Initially, China possessed nuclear weapons but lacked the capacity for effective deployment and this certainly limited its ability to credibly deter potential adversaries. Subsequently, as its arsenal grew in numbers and sophistication of delivery systems, China gained the confidence to inflict substantial damage on its adversaries. This increased its deterrent capabilities and allowed it to more

effectively protect its national interests. Finally, China having developed the capability to strategically obfuscate the location of its nuclear missiles, has enhanced its deterrent capabilities and enabled protection from potential adversaries intending to target China's nuclear arsenal (Chauhan, 2019).

## Conclusion

The unique strands of Chinese strategic culture of self-proclaimed civilisational supremacy, mandate of heaven leading to a staunch notion of achieving its rightful place, unrelenting desire to establish supremacy, and unprecedented scale of weaponisation of rogue nations along with hegemonic expansion is creating a highly unstable security situation. This situation is getting exacerbated, as in the absence of any mechanisms for internal debate with inherent checks and balances and absolute powers vested in one leader, any strategic miscalculation can undermine the very existence of humanity. From the Mao era, Chinese leaders have emphasised the political value of nuclear weapons for gaining international prestige and securing China's great power status.

Historically, China has adhered to a "minimum deterrence" approach, aiming for a credible second-strike capability rather than engaging in the nuclear arms race. Recent Chinese nuclear expansions suggest a departure from minimalism towards more aggressive postures, emphasising quantitative and qualitative enhancements. China's buildup of nuclear forces aims to create a strategic counterbalance, particularly against the United States, influencing global power dynamics and geopolitical stability. Xi Jinping's leadership has increasingly centralised nuclear decision-making, with political imperatives often overriding technical factors in shaping China's nuclear strategy. China perceives its growing tensions with the U.S. as an existential threat, driving a more proactive nuclear stance to safeguard its political system and security. Chinese military writings indicate flexibility around its "No First Use" policy, allowing for nuclear coercion under certain conditions, like significant conventional attacks. China's decision to construct large intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silo fields reflects an effort to ensure the survivability of its nuclear arsenal. Increasingly, China views its nuclear forces as playing a broader role in strategic stability, including responding to conventional military threats. China maintains strategic ambiguity in its nuclear doctrine, particularly concerning its willingness to escalate during crises, making its deterrence strategy less predictable. This elaboration delves into the assertion that there exists a distinctively Chinese approach to strategy, which endures despite China's evolution into a formidable nuclear-capable nation. This perspective suggests that even as China wields significant power



and possesses nuclear capabilities, its strategic decision-making may still be influenced by certain factors. These factors include an acute sensitivity to internal threats, a pronounced tendency towards suspicion and mistrust of external actors, and an overall mindset that may sometimes deviate from conventional global strategic norms. Consequently, there is a concern that in situations where these factors are heightened, there is a possibility of making decisions related to the use of nuclear weapons that might seem irrational or unpredictable from a global perspective.

## Notes

1. In nuclear ethics and deterrence theory, “no first use” (NFU) refers to a type of pledge or policy wherein a nuclear power formally refrains from the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in warfare, except for as a second strike in retaliation to an attack by an enemy power using WMD. Such a pledge would allow for a unique state of affairs in which a given nuclear power can be engaged in a conflict of conventional weaponry while it formally forswears any of the strategic advantages of nuclear weapons, provided the enemy power does not possess or utilise any such weapons of their own.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No\\_first\\_use#:~:text=In%20nuclear%20ethics%20and%20deterrence,an%20enemy%20power%20using%20WMD.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_first_use#:~:text=In%20nuclear%20ethics%20and%20deterrence,an%20enemy%20power%20using%20WMD.)
2. Mutual assured destruction (MAD) is a doctrine of military strategy and national security policy, which posits that a full-scale use of nuclear weapons by an attacker on a nuclear-armed defender with second-strike capabilities would result in the complete annihilation of both the attacker and the defender. It is based on the theory of rational deterrence, which holds that the threat of using strong weapons against the enemy prevents the enemy’s use of those same weapons. The strategy is a form of Nash equilibrium in which, once armed, neither side has any incentive to initiate a conflict or to disarm.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutual\\_assured\\_destruction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutual_assured_destruction)
3. The Thucydides Trap is a political theory that describes the dangerous situation that occurs when a rising power threatens to overthrow an established one. The theory is based on the work of the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, who described the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece as a result of the rise of Athens and the fear it instilled in Sparta.  
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/destined-war-can-america-and-china-escape-thucydides-trap>

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A comprehensive examination of China's evolving nuclear strategy since the 1960s reveals a distinctly Chinese approach to strategy, shaped by its strategic culture. Given the evolving security landscape, China's future deterrence posture holds significant implications for global powers. It becomes crucial to understand how China's strategic culture shapes its worldview and elucidates its behaviour on the international stage. Central to understanding China's approach to nuclear deterrence is the concept of strategic culture, which encompasses the beliefs, norms, and values that shape a nation's strategic behaviour. The correlation between Chinese strategic culture and nuclear strategy underscores the intricate interplay between historical legacies, ideological beliefs, and geopolitical imperatives. China's approach to nuclear weapons is shaped by its desire to safeguard national security, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic autonomy. Further, the nexus of stratagems and nuclear strategy reflects a deeply integrated approach to leveraging traditional strategic thought in modern geopolitical and military contexts. China leverages strategic ambiguity to shape perceptions and conceal intentions, drawing from ancient tactics like "hide a dagger in a smile". This approach, evident in its nuclear policies, provokes reactions, allowing China to assess adversaries' defences and uncover their vulnerabilities while maintaining flexibility and unpredictability. Understanding these correlations is essential for assessing China's nuclear intentions, managing strategic stability, and promoting arms control measures in the Asia-Pacific region. As China continues to assert its influence on the global stage, its strategic culture will remain a key determinant of its nuclear behaviour and international security dynamics.

• • •



Major General **Rohin Bawa**, YSM, an alumnus of the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, was commissioned into the First Gorkha Rifles in June 1993. He has a double Master's. He graduated from DSSC, Wellington, where he did a Master's in Defence & Strategic Studies and has also attended the prestigious Higher Defence Management course at the College of Defence Management, Secunderabad, wherein he acquired a Master's in Management Studies. He also acquired an M.Phil. degree from the most prestigious National Defence College, New Delhi. He is currently pursuing his Doctorate from Amity University, Noida. He has also completed the Basic Chinese Language course.

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