

China's Hybrid Warfare

Part I: The U.S.-China security dilemma

by MGySgt Andy B. Anderson

This article uses the theoretical framework of the security dilemma to analyze the impact of China's hybrid warfare on the contemporary U.S.-China relations. It argues that China's escalating hybrid warfare increases the U.S. suspicion of China's long-term intentions, thereby aggravating these states' current security dilemma. A security dilemma appears

when the military preparations of one state create an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those preparations are for 'defensive' purposes only (to enhance its security in an uncertain world) or whether they are for offensive purposes (to change the status quo to its advantage).²

In essence, a security dilemma exists when a state that attempts to enhance its security ignites the insecurity of other states. Thus, this dilemma in the international system is generally seen "as the essential source of conflict among states."³

The post-Cold War international system experiences more change regarding the challenges faced and how states respond to them than during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War in 1989 was one of the defining historical events that signified the end of one era and introduced another age full of its peculiarities and uncertainties. The series of revolutions that swept over the Eastern and Central Europe not only ripped the Iron Curtain but also crippled the Soviet Union, which then collapsed in 1991.⁴ Stephen Walt observes that during the Cold War, the two superpowers—the Soviet Union and the United States—devised their security policies in response to each other

>MGySgt Anderson is the Operations Chief of Plans, Policies, & Operations POG-30 – Infantry Specialist, HQMC.

"You think we are a bully. We think we are a victim."
—David Ignatius¹

and that this East-West competition also molded the behavior of other states.⁵ Thus, the bipolar structure of the international system clearly defined the power distribution throughout the states in the international system. According to realism, the possession of power is important to prevent aggression and to influence other states on various issues.⁶ As a result of the end of the Cold War, the United States remained the only superpower. Such a "unipolar moment" lasted until the tragic events of 11 September 2001, signifying the beginning of a new and dangerous era of war.⁷

Currently, China's emergence as a global power poses to change the structure of the international system radically. John Mearsheimer believes that if the Chinese economy continues growing at a brisk clip in the next few decades, the United States will once again face a potential peer competitor, and great power-politics will return in full force.⁸

Military force, thus, remains a central element in international security despite the demise of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.⁹

It continues to serve not only as the primary arbiter in both interstate and intrastate conflicts but also as a powerful weapon that may be used by state and non-state actors despite transformational global changes. Because of the post-Cold War's shift in the strategic landscape, the imminent risk of war between major powers has considerably declined. Despite such a decline, military conflict has acquired new forms. The changing nature of modern warfare can be seen through the escalation of hybrid warfare. According to Frank Hoffman,

hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.¹⁰

Therefore, hybrid warfare complicates the current defense planning because of the preparation for conventional warfare and other elements of violence.

This series of articles is structured into six main sections. After the introduction in Section 1, the literature review in Section 2 outlines both the origin and transformation of the security dilemma concept. Subsequently, it examines the use of this concept by international relations scholars to describe the nature of current U.S.-China security relations. This contextualization enables this article to emphasize the significance of the security dilemma concept in clarifying some of the main issues in this bilateral security relationship, such as the recognition of the presence of the U.S.-China security dilemma and interpretation of China's motivations as security-seeking, revisionist, or unknown.



Members of the People's Liberation Army garrison Hong Kong tour the amphibious assault ship USS Peleliu (LHA 5) in 2013 prior to China's current escalation of hybrid warfare. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jasmine Sheard.)

The literature review in the second section also outlines the current literature regarding China's hybrid warfare within the framework of the security dilemma. First, it underscores the relevance of exploring hybrid warfare in concert with the "asymmetric distribution of military power," an important material regulator of the security dilemma in the post-Cold War international system. Second, it describes the debate about the definition and applicability of hybrid warfare as a concept. Third and fourth, it provides unique characteristics of Asian hybrid warfare and then highlights how this context influences China's warfare. Finally, it engages closely with China's official national security publications and other secondary sources to establish a clear case about the impact on its hybrid warfare by China's military doctrine, which has been shaped by the "asymmetric distribution of military power" with the United States.

Section 3 focuses on the evolution of the U.S.-China security dilemma by demonstrating the escalation of perceptions of threat from both countries, especially during the last decade. Section 4 uses the security dilemma framework to describe China's hybrid warfare—in particular, maritime warfare and cyber

warfare. It argues that the escalation of China's hybrid warfare aggravates the current security dilemma by increasing the U.S. suspicion of China's long-term intentions. Section 5 analyzes how China increases its hybrid warfare's capabilities to attain security in an un-

**... the escalation of
China's hybrid warfare
aggravates the current
security dilemma ...**

certain world. It demonstrates that, as a rising power, China enhances security by downplaying or withholding information about the legitimate objectives and details related to the transformation of its maritime and cyber security infrastructure, the growth of defense budget, and the civil-military integration connected to its escalating hybrid warfare. Section 6 concludes and offers suggestions for further research and information.

One of the main limitations of this article is the narrow scope of the literature review about the security dilemma concept and China's hybrid warfare.

For example, because of space limitations, this article does not discuss in detail the views on the security dilemma by the international relations scholars of other traditions, besides realism or neo-realism. Also, because of the lack of reliable quantitative information about the escalation of hybrid warfare in the Chinese primary sources, there are some educated assumptions about the subject matter in Section 5.

Notes

1. David Ignatius, "China's Assertiveness Leaves Its Neighbors Anxious," *The Washington Post*, (February 2014), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

2. N.J. Wheeler and K. Booth, "The Security Dilemma," in John Baylis and Nicholas J. Rengger (Eds.), *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3. John Baylis, "International and Global Security," in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, (Eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4. Roland Dannreuther, *International Security: The Contemporary Agenda* (2nd ed.), (Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2017).

5. Stephen M. Walt, "The Renaissance of Security Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, June 1991).

6. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century*, (5th ed.), (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014).

7. Frank Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies*, (December 2007), available at <http://www.potomacinstitute.org>.

8. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014).

9. "The Renaissance of Security Studies."

10. "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars."

