



Chinese Views on Deterrence

By DEAN CHENG

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Celebration of 50th anniversary of PLA Navy's North Sea Fleet as it pursues capability to operate from Indian Ocean to western Pacific

The issue of Chinese views of deterrence and its role within Chinese security policy has become increasingly important in analyses of future East Asian security developments. In considering Beijing's views, three considerations should be kept in mind:

- There is no bolt-out-of-the-blue experience in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) comparable to Pearl Harbor or Operation *Barbarossa*.

- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) does not seem to exhibit nearly the same degree of concern with inadvertent wars or the lessons from World War I as is common among American decisionmakers.

- The PRC view of deterrence is not bilateral, but more multilateral, as China has been concerned with a range of threats on its periphery.

Dean Cheng is a Research Fellow for Chinese Political and Security Affairs at The Heritage Foundation.

Each of these issues affects China's views of deterrence.

Chinese Definition of Deterrence

It is important first to consider how the Chinese define *deterrence* and how that compares with the Western understanding of that term. The Chinese term that is often equated with deterrence is *weishe*. In the *PLA Encyclopedia*, for example, the term *weishe zhanlue* is translated as "strategy of deterrence."¹

But translations are often imprecise. There is the Italian saying, "*Traduttore, traditore*," or "All translators are liars." For most Western analysts, deterrence is seen as dissuading an opponent from acting in a particular way or following a particular course of action. Thus, Thomas Schelling, in his 1966 book *Arms and Influence*, defines *deterrence* as "the threat intended to keep an adversary from doing something."² This definition is echoed by other Western analysts of deterrence. John Mearsheimer in *Conventional Deterrence* notes that "deterrence, in its broadest sense, means persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks."³

Schelling specifically differentiates deterrence from *compellence*, which he defines as "the threat intended to make an adversary do something."⁴ Glenn Snyder makes the same point by noting that deterrence "is the power to *dissuade* as opposed to the power to *coerce* or *compel*."⁵

This is in sharp contrast with the term *weishe*, which embodies *both* deterrence and compellence. The *PLA Encyclopedia*, again, defines a *strategy of deterrence*, or *weishe zhanlue*, as "the display of military power, or the threat of use of military power, in order to compel an opponent to submit."⁶ Other authoritative Chinese volumes expand on this.

Generals Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, in the PLA textbook *The Science of Military Strategy*, note that "deterrence plays two basic roles: one is to dissuade the opponent from doing something through deterrence, the other is to persuade the opponent what ought to be done through deterrence, and *both* demand the opponent *to submit to the deterrer's volition*."⁷ Thus, Peng and Yao in essence combine Schelling's definitions of deterrence and compellence within the Chinese term *weishe*.

A similar conflation occurs in a volume authored by the PLA National Defense University's Military Science Research Department, which attests that the purpose of deterrence is "to halt, or prevent, the other side from starting a conflict, and thus protect one's own interests from aggression. Or, it is to shake the other side's will to resist (*dikang yizhi*), and thus seize those interests or benefits that originally would have required conflict in order to obtain them."⁸

Finally, in *National Defense Theory* (*guofang lilun*), the second of a PLA-published series of volumes used as national defense teaching materials, strategic deterrence is seen as the adroit application of military strength, involving actual use or nonuse, to psychologically constrain an opponent's actions, or to cause him to submit.⁹ This same volume goes on to state specifically that not only can a defending side utilize deterrence to compel an aggressor to abandon offensive intentions, but also an offensive side can implement strategic deterrence, causing a defender to conclude that the cost of resistance is too high. By causing the other side to capitulate without fighting, or with minimal violence, one can then achieve the goal of "not fighting yet causing the enemy's troops to submit (*buzhan er qu ren zhibing*)."¹⁰ This, of course, is consistent with Sun-Tzu's observation that the greatest general is the one who can win without fighting.

Components of Deterrence

From the Chinese perspective, strategic deterrence (*zhanlue weishe*) involves all the components of "comprehensive national power (*zonghe guojia liliang*)."¹¹ These include military forces, economic power, diplomatic influence, scientific and technological capabilities, and even political and cultural unity. These serve to compel or deter opponents. These capabilities must be integrated so there is a coherent strategic deterrent at the disposal of the national leadership.

An essential component is real military power suitable to the types of wars that will be fought.¹² By this, the PLA means actual military forces currently fielded, in contrast with military *potential*, such as that embodied within a strong economy or a strong scientific and technological base. In today's environment, that means fielding a military that can fight "local wars under informationalized conditions"—that is, joint forces capable of exploiting modern information technology to wage noncontact, nonlinear, nonsymmetric



Secretary of Defense and Chinese officials participate in U.S.-China Track Two Dialogue in Washington

DOD (Cherie Cullen)

warfare on land, sea, air, outer space, and cyberspace.

Successful deterrence requires not only capabilities, however, but also the will to use said power. Moreover, it requires the ability to persuade an opponent that one *has* both that capability and will.¹³ This latter aspect is of special importance because from the Chinese perspective, successful application of *weishe* requires influencing the opponent's decision-makers. As *The Science of Military Strategy* notes, deterrence requires transmitting to an opponent both the existence of actual strength and the determination to use that strength in order to "impact directly on his mentality in creating a psychological pressure to shock and awe the opponent."¹⁴ *Weishe* is ultimately as much psychology as it is capability.

In discussing military capabilities for deterrent purposes, PLA analyses include conventional and nuclear forces, but also, increasingly, space and information capabilities as well.

First, there is nuclear deterrence, which the Chinese characterize as coming in three degrees:

- "maximum nuclear deterrence," in which an opponent may be disarmed with just the initial massive strike
- "minimum nuclear deterrence," in which a handful of nuclear weapons may strike an opponent's cities
- "moderate intensity nuclear deterrence," which involves a "sufficient and effective" nuclear capability.¹⁵

While the PLA has generally been seen as fielding a "minimum nuclear deterrence," it may now be shifting toward a "moderate intensity nuclear deterrence." The problem with nuclear deterrence, however, is that the destructiveness of nuclear weapons raises questions about the credibility of threats involving them.

Conventional deterrence relies on a nation's conventional military forces. In Chinese analysis, this is gaining in importance as conventional forces are more controllable, and ironically less destructive, than nuclear forces. They are therefore more usable than nuclear forces. Moreover, as modern technology has advanced, it has made non-nuclear forces much more capable, granting them the ability to wage long-range precision strikes and making "noncontact" warfare possible.

Space systems both enhance other forms of deterrence, while also serving as a deterrent in their own right. For conventional deterrence, they make it possible to fight noncontact, nonlinear, nonsymmetrical wars by providing all the necessary positioning, targeting, navigational, and weather data. Moreover, the ability to detect opponents makes it possible to deter enemy action by denying him the element of surprise.

For nuclear deterrence, PLA authors suggest that space systems may neutralize an opponent's nuclear deterrent so that, when paired with one's own nuclear forces, an opponent will be deterred or can be coerced due to the unpalatable choices it faces.¹⁶

In addition to complementing nuclear and conventional deterrence, PLA writings suggest that space systems may deter an opponent on their own. A space force effects deterrence in a number of ways. In the first place, because of the combination of expense, fragility, and vulnerability, one could hold an opponent's space infrastructure hostage. Much like nuclear deterrence, space deterrence, in this regard, becomes a question of cost-benefit analysis: Is, say, Taiwan worth the likely cost of repairing or replacing a badly damaged or even destroyed space infrastructure?¹⁷

Moreover, because space systems affect not only military but also economic, political, and diplomatic spheres, damage to them would have wide-ranging second-order repercussions.¹⁸ Damaging an opponent's space infrastructure would impose economic and diplomatic costs beyond those of simply replacing satellite systems. The combination of first- and second-order effects may be sufficient to persuade an opponent that it cannot attain victory at an acceptable price.

Finally, PLA authors also discuss the concept of information deterrence. Information deterrence—and information warfare, the use of information techniques writ large to influence foreign governments, militaries, and populations—is seen as a stand-alone form of interaction, distinct from more traditional forms of warfare, and offering the potential of achieving “enemy troops [submitting] without war,” that is, winning without fighting—the acme of the generals' skill, as Sun-Tzu writes.

There are two aspects to information deterrence. The first, more operational, aspect is the ability to influence the flow of information on the battlefield. The side that is able to better exploit information is seen as exercising information deterrence, a concept that is receiving growing attention in PLA writings. The second, more strategic, aspect is the ability to influence decisionmakers and the publics of one's own country, that of an opponent's, and those of third parties.¹⁹ This includes not only affecting the flow of information, but also having the ability to provide one's own information and narrative. Within this broader context, the Chinese discuss what they term the “three warfares” of legal warfare (or lawfare), psychological warfare, and public opinion (or media warfare). One should consider the recent creation of the Chinese 24-hour English language news service, with global access, within this context.

Views of Deterrence

So, how do China's views of deterrence mesh with 21st-century security requirements?

In the first place, *weishe* is not new. Deterrence has long been part of Chinese military thinking. The concept of People's War, the development of China's nuclear forces, and preparations for protracted war were all driven in part by the hope that such measures would make potential aggressors hesitate, while also putting in place the mechanisms necessary to fight and defeat an opponent should deterrence fail.

Second, just as China believes that maintaining national security requires “comprehensive national power,” so, too, strategic deterrence is best achieved through not only military but also economic, diplomatic, and political means. Only a rich, unified nation can deter an opponent across the full spectrum of capabilities—lending a whole new meaning to “escalation dominance.”

That said, it should be noted that the avowed goals of PRC defense policy now include constraining or limiting wars. One Chinese article notes that Jiang Zemin explicitly stated that limiting wars was now a vital part of the Strategic Guidelines for the New Period, which is the fundamental guidance for PLA thinking.²⁰ In essence, according to PLA authors, the Chinese military is expected to fulfill the mission of helping forestall the outbreak of war.

This view is consistent with Chinese views of *weishe*, since deterrence and war-fighting are seen not as opposites, but as complements. Wars can serve to underscore deterrence, and deterrence may occur within war.²¹ As important, the ability to “fight and win wars is the prerequisite for constraining wars.”²² In essence, the PRC believes that being able to fight and win wars, and making sure an opponent knows that, is the key to deterrence.

To this end, the uptick in public Chinese military activity, from out-of-area operations in the Gulf of Aden, to military exercises such as Vanguard 2010 and increased activity along the Ryukyus, to harassment of U.S. platforms such as the USNS *Impeccable* and *Victorious*, should all be seen in the context of the application of *weishe* toward the United States and other nations—both deterrence and compellence.

Finally, for the PLA and PRC leadership, the core question is how to realize a particular political goal without using force, while causing the enemy to believe that force may

nonetheless be used. This is an essential consideration because it emphasizes that the point of *weishe* is not simply to deter enemy actions, or even compel submission, but to achieve a given political goal. Thus, for the PLA, and arguably for the PRC leadership, *weishe* is not an end, but a means. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ PLA Encyclopedia Committee, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia*, Supplemental Volume (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2002), 477.

² Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 69.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 14.

⁴ Schelling, 69.

⁵ Emphasis added. Glenn Snyder, “Deterrence and Defense,” in *The Use of Force*, ed. Robert Art (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 31.

⁶ PLA Encyclopedia Committee, 477.

⁷ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), 215.

⁸ Emphasis added. National Defense University Science Research Department, *New Perspectives on Military Transformation: Explaining 200 New Military Concepts* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2004), 85.

⁹ Luo Youli, ed., *National Defense Theory* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2002), 113–114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹ Zhou Peng and Yun Enbing, “Developing the Theory of Strategic Deterrence with Chinese Characteristics,” *China Military Science*, no. 3 (2004).

¹² Xu Shouwen, “Briefly Discussing Strategic Deterrence in the Information Age,” *PLA Daily*, May 7, 2009.

¹³ Zhou and Yun.

¹⁴ Peng and Yao, 214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁶ Hong Bin and Liang Xiaoqiu, “The Basics of Space Strategic Theory,” *China Military Science*, no. 1 (2002).

¹⁷ Xu Wei and Chang Xianqi, “Discussing Space Deterrence,” *Academy of Equipment Command and Technology* 13, no. 1 (February 2002).

¹⁸ Li Jingjun and Dan Yuquan, “The Strategy of Space Deterrence,” *China Military Science*, no. 1 (2002).

¹⁹ “Information Deterrence and You,” *PLA Daily*, June 9, 2004.

²⁰ Zhou and Yun.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Chen Zhou, “On the Development of China's Defense National Defense Policy in the New Situation,” *China Military Science*, no. 6 (2009).