PHASE ZERO

How China Exploits It, Why the United States Does Not

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In October 2006 General Charles Wald, Deputy Commander U.S. European Command, brought "Phase Zero" into the joint lexicon with the publication of an article, "The Phase Zero Campaign."[1] Over the last five years the concept of taking coordinated action in peacetime to affect the strategic environment has become widely accepted and is now integrated into theater campaign plans. These activities focus on building capacity of partners and influencing potential adversaries to avoid war. In contrast, Chinese strategic culture has encouraged taking actions to defeat an enemy prior to the onset of hostilities for two and a half millennia. This accounts, in part, for the manner in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) applies the elements of national power in the steady-state environment to advance its strategic interests. While the United States remains focused on preparing the environment and building partners, Chinese strategic culture states a preference for defeating an adversary before what Western thought thinks of as war has begun. This outlook ultimately places the PRC in a position of strategic advantage. To meet future challenges like that posed by the PRC, the United States should better integrate Phase Zero with contingency (crisis) planning, then design and execute operations in the steady-state environment that go beyond avoiding war and attempt to settle conflicts in accordance with the national interests of the United States.

It is important to remember that the fundamental purpose of the military is war, which Clausewitz defines as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."[2] If the purpose of Phase Zero is to be changed to reaching a decision —winning—in the steady-state environment, it must be discussed not only in terms of bending the enemy's will but as including all components of national power—diplomatic, informational, and economic, as well as military—that can be brought to bear against an adversary.

U.S. military planners have used the term "Phase Zero" for only five years, and it has no equivalent in Chinese strategic tradition. However, as this article aims to influence the manner in which U.S. planners approach Phase Zero, the phrase will be used to discuss both U.S. and Chinese thinking on how to employ the instruments of national power prior to armed combat.

From that basis, this article will analyze how Chinese strategic culture encourages decisive action prior to the onset of hostilities. Recent PRC actions will then be examined in this light to illustrate how a more decisive concept of Phase Zero can be implemented. The strategic culture of the United States will then be examined to understand why it has not more fully incorporated the concept of Phase Zero into planning and operations, despite the welcome the concept has enjoyed in the context of the operations against Islamic fundamentalists.

THE CHINESE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The seeds of Chinese strategic culture were sown in the chaos of the Warring States period (475 to 221 BC). This epoch of continuous warfare saw seven states compete for dominance. They enlisted the aid of administrators and strategists who would eventually catalog the principles that came to epitomize Chinese political and military thought. These documents retain their relevance today, not only because of the longevity of Chinese civilization but because they are still read by, and influence, PRC decision makers.[3]

The Chinese intellectual tradition developed separately from that of the West and approaches the world from a different perspective. As one Western scholar notes, "Instead of seeking to pick out common features that are more or less fixed, more or less stable, it sets out to explore the limits of the possibilities of change."[4] In fact, it is in this very notion of change that much of traditional Chinese strategic thinking rests. Central to this understanding is the concept of *shi* (勢).[5] *Shi* can be translated as "power," "momentum," "tendency," or "state of affairs."[6] Another Western scholar, attempting to convey all its contextual meanings, translates it as "strategic configuration of power."[7] This is sufficient when discussing troop formations and physical force but seems to fall short in passages such as "[The king] displays his form but conceals his nature. He is like the heights of Heaven, which cannot be perceived. . . . If he should execute but does not, great thieves will appear. If strategic military power [*shi*] is not exercised, enemy states will grow strong."[8] This passage from *The Six Secret Teachings of Tai Gong* suggests that *shi* is more than bringing forces to bear but includes an existent potential that may or may not be employed by the king. In fact, it is in the sense of potential in any situation for change and development that *shi* helps shed light on how Chinese strategic culture views operations in what the West has come to call Phase Zero.

Most confusing from the Western perspective is the sense that this latent potential naturally comes to be. Various Chinese philosophical traditions admonish their followers for trying to alter the potentiality of a situation. In fact, attempting to change the future is often viewed as disadvantageous.[9] If this is the case, how is strategy to be understood at all? How can there *be* any strategy at all?

Mencius, who was arguably the most influential disciple of Confucius and whose teachings were influential in the development of Confucian thought, alludes to this apparent dichotomy in his discussion of the spirit.[10] He argues that the spirit must be nourished and protected but that one should not "try to assist its natural growth." To illustrate he draws an analogy to a man who, in attempting to improve the size of his crop, ruins his corn by pulling on it. However, "those who think it useless to feed their spirit and simply let it alone are as it were neglecting to weed their crops."[11] In other words, one must take action, but by nurturing the already developing situation and establishing the conditions necessary for the desired outcome, not by intervening directly in the process—that is, the potential of the corn's natural growth.

To intervene as little as possible, one must intervene as early as possible. One gets a sense of this in Sunzi's admonition that "the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities."[12] By acting on a situation as early as possible—and as far away from the ultimate objective as possible—one achieves the desired result with least effort. Sunzi also argues that he who excels at warfare "directs his measures toward victory, conquering those who are already defeated."[13] The general knows the outcome because he has read the situation correctly and influenced it well before battle is engaged. This sheds light on Sunzi's often repeated dictum that the best general wins without fighting.[14] He has intervened early enough in the situation that it develops toward his desired result without requiring a resort to armed force.

This sense is echoed by the Daoist philosopher Laozi. He specifically advises action as early in a process as possible, because it will be easier then to gain the desired result. A master of the Dao "anticipates things that are difficult while they are easy, and does things that would become great while they are small. All difficult things in the world are sure to arise from a previous state in which they were easy, and all great things from one in which they were small. Therefore the sage, while he never does what is great, is able on that account to accomplish the greatest things."[15]

He also saw the value in allowing the course of events to tend naturally toward a desired end state. However, "the sage" does intervene in the situation in order to place himself in a position to benefit from that tendency. Laozi uses the analogy

of a river, arguing that a state becomes great by placing itself downstream, where small states will incline naturally toward it: "thus it is that a great state, by condescending to small states, gains them for itself."[16] In other words, he advocates pretending to be humble to obscure one's true intent from the adversary and allow it to move toward one of its own accord.

In sum, China's strategic culture encourages intervening subtly in a situation long before armed conflict arrives to alter the strategic landscape. Or, to translate the concept into a Western context, by laying the groundwork in Phase Zero the strategic landscape can be altered so that the objectives of the state can be achieved, and with minimal fighting.

THE PRC AND PHASE ZERO OPERATIONS

Examining a nation's strategic culture is only useful if the knowledge gained aids in understanding actions taken by the modern state. Such an analysis requires examining recent PRC activities for signs that its leaders are attempting to nurture the strategic environment through diverse actions that tend to develop the situation to their strategic advantage. Analyzing these actions from the perspective of the components of national power is useful in framing this analysis for a Western audience.

Diplomatic. The PRC has adeptly used the art of diplomatic protest. Such has been the case when Beijing protests U.S. and South Korean combined naval exercises in waters west of the Korean Peninsula. On more than one occasion the United States has acceded to PRC demands by either not deploying a carrier strike group or moving an exercise to the East Sea, off Korea's east coast.[17] Simply by nudging with a little rhetoric, Beijing gets the United States to comply with its interests and apparently to abandon its long-held principle of freedom of navigation. In the case mentioned the United States did eventually hold exercises in the Yellow Sea, but the fact that it first deferred to PRC interests has potential negative implications for the confidence allies have in the will of the United States to stand by them when the PRC disagrees.

The PRC has also effectively used diplomacy to limit the defensive capabilities of Taiwan. In 2009 President Barack Obama approved six billion dollars' worth of arms sales to Taiwan.[18] However, this sale did not include several items specifically requested by Taiwan and that Taiwan deems necessary to fill critical capability shortfalls. While the Taiwan Relations Act legally obliges the U.S. government to "make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability," the nature and timing of that support seem to be increasingly influenced by PRC pressure.[19] While Washington publicly maintains a policy of not consulting the Chinese on arms sales to Taiwan, it is difficult to

view persistent delays in selling articles of a defensive nature as anything other than attempts to dodge their ire.

PRC diplomacy has also sought to encumber the United States through its support of North Korea and Iran. When it became apparent the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* had been sunk by a North Korean torpedo, the PRC remained tight-lipped, refusing to condemn the act or even to acknowledge North Korean involvement. Neither did Beijing issue a rebuke to North Korea for its artillery barrage of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. The PRC has also been successful in undermining diplomatic efforts toward Iran, consistently opposing U.S. or multilateral actions to stop the development of Iranian nuclear weapons.[20] Taken together, this support of countries directly opposing the United States complicates the strategic environment in two ways. First, it requires Washington to continue to devote attention to these problems rather than to the disruption of the PRC's strategic momentum. Second, should U.S.-PRC hostilities occur, it would complicate the military problem for the United States, which would have to worry always about what North Korea or Iran might do on its flank.

In this light, it is hard to consider the Six Party Talks on North Korean nuclear weapons as other than a Beijing diplomatic victory. Seizing the opportunity to step onto the world stage and lead a multilateral process, the PRC has managed to gain praise from the Western world for contributing to international processes, thus fitting the West's picture of a responsible stakeholder. However, the Chinese have most to gain from the Six Party process by keeping it going, thereby preventing resolution of one of the main security concerns of the United States, as well as keeping the world focused on North Korea rather than the PRC.

Informational. On 13 February 2011, *USA Today* published the results of a Gallup Poll finding that 54 percent of Americans think the People's Republic of China is the world's leading economy, compared to 32 percent who think—accurately—that the leading economy is still the United States. The fact itself may be irrelevant, but the sentiment speaks to the power of perceptions that the PRC is trying to influence. An understanding of this helps explain why the PRC has recently made courting and hosting high-profile international events a matter of national policy. The pageantry and grandeur of the 2008 Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing is the most obvious example of how the PRC is using these events in an attempt to have world opinion ratify its ascendance.

Marketing oneself to the world, however, is not the only goal of the informational component of national power. Even the manner in which information is disseminated has an impact on the strategic environment. For example, the People's Liberation Army Air Force chose to demonstrate its new J-20 fighter while U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates was visiting Beijing.[21] Choosing to display this new capability while ostensibly reestablishing military-to-military

relations with the United States sends a message to the world that the Chinese are conducting negotiations from a position of strength. It is not a stretch to conclude that it is the Chinese who are determining the tenor and pace of the bilateral relationship—a conclusion that neighboring states may well consider when determining their own policies relative to the PRC.

In the Internet age, controlling information is becoming as important as influencing opinions. Mounting evidence suggests not only that the PRC is very interested in this sort of activity but that it is behind many sophisticated computer-network operations. Attacks widely believed to have originated in the PRC have targeted diplomats from the United States and partners, politicians, human-rights campaigners, military networks, and corporations.[22]

Two Internet incidents in 2010 reveal attempts by an unknown actor to manipulate the very means by which information is transmitted. "In one, mass Internet traffic, particularly that with U.S. military addresses, was routed through China for about twenty minutes. In another, Internet users in the United States and Chile found it impossible to contact certain Web sites that the Chinese government has deemed to be politically unacceptable to its own population."[23]

While responsibility for the diversions has not been confirmed—it is often difficult to pinpoint the exact sources of Internet operations—if the PRC's army of hackers can effectively control the world's Internet routing, even if only briefly, the PRC will possess the capability to manage the information that its adversaries receive. Even the integrity of one's own information might then be called into doubt.

Military. Faced with a qualitative disadvantage in conventional forces relative to the United States, the PRC has spent decades developing and producing a wide array of ballistic, cruise, and air-defense missiles that could avoid U.S. strengths, put assets at risk, and be relatively cheap to protect or replace. "For this reason, missiles have permeated the doctrine of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for every important kind of operation, from denial to blockade, and the PLA officer corps views them more and more as the way to level the playing field against a superior adversary."[24] A case in point is the antisatellite missile test of 11 January 2007, wherein U.S. satellite command, control, and intelligence systems were put under threat.[25] Now that these Chinese investments are bearing fruit, the strategic balance of the western Pacific is changing. U.S. forces can be put at risk earlier in a regional conflict than was once possible, and many of their technological advantages are negated, by inexpensive missiles. The likelihood of rapid U.S. victory is seriously reduced and its probable cost increased. This potential affects the calculations both of a United States considering war and of regional nations considering accommodation.

Of course, "soft power" influences the strategic landscape as well. With the launch of its own ten-thousand-ton hospital ship—pennant number 866—the People's Liberation Army Navy has established a means of projecting "soft power" around the world.[26] This capability may increase the PRC's leverage by allowing it to display goodwill in places where previously it could offer only resource extraction. This is a tool that the United States has used to great effect regionally, in part because no one else could employ it as quickly or efficiently. The hospital ship and new amphibious ships could, over time, aid the PRC in its desire to be seen as a U.S. peer in the region.

Economic. While there is debate over the actual role of the overvalued yuan (the PRC currency) in either the PRC's strategic calculus or the economy of the United States, it has become a focal point of U.S. economic policy making. The United States has repeatedly argued the PRC is manipulating its currency to maintain leverage over the global market.[27] Perhaps the most valuable part of the debate from the PRC's perspective is that it keeps the United States focused there while Beijing pursues its own development strategy. Additionally, the perception that PRC markets are essential to U.S. businesses shapes economic calculations that reach into the debate on policy toward the PRC. For example, Boeing is one of the PRC's largest suppliers of aviation technology, including half its commercial aircraft.[28] It might seem that this should provide leverage to the United States, but instead it is Beijing that has been willing to use such linkages to threaten U.S. businesses. This occurred in the wake of the January 2010 announcement of arms sales to Taiwan, following which the PRC made an explicit threat to stop trading with any U.S. business that sold weapons to the island.[29]

The Strategy. When the actions outlined above are taken as a whole, a strategy starts to emerge. Actions across the components of national power taken by the PRC coalesce into a single strategic momentum whereby Taiwan and its surrounds are being isolated not just militarily but in the minds of decision makers in Washington and the western Pacific. The Chinese leaders are attempting to create the perception that the PRC is locally too strong, allies are too few, economic and military costs are too high, and victory is too difficult to risk coming to Taiwan's aid. The goal is to convince the United States to decide not to defend Taiwan, so that it can be easily absorbed—peacefully if possible, in a one-on-one battle if necessary.

Anomalies. Despite the building strategic momentum outlined above, over the last two years the PRC has made several overt moves that appear to discard its strategic tradition in favor of a more overt and aggressive foreign policy. PRC vessels harassed USNS *Impeccable* on 8 March 2009.[30] Then, repeated ramming of a Japan Coast Guard vessel by a Chinese fishing boat on 7 September 2010, in

waters administered by Japan but claimed by the PRC, became a blatant display of bullying when the PRC cut off rare-earth exports to Japan in retaliation for the arrest of the boat's captain.[31]

Though some might argue that these are merely examples of the PRC leadership attempting to seize the initiative in situations that had already developed naturally to their own advantage, it could also be argued that the reaction of the United States and regional countries to this new assertiveness shows that the PRC would have been better off sticking to its cultural heritage and continuing to allow the world geostrategic situation to develop in its favor. In fact, recent public statements by Chen Bingde, chief of the PLA General Staff, emphasizing the large lead the United States enjoys in military technology and China's weaknesses suggest that the PRC realizes it overreached and is attempting to return to a more measured path.[32]

U.S. STRATEGIC CULTURE, DOCTRINE, AND PHASE ZERO OPERATIONS

Since General Wald brought the term "Phase Zero" into common usage five years ago, it has become a standard part of U.S. joint doctrine and is routinely discussed by operational planners and commanders. However, implementation falls short of meeting Phase Zero threats, such as those posed by the PRC. This failure is due to a combination of U.S. strategic culture, a doctrinal disconnect, and the tendency to refight the current conflict.

U.S. Strategic Culture

In his well-known 1973 work *The American Way of War,* Russell Weigley argues that U.S. strategy has historically concentrated on destruction of enemy forces, not on the larger political context. Prior to the Second World War, he states, "the United States usually possessed no national strategy for the employment of force or the threat of force to attain political ends."[33] While the U.S. military has recently refocused on small wars and counterinsurgency campaigns, its concern has been tactical. "Shaping" operations normally planned in Phase Zero (as discussed below) are focused on strengthening local populations against insurgents or their influence. Thus, two analysts argue that the question driving U.S. strategy in the future will be "where, when, and how America should help partners and allies build the capacity to defend and govern themselves in a legitimate and just and therefore sustainable manner."[34]

In fact, this idea that Phase Zero primarily supports partners has established a false dichotomy between Phase Zero operations and the military conflict in U.S. military thought. Criticism of the American inability to adapt to the "limited war" of Iraq and Afghanistan often faults the U.S. military for its difficulty in

"limited force" peace enforcement and humanitarian operations. The subtext of this criticism is a bias toward seeing conflict only in terms of the exercise of armed force.[35] This is a reflection of the U.S. strategic narrative, which sees a battle of wills only as a competition of armed force, in the Clausewitzian tradition, the corollary of which is to see limited-force operations only in terms of nonconflict. Consequently, only before or after the conflict does the United States focus on hearts, minds, and the distribution of humanitarian aid. What is missing is a concept of actively bending the will of potential adversaries without the resort to armed conflict. In short, because the United States views a battle of wills only in terms of armed force and has been preoccupied with strengthening populations against irregular threats, it has failed to recognize the value of the Phase Zero concept for bending an adversary's will.

One scholar argues that as a result of America's success in the Pacific for the last sixty years, individual service cultures now reinforce the idea that what has worked will work, that there is no need to change course. As a result of this conviction, the U.S. military may have become inflexible in the face of emerging threats and unprepared for the Pacific's evolving security environment.[36]

Doctrinal Disconnect

Further hampering the ability of the United States to counter the PRC's strategic advantage is its own joint doctrine, which in its present incarnation encourages a bifurcation between Phase Zero and the rest of a campaign. While the United States has made advances in understanding how all elements of national power impact the operational environment, there is an artificial line between preconflict and conflict scenarios.

While formal theater campaign planning attempts to build an integrated approach to building partner capacity and deterring adversaries, it is not designed to counter an adversary's own advances. A recent requirement to nest contingency (crisis) plans in theater campaign plans appears to be a direct attempt to integrate Phase Zero into contingency planning, but this is still not the case in terms of doctrine.[37] This is because the pertinent doctrinal publication, *Joint Operation Planning,* Joint Publication 5-0 (or JP 5-0), defines and limits Phase Zero operations as follows:

> [Phase Zero operations] are executed continuously with the intent to enhance international legitimacy and gain multinational cooperation in support of defined national strategic and strategic military objectives. They are designed to assure success by shaping perceptions and influencing the behavior of both adversaries and allies, developing allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and coalition operations, improving information exchange and intelligence sharing, and providing U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access.[38]

This definition misses any sense of acting in accordance with a contingency plan to change the adversary's will. In fact, JP 5-0 goes farther: "Planning that supports most 'shaping' requirements typically occurs in the context of day-to-day security cooperation, and combatant commands may incorporate Phase 0 activities and tasks into the SCP [security cooperation plan]. Thus, these requirements are *beyond the scope* of JP 5-0."[39] In short, the security cooperation and contingency planning are separated. This may make sense if Phase Zero is viewed only as a means for shaping the environment. However, if Phase Zero is truly part of resolving a contingency in one's favor, it must be part of the planning for the contingency; so actions taken in Phase Zero are aimed at disrupting the adversary's plans and bending his will toward the desired end state.

The Obscurity of the Present

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have forced the U.S. military to remember a forgotten tradition in small and irregular wars: the use of methods other than force to influence the strategic situation. However, because the current campaign focuses on counterinsurgency, the methods of influence revolve around shaping the environment by building support among the people. While this is important, it has led to the perception that Phase Zero, per se, is simply a tool for preparing an environment or building support among a populace, not a means of attacking an adversary's will. As has been noted, this movement in perception "occurs below the level of grand strategy and is largely reactive. The changes focus on the major problems at hand: large-scale counterinsurgency and stabilization operations like those in Iraq and global efforts to track and locate known and suspected terrorists."[40]

Robert Gates stated this explicitly in 2007, as secretary of defense:

> We can expect that asymmetric warfare will remain the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time. These conflicts will be fundamentally political in nature, and require the application of all elements of national power. Success will be less a matter of imposing one's will and more a function of shaping behavior—of friends, adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between.[41]

One could argue Gates correctly identified the emerging nature of warfare and even adversaries as targets of shaping operations. However, by de-emphasizing "imposing one's will," which Clausewitz considered the fundamental element of war, he separated shaping operations from their most important role—defeat of an adversary in advance of armed conflict. Gates's position suffered from a view of future warfare as a reflection of the last conflict. In fact, one analysis of the U.S. military's use of culture notes the recent celebrity enjoyed by "culture" as a symptom of Washington's willingness to throw money at almost anyone or anything that offers a solution to "contemporary problems."[42]

Even General Wald's introductory discussion of Phase Zero focused on hearts and minds of the populace.[43] While this appeared to make sense in the preemptive counterinsurgency campaign that U.S. European Command was running in Africa at the time the article was written, it does not actually lay the foundation for integrating Phase Zero into the resolution of contingencies in favor of the United States. As Wald noted, the European Command's ultimate goal for Phase Zero is "building capacity in partner nations that enables them to be cooperative, trained, and prepared to help prevent or limit conflicts."[44] While preventing or limiting conflict is an admirable goal, it is not useful if a conflict is already under way.

What emerges from this study is a PRC whose leaders are drawing on a strategic culture that emphasizes acting early and subtly to manipulate adversaries into positions of disadvantage. They hope in this way to win strategic victories and bend the wills of their adversaries without ever engaging in physical combat. At a minimum, they hope to engage in combat with the upper hand. Standing in the way of the PRC's objectives is the United States, a country with the world's preeminent military but prevented from taking decisive action in peacetime by its own culture, habits, and doctrine. This bias prevents decision makers in the U.S. military and government from seeing PRC operations as part of a conflict in process, and it cedes the strategic momentum to an active adversary.

While the United States has recognized the importance of Phase Zero, it has failed to take full advantage of the concept, because it has not integrated the principle with the idea of bending an adversary's will. To do so, the United States should redefine Phase Zero as follows: *acting across the components of national power during steady-state conditions in order to compel the adversary to do our will, thereby avoiding the need for combat or entering combat under more favorable conditions.* This definition includes actions taken to support allies, partners, and even friendly populations, as the ultimate aim of such actions is to convince adversaries that these groups are both capable of supporting us and willing to do so.

By redefining Phase Zero in this manner, the United States will force itself to reconsider the way it acts in the steady state, as well as the way it evaluates actions taken by others. This definition more fully integrates the concept of Phase Zero into the phase structure of contingency (or crisis) planning, emphasizing that the goal is to resolve a contingency successfully, not just prevent or limit it. This change not only encourages U.S. military planners to integrate day-to-day operations better with possible contingencies but facilitates the recognition that there are those in the world who are attempting to use their own understandings of strategy to undermine the will of the United States during peacetime. With this recognition, planners will be intellectually armed to take the actions required to disrupt the strategic momentum of those who wish the nation harm.

NOTES

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4. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking,* trans. Janet Lloyd (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 179.
5. The authors thank Dr. Stephen Peter Rosen for recommending this course of inquiry.
6. As with many Chinese characters, there are several possible translations of *shi,* and its meaning is contextual.
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43. Wald, "Phase Zero Campaign," p. 75.
44. Ibid., p. 73.

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