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## **Understanding China's Strategic Culture: A Clash of Realpolitik and Cultural Moralism**

*By Jonghyuk Lee*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*China's foreign policies are shaped by two distinct political cultures: the authoritarian culture of communist ideology and the cultural moralism based on Confucianism. While these values are interwoven in China's strategic culture, their manifestation varies among different schools of thought. Understanding these differences provides fresh insights into ongoing discussions on China's ability to serve as a responsible global superpower. Although Western and Chinese perspectives on China's strategic culture differ significantly, it is essential to consider nuanced views that differentiate between various leaders in China.*

### **COMMENTARY**

To evaluate and predict China's foreign policies, it is essential to have a contextual understanding of the country's political culture. When we consider China as a nation, two primary cultural characteristics come to mind. The first is the authoritarian culture of communist ideology, which is often described as "socialism with Chinese characteristics". The second is the traditional Chinese culture based on Confucianism.

China's strategic culture may be seen as a combination of these two values. The degree of emphasis on each value varies among different thinkers, and the differences will offer new insights into the ongoing discussions on China's credibility to serve as a responsible global superpower.

### **Western Views on China's International Relations**

When it comes to analysing the strategic culture of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), western scholars and policymakers have tended to emphasise its communist

and authoritarian nature. This has led to a focus on the CCP's propensity for covert actions, aggression towards enemies, and reliance on violence to solve problems.

Furthermore, the CCP's lack of democratic institutions and popular consent means that its leadership is prone to irrationality and lacks accountability, as there are no checks and balances to prevent radical and aggressive actions. Given these factors, Western observers have been cautious about the emergence of a powerful post-communist and authoritarian regime like the CCP.

From this perspective, the CCP's strategic culture is fundamentally realist in its orientation, prioritising power and *realpolitik*. The strategies employed by CCP leaders, such as Deng Xiaoping's "*tao guang yang hui*" (keeping a low profile until we have capabilities) and Hu Jintao's "*he ping jue qi*" (peaceful rising), are viewed as strategic deceptions and political propaganda.

While hardliners like Mao Zedong expressed open hostility towards the capitalist world, pragmatists like Deng Xiaoping and his successors are seen as covert, deceptive, and manipulative to maximise their own benefits. However, despite the shift in CCP leadership from Mao to Deng and beyond, Western observers maintain that there has been no fundamental political or institutional change in China. The CCP remains authoritarian and resilient in its ideological narrations, but there is little evidence of a significant shift in actual mindset.

Indeed, Deng Xiaoping's policy is interpreted as a means of avoiding provocation when China is weak while building strength for future assertiveness when it becomes strong. This suggests that the CCP's pursuit of peace and pacifism may be merely a strategic ploy, with a clear agenda for future action. China's history is replete with examples of the country using force when the opportunity presented itself, such as in its past conflicts with Korea, India, and Vietnam. More recently, the CCP's aggressive stance towards Taiwan, including explicit threats of violence by PLA generals and spokespeople, has only served to reinforce this perception.

### **Chinese Views on China's International Relations**

On the other hand, the perspective of Chinese scholars and thinkers regarding the CCP's political narrations presents a different interpretation. They tend to emphasise cultural moralism, which is rooted in the Confucian preference for non-violent approaches in addressing challenges. According to this perspective, Chinese leaders genuinely seek peace and restrain the use of force because their mindset is built upon Confucian values of virtue (*de*), benevolence (*ren*), and righteousness (*yi*) as the basic norms in training officials, maintaining domestic order, and conducting foreign policy.

This cultural moralism sometimes constrains Chinese aggressive behaviour. The CCP always portrays itself as a moral, benevolent, and selfless ruler, claiming to have the "mandate of heaven". One popular mentality in China is the "benevolent central government" image, which attributes all the bad things happening on the ground to corrupt and selfish local officials. The central leadership, on the other hand, is seen as essentially benevolent and working for the general public. A good example of this narrative is the way the COVID-19 pandemic was seen to have been handled. The Wuhan mayor was blamed for all the mistakes, while Xi Jinping was portrayed as the

saviour of the country. However, this perspective can also facilitate the use of force when it is morally justified.

Chinese leaders, especially under Xi Jinping, continue to harp on the "national humiliation" of the colonial past and China's return to its global leading role. Extreme emotional moralism can justify the use of any means to achieve this goal.

Therefore, both Western and Chinese perspectives on the CCP's strategic culture are shaped by their respective cultural and historical backgrounds, which influence their interpretation of China's actions and intentions. Western scholars tend to focus on the communist and authoritarian nature of the CCP and see it as a realist power that emphasises realpolitik and the use of power and guns. Chinese scholars, on the other hand, emphasise cultural moralism rooted in Confucian values and the benevolent central government image, which sometimes constrains Chinese aggressive behaviour, but can also be used to justify the use of force when it is seen as morally justified.

### **Nuanced Views Between Western and Chinese Thinkers**

There are two distinct cultural influences on China's foreign policies: communist and authoritarian culture, and Chinese and Confucian culture. Both aspects contribute to the country's political discourse, and it is essential to consider both ideologies when analysing China's behaviour. However, it is also important to note that China is not a unitary actor, and there have been substantial differences in leadership preferences and characteristics across different leaders. The current leader, Xi Jinping, has a more aggressive and forceful foreign policy than his predecessor, Hu Jintao.

Xi's leadership style is characterised by a strong domestic image and a personalist one-person dictatorship, which deviates from the previous collective single-party leadership. His source of legitimacy in Chinese domestic politics is derived from the portrayal of him as a "strong leader" and "saviour of China". Therefore, his aggressive foreign policy is partly driven by his need to maintain this legitimacy. In contrast, Hu Jintao's leadership was more resilient, and he had many flexible options to deal with foreign affairs; thanks to the collective leadership. Hu focused on expanding individual rights, improving democratic values, and integrating into international society.

Under Xi's personalist leadership, any significant blunder or weakness creates enormous political pressure on him, making it difficult to maintain cautious and reassuring foreign policies toward China's neighbours. Consequently, Xi has adopted more repressive and deflective strategies to maintain his political power. In conclusion, a nuanced understanding of China's foreign policy requires a balanced view that takes into account both cultural influences and differences in leadership style and preferences.

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