

CNEAS COMMENTARY

Decoding China's Strategic Culture: Chinese Aggressions Under the Veil of 'Just Wars'

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Introduction

The concept of strategic culture has been a pertinent subject of discourse, especially in the context of analysing and predicting the behaviour of nations along with grasping the origins of their foreign policy which is deeply embedded in nations' respective developmental histories.

Alastair Iain Johnston defines strategic culture as an integrated “system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious”¹. Johnston's definition places strategic culture at the centre of a nation's decision making and one that can be seen as a set of preferences that have and continue to guide a state's strategic and foreign policy decisions.

On this background, decoding Chinese strategic culture becomes an important mechanism to firstly, gauge to an extent the unpredictable behaviour that China exhibits and secondly, it presents itself as an entry point into understanding the patterns that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) engages in as, the Chinese themselves see strategic culture as a pertinent determinant of their behaviour and that of other nations.

Mahnken argues that disentangling Chinese leaders' portrayal of themselves from how they act is a particular challenge.² This challenge is elaborated upon in the works of many scholars of strategic thought. It arises because of the portrayal of China as a peace-loving nation and one

¹ Johnston, A. I. (1995). Thinking about Strategic Culture. *International Security*, 19(4), 32–64. p46
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119>

² Mahnken, G. T. (2011). *Secrecy & Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture*. MacArthur Foundation. Lowly Institute for International Policy.
https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Mahnken_Secrecy_and_stratagem_1.pdf

that has a pacifist strategic culture, and this portrayal fails to align with its actions. It is the presence of this dichotomy between portrayal and behaviour that makes the study of Chinese strategic culture increasingly important.

Colonel Johnson in his thesis argues that strategic culture consists of three frames which interact with each other to influence national security leadership decisions. The first frame is the identity frame which includes states' perception of itself and other nations, informed by its history, geography, and philosophical traditions. The second frame; a strategy frame which encompasses the preferred strategies to preserve or expand the national security which is influenced by the identity frame and the non-cultural, structural aspects of the environment. The third frame; the environment frame includes "perceived interstate relative balances of power" which are understood from a structural realist perspective.³ This piece would borrow Johnson's framework to comment on China's strategic culture using the tensions between the identity and strategic frameworks that Johnson has elaborated.

China's Strategic Culture: Just War as a License for Violence

Confucius, about twenty-five hundred years ago was asked by a Chinese duke, the lord of a sub-state under all under-heaven system, what "the most important thing" was according to him, Confucius answered " It must be politics".⁴ "Justified order" is the Chinese word for politics which indicates the "civilized order that determines the common fortune of all peoples."⁵ The understanding of this civilized order in context of the traditional Chinese order, which is centred around the concept of the ideal emperor whose power was boundless and one who holds the Mandate of Heaven, is a requisite to fathom the concept of "Just War".

Confucian lays down a guide regarding the emperor's authority and the structure of the state. The internal organization of the political system is such that if the emperor holds the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) his authority will encapsulate all the ones living under heaven (*tianxia*). Given that the emperor is appointed by heaven, regional limits cease to exist on his power⁶. Here lies the important interpretation that domestic and foreign policy are not separated which

³ Johnson, R. J.(2022). The Evolution of Strategic Cultural Thought and Its Application to an Understanding of Chinese Strategic Culture. FAOA Journal of International Affairs. <https://faoajournal.substack.com/p/the-evolution-of-strategic-cultural>

⁴ Tingyang and Dallymayr(2013). Contemporary Chinese Political Thought. The University Press of Kentucky. Chap. 3

⁵ Ibid.p46.

⁶ C. (n.d.). THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN: THEN AND NOW. <https://orcasia.org/public/the-mandate-of-heaven-then-and-now>

means that internal and external wars are not distinguished from one another. This underlines the understanding that the traditional Chinese civilization is one without boundaries. As Godehardt elucidates “ The union of internal and external politics (or wars) is the central phenomenon within Confucian writings.”⁷

The narrative of ‘Century of Humiliation’, which stretched from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century is employed by the Chinese state as a pretext to their actions today. The leaders see Chinese current rise as the return to China’s ‘natural position’ in the world order i.e., the position of the ‘Middle Kingdom’. This narrative according to Mahnken pertains to China’s perceived cultural and geographical superiority, which places China at the core or centre of the hierarchical international system and the tributaries on its periphery. If the tributaries followed the hierarchy, there was little need for war.⁸

The notion of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ is still active in China’s foreign policy. It presents itself as a justification for the series of aggressions that China indulges in through the instrument of ‘Just Wars’. The examination of Just Wars is done using the philosophical texts from the Autumn and Spring Period, the Warring States Period, writings of the Confucian classics; Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, as well as the seven military classics.

There exists an inherent dichotomy in the literature on Just Wars wherein on the one hand it condemns the use of force and wars while on the other hand justifies the use of warfare under certain circumstances. The Chinese capitalize on this exact dichotomy; it portrays itself as a peace-loving nation opposed to the notion of hegemony and expansion while it employs aggression as seen in various instances in history.

According to the Confucian perspective, war if waged by the emperor is then justified. Although the Confucian, Mengzi, warns that the war for profits and conquest are condemned whereas he elucidates the difference between war and “punishment”, hence a “punitive expedition” is viewed from a different lens as it is morally justified for the reason for such a punitive war is to prevent the political order of the middle kingdom from declining. Just wars also include the possibility of State X which is ruled by Confucian morals to invade State Y

⁷ Godehardt, N. (2008). *The Chinese Meaning of Just War and Its Impact on the Foreign Policy of the People’s Republic of China*. German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA).
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07520>

⁸ Mahnken, G. T. (2011).

which is not governed by Confucian morals. For Confucians, punitive war is justified when there is “potential danger”.⁹

Just Wars also encompass the notion of defensive wars. Sun Tzu, advocates ‘attacking the enemy’s strategy’ meaning the enemy should be nipped in the bud before it instrumentalizes into an actual threat. Sun Tzu also talks about “foreknowledge” to minimize the possibility of war; hence espionage constitutes as a legitimate component of Just War. He further identifies deception as a fundamental basis for warfare.¹⁰

The Just War concept gives the emperor the authority or the mandate to engage in violence if the political order or harmony is challenged for violence is less dangerous compared to long periods of continuous disorder or social unrest. The events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 stands as the ideal exhibit in Chinese history where this philosophy was exemplified¹¹. The increasing insecurity regarding the collapse of the state and disruption of harmony in the mind of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping led to the use of force to suppress the protests, resulting in the death of unarmed student protestors. In the eyes of the leaders, the events of 1989 fell in the ambit of a ‘Just War’ which enabled the persistence of peace and harmony in the state at the cost of a massacre.

According to Johnson’s framework, the People’s Republic of China maintains the identity frame of being the central authority in the middle kingdom, one which the state endeavours to revive. Any threat to this identity frame, like the one posed by the Hong Kong protests in the recent past, enables China to employ its strategy frame of cracking down on the protests to maintain its stronghold and preserve the middle kingdom.

The unabashed abuse of the notion of Just War is one that should concern the international community as for China it is the ideal instrument to revive the nation’s ‘natural position’ under the pretext of the ‘Century of Humiliation’. The issue lies in China seeing its acts of aggression as justified even if they might go against the decorum of the established international order. The façade of being a peace-loving nation and the sympathy that they wish to garner using the

⁹ Godehardt, N. (2008).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nathan, A. J. (2001). The Tiananmen Papers. *Foreign Affairs*, 80(1), 2–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050041>

‘Century of Humiliation’ starts to fail when the international community becomes aware of the license that the concept of Just War gives China.

Lifting the Veil of Just Wars: Decoding Chinese Actions

The various leaders that the People’s Republic of China has witnessed have persisted in using Just Wars to their advantage. From Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, the identity frame of China has continued to be one that was rising to the natural position dictated by the Mandate of Heaven.

Scobell in his book *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, presents three areas under which Chinese actions fall under; general security, external security, and domestic security.¹² Under general security, China maintains national unification as an uncompromising value and further showcases a ‘siege mentality’ in the sphere of geopolitics. Considering external security; China maintains that it engages only in ‘Just Wars’ which are the wars of the oppressed (China) against the oppressor given the ‘Century of Humiliation’. It also engages in ‘active defence’ which includes preventive strikes. China has quoted Just War and self-defence as a justification to all its aggressive actions since 1949. The sending of an expeditionary force to Korea with the objective to establish communist control during the Korean War (1950-1953) under Mao to the recent border escalation with India reflects the middle kingdom mentality of China.

The third area of domestic security; China is always anxious about internal chaos and wishes to maintain the mandate of heaven, hence indulges in crackdowns on any uprisings in the State like that of the Tiananmen Square and its actions in Taiwan all reflect China’s insecurities. The case of Hong Kong has stood as an impediment to the mandate of heaven given its demand for independence from the Umbrella Movement in 2014 to the protests in 2019.¹³ Chinese aggressions in Hong Kong in 2019 stem from the anxiety regarding the possible chaos that Hong Kong’s independence fervour may provoke. Playing the ‘Just War’ card seems imperative for China as Hong Kong’s rejection of the Chinese state sends similar messages to neighbouring nations which hamper Chinese ambitions.

¹² Scobell, A.(2003). *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510502>

¹³ Maizland, L. (2022, May 19). *Hong Kong’s Freedoms: What China Promised and How It’s Cracking Down*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/hong-kong-freedoms-democracy-protests-china-crackdown>

The strategic framework that China employs in response to the identity framework creates a positive feedback loop feeding the identity framework even further. The strategic framework of cracking down on the Tiananmen Square due to the identity framework of maintaining the 'Mandate of Heaven', fuels the identity framework of Middle Kingdom further. The narrative of Just Wars presents itself as an important player in this positive feedback loop.

The ambit of 'Just Wars' seems to have expanded today, encompassing strategic advances, deception tactics, debt-trap diplomacy, and economic partnerships, besides aggression. China's String of Pearls strategy which aims to secure its presence in the Indian Ocean Region reflects one of the many facets of 'Just War' which is 'active defence'. Even though China claims the ports in the String of Pearls to be solely commercial, there appears to be a growing footprint of military bases as well.¹⁴ The identity framework of 'national rejuvenation' or the 'Chinese dream' results in the strategic framework of securing the Indian Ocean Region to achieve the greatness China once had reached. Similarly, China's engagement with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) reflects a similar identity- strategy feedback loop, as to achieve the Chinese dream and become a global superpower, securing the PICs which lie in the 'Far Seas' becomes a requisite.

Strategic economic partnerships like the Belt and Road initiative hint towards Chinese efforts to build a Sino centric world. The nations involved in the 'New Silk Road', precarious elements of BRI's lending practices which makes nations economically reliant on China, and the geopolitical implications of BRI's projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) all confirm the ascent of a new facet of 'Just War', confirming the identity framework of the 'Middle Kingdom'.

Conclusion

The Strategic culture of China indeed reflects the deep cultural history and legacy of many thinkers of the nation, but it also presents itself as an instrument through which the state can violate the decorum set by the international order. Further, the Just War concept stands as the

¹⁴ Ashraf, J. (2017). String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture. *Strategic Studies*, 37(4), 166–181. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48537578>

ideal mechanism which allows China to conduct aggressive actions to fulfil its objectives of the Middle Kingdom.

Just War is the only concept that allows China to be an aggressor nation without breaking out of its stance of being a peace-loving nation, allowing China to maintain its “Good State” façade.

The gravity of the manipulation of Just War by China becomes clear only after analysing it in the context of China’s traditional political order. The emergence of borders in the modern- or present-day Chinese state does not impede it from maintaining the ‘Middle Kingdom’ mentality that it has always maintained.

The principal issue with the Chinese state is the fact that it still operates with the ‘Middle Kingdom’ mindset when the times have evidently changed. The fervour to restore the Chinese state to the natural position ceases to be just a dream when one realizes the history of aggressions the nation undertook under the veil of ‘Just War.’

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Ashraf, J. (2017). String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture. *Strategic Studies*, 37(4), 166–181. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48537578>