

Speak Softly and Conceal a Big Stick: A Diplomat's Strategy for Competing with China

George Bartle (/the-bridge?author=5f14ca7f74141a786990d2d8) · November 3, 2020 (/the-bridge/2020/11/03/speak-softly-and-conceal-a-big-stick-a-diplomats-strategy-for-competing-with-china)

The generation of civil and foreign service officers that came of age in the post-Cold War and 9/11 worlds were often more steeped in non-traditional security threats and sub-national conflict than competitive statecraft. Yet, the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy point to a security environment where strategic competition, particularly competition with China, is ascendant. Although the allure of geopolitics has transfixed much of the Department of State's political leadership, inter-state competition is a cross-cutting issue rife with bureaucratic and policy complexities that often makes it difficult for agencies, bureaus, or offices not traditionally focused on inter-state competition to bring their regional and thematic expertise to bear.[1] Adding to these challenges is a tendency for public servants unfamiliar with Chinese history and politics to latch onto talking points like malign influence and debt-trap diplomacy as guideposts when creating programs, papers, or policies. While these terms may be powerful narratives for an external audience, U.S. foreign policy practitioners should recognize them for what they are: effective messaging.[2] It is when the U.S. foreign policy community starts to internalize Washington's external messaging that it runs the risk of misidentifying problems and proposing ineffective solutions.



President Donald J. Trump in China, November 2017 (Shealah Craighead/White House Photo)

Career foreign policy professionals are understandably eager to work one of the most pressing national security challenges of the 21st century, but effective tactics aimed at competing with the People's Republic of China require thoughtful discretion, nuance, and the discipline to resist incentives that encourage a myopic focus on the short-term. The strategy below outlines ways the U.S. national security community can effectively—and discreetly—contribute to efforts aimed at competing with the People's Republic of China outside the paradigm of political rhetoric, jargon, and reactive diplomacy. It also offers a set of goals that take into account Washington's constrained resources over the medium term and the importance of avoiding a framework like that of the Cold War, where the United States is seen as seeking victory over the Chinese Communist Party, regime change in Beijing, or an end state where countries are forced to choose sides. These subtle, yet achievable, goals are 1) ensure friends, allies, and partners can protect their sovereignty, identity, and freedom of choice and 2) the United States is not shut out of any region and maintains an ability to compete with China for global influence in the economic, ideological, cultural, military, technological, and political realms.[3]

DEFINING THE PROBLEM: A CLASH OF IDEALS, NOT CIVILIZATIONS

Whether a real reckoning with past policy failures or a calculated measure of the current political winds, many influential China hands have walked back their previously held views that engagement with the Chinese Communist Party would eventually bring Beijing into the fold of a liberal, rules-based order.[4] Elizabeth Economy summed these well-meaning foreign-policy thinkers who either downplayed the Chinese Communist Party's stated goals and ideology as empty rhetoric from a bygone era or overestimated the transformative power of liberal ideals, writing, "We must deal with China as it is today," not how we think it should be or want it to be.[5] Most in the foreign policy community now recognize Beijing's surveillance state as antithetical to the U.S. vision of an open society where ideals like individual rights and personal security serve as the *sine qua non* for the state-

society relationship.[6] As John Garnaut notes in his widely read 2017 speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping's "project of total ideological control does not stop at China's borders. It is packaged to travel with Chinese students, tourists, migrants and especially money. It flows through the channels of the Chinese language internet, pushes into all the world's major media and cultural spaces and generally keeps pace with and even anticipates China's increasingly global interests." [7] The United States must ensure there are competing narratives that credibly challenge Beijing's worldview and its definition of what constitutes a "harmonious society." [8] Washington must also prevent pivotal regions like Southeast Asia from falling into a Beijing-led hierarchical system closed to U.S. influence and engagement.

Before diving into specifics, it is important to note three overriding concepts defining strategy and planning when it comes to China-focused programs. First, Western culture is not incompatible with traditional Chinese political philosophy, even if communist authoritarianism is. China's contribution to Western governance structures through concepts like bureaucracy and meritocracy is worthy of study and recognition when considering the evolution of statecraft and international governance. The aspirations of China's people should be a welcome contribution to the global marketplace of ideas. Second, the notion that China's reemergence will inevitably lead East Asian international relations back to a pre-European China-led hierarchical system, as some scholars have argued, is misguided historical determinism akin to reinventing 19th Century American manifest destiny. [9] Likewise, claims that Chinese culture is incompatible with liberal values are as much a falsehood as saying U.S. democracy could never fall under domestic tyranny. Third, competition with China should not preclude cooperation, even if it is now apparent that Washington's previous approach—the idea that the United States could share leadership in certain areas and multilateral institutions with Beijing—was flawed. Areas of cooperation cannot follow ideologically driven views that the Chinese Communist Party will inevitably become a more responsible stakeholder once it is brought into the liberal, rules-based order. [10] Even within the context of cooperative organizations, the United States and its partners must vie for influence and leadership.

THE ABCS OF GRAND STRATEGY: ALWAYS BE COMPETING

Competing with China requires proactive diplomacy where bureaucrats work to develop and execute flexible tactics aimed at achieving measurable objectives that advance a broader strategy in pursuit of steady foreign policy goals. This does not mean an office, bureau, or agency needs to dramatically shift its mission. An entity's main lines of effort—whether counterterrorism, stabilization, environmental protection, or economic development—can all help countries protect their sovereignty, identity, and freedom of choice as long as an Always Be Competing principle is built into each project/initiative and that this competition is tied to clear goals, such as those noted above.

While an Always Be Competing approach would not require a significant shift in mission, it will require a shift in mindset. For example, the goal of some counterterrorism work in the southern Philippines had previously been tied to reducing violence, stemming the spread of violent extremist organizations, and mitigating terrorist threats. [11] An Always Be Competing approach would not abandon these important objectives but would define the goal as contributing to a process that transforms the Philippines from a country long consumed with internal security threats to a partner capable of a viable external defense. Attaching these lofty long-term goals to a specific office's work would not always mean a change in tactics or programming. What it would do is change incentives, thus shaping how bureaucrats approach planning and project design. In most cases, adopting an

Always Be Competing approach would compliment and sometimes enhance existing projects or engagements. If the goal in the Philippines were to simply reduce violence and mitigate terrorist threats, programming decisions would reflect the medium-term nature of those incentives. In shifting to an Always Be Competing incentive structure, programming decisions would still look at ways to reduce violence, but they would also incorporate tactics aimed at transitioning the Armed Forces of the Philippines from its domestic security role into an outward-focused force with a wary eye on its maritime domain. These tactics could include programs aimed at good governance; women, peace, and security; community resiliency, or security sector assistance—all within many U.S. government agencies' existing lines of effort.

SPEAK SOFTLY AND CONCEAL A BIG STICK

A critical component of an Always Be Competing approach to programming and engagements is that it remains indirect and discreet. Policy desks at U.S. foreign policy agencies work on direct competition. They are on the front lines of competitive statecraft and often wary when well-meaning entities seek to engage in programs broadly aimed at countering China. While an office's internal planning documents should ensure strategic competition goals are included in programmatic incentives, most entities have nothing to gain by overtly advertising their work as countering China. Not only does this rankle certain bureaucratic counterparts, it is often counterproductive.

For example, direct public shaming has achieved many positive effects in raising awareness of Beijing's shocking policies in Xinjiang, but it also allowed the Chinese Communist Party an opportunity to bend the narrative on what constitutes counterterrorism. The concept of a Xinjiang model—which is actually a collection of regime stability programs having little to do with counterterrorism—did not exist until intense international pressure led Beijing to double down on its policies.[12] In defending its tactics, Beijing stretched the realm of acceptable international discourse on counterterrorism, making it easier for other countries to follow its path.[13] If the U.S. goal were to change Beijing's behavior, promote U.S. values, and ensure important geographical regions remain open to the United States and its partners, Washington could complement its direct tactics with indirect approaches. For example, U.S. diplomats could deploy experts to pivotal regions like Central Asia to brief counterparts on peer-reviewed research, data, and best practices on rights-based approaches to countering violent extremism without ever having to mention Xinjiang. Much more than Americans, Asian populations are sensitive to nuance and indirect communication and would likely appreciate the attempt to debunk China's policies without discussing the Xinjiang issue directly.[14]

IF EVERY CHINESE ACTION IS SEEN...AS A THREAT TO THE INTERESTS OF THE UNITED STATES...AMERICAN TOOLS OF NATIONAL POWER WILL QUICKLY BECOME DIFFUSED AND INEFFECTIVE.

Beyond the tactical, indirect competition also complicates Beijing's defensive strategies. The Chinese Communist Party feeds off Washington's bluster, but it responds to American strength. Bluster provides clear targets to counterattack whereas quiet strength demonstrates red lines Beijing is often hesitant to cross.[15] Yet, in an era where likes and retweets are an acceptable metric of diplomatic success, the incentive structure for most bureaucrats is not conducive to the adoption of discreet or indirect tactics.[16] Nor are traditional incentives for promotion and advancement that elevate skills

in crisis response over strategic planning or reactive diplomacy over deep learning and professional education. An Always Be Competing approach to concept and tactic development can help elevate incentives that encourage subtle programming focused on long-term goals while deemphasizing well-intentioned impulses that seek to uncover and respond to Chinese malign influence all around the world. If every Chinese action is seen (or is incentivized to be seen) as a threat to the interests of the United States, which in turn requires Washington to respond, American tools of national power will quickly become diffused and ineffective. The Always Be Competing approach asks bureaucrats to consider how their work ties into long-term strategic competition goals—and promotes discreet proactive programming to that effect—while minimizing incentives that encourage bureaucrats to go abroad in search of Chinese Communist Party monsters to destroy.



18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Wikimedia)

Given the incentive structure of most political appointees, it is understandable that they often push for a more direct and visible approach to competition that seeks to achieve effects in the short term. While the direct approach is an important part of the diplomatic toolkit, career foreign policy professionals have the leeway—the responsibility, really—to also concentrate on the discreet long-term. U.S. bureaucrats would also do well to remember a key asymmetrical difference between China and the United States that should guide long-term planning: the existential risks to Beijing of a major foreign policy failure are significantly higher compared to Washington, and as such, the U.S. consistently operates from a position of strength. As a liberal democracy, the United States is mostly impervious to foreign attacks on its elected government even though those attacks can sometimes discredit a political party or politician.

Although foreign powers have tried to exploit divisions within the United States to undermine its democratic system, it has not been attacks on Washington's image that have diminished U.S. national power. Conversely, the Chinese Communist Party's foreign policies and domestic governing legitimacy become increasingly vulnerable as its image is diminished.[17] China's party-state system

of government increases the risk factor for Beijing should an aggressive foreign policy effort end in failure. Past miscalculations in Southeast Asia and the Middle East may have roiled politics in the United States, but they never threatened to bring down its system of representative government. Conversely, if Beijing blundered into a conflict in the South China Sea where it suffered high costs at the hands of a Southeast Asian country like Vietnam or stumbled into a debt crisis triggered by the One Belt One Road initiative, the Chinese Communist Party's diminished image could become a prelude to debilitating intra-party factionalism, or even dynastic decline.[18]

The United States' economic and political system is resilient, and when Americans have faith in its liberal foundations can even be antifragile. History has shown the United States capable of not only bouncing back from severe wounds and major blunders but learning from its mistakes and getting stronger. If U.S. foreign policy professionals speak softly and conceal a big stick, it will be an advantage for Washington in its long-term competition with the Chinese Communist Party.

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NOTES:

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