

Navigating US-China Relations: Complicated by China's "Unrelenting Strategy" by Jenny Lin

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Wonder why the Chinese government, especially the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has appeared more aggressive, self-confident, and assertive in dealing with the US and its allies? The answer could lie in an ancient Chinese strategy called the "unrelenting strategy" – a part of the "thirty-six political military strategies" derived from the I Ching. Mao Zedong incorporated this ancient teaching into his strategic thinking, and it was recently discussed in Chinese media as having made the Japanese miserable over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute. Use of this strategy suggests that Beijing has taken the US-China relationship onto an adversarial path, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) systematically seeks to reduce Washington's influence in Asia.

This "unrelenting strategy" first calls for China to confuse its opponent's judgments; second, create and induce internal political conflicts within its opponent; and third, deepen the opponent's existing internal conflicts before launching an offensive attack. However, the goal of "offensive attack" does not necessarily mean the CCP/PLA is ready to use military force against the US in the short-run; rather Beijing is pressing every advantage against the US to transform the balance of forces between them. That said, evidence of all three is visible in Chinese behavior.

Beijing believes that the US is both the greatest threat to China's national security and a declining power. According to PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Zhang Qinsheng, the main challenges to China are threats to the country's sovereignty and legitimacy, as well as separatism. Hu Jintao has warned of a hegemonic power's efforts to induce separatist movements and violate China's sovereignty. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping is dedicated to lead China toward "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" with Mao's strategic thinking at its core – which is a struggle against hegemonic power by unifying third world countries.

The perception that the US is in decline began as early as 2001. According to Chinese media such as *Xinhua* and *People's Daily*, "US decline is no longer an unwarranted fear." They report that US power will "continue to decline" and the US "will unlikely hang on to its hegemony." Chinese media have examined the causes of US decline, speculated on the possibility of breaking US hegemony, and explored how China can achieve superpower status.

To effectively implement the "unrelenting strategy," China must fulfill certain preconditions – achieve internal stability, along with economic, political, and military strength – before it can contend with other powers. Since Deng Xiaoping opened China, the CCP has made great strides in building national strength with economic growth and military modernization. By the end of 2015, China will have fulfilled its 12th Five-Year Plan. Utilizing an average annual economic growth of 11 percent during 2006-2010, the CCP grew national wealth and agricultural production, and financed technological breakthroughs in space, supercomputers, weapon systems, and high-speed rail.

This growing economic and military strength underpins Beijing's perception that China has ascended to great power status and met the preconditions for implementing the "unrelenting strategy." The perception that China is an emerging superpower began in the early 2000s. Chinese media such as *Xinhua* linked the ownership of an aircraft carrier as a symbol to superpower status, while others defined superpower status as achieving economic, military, and political power. In September 2012, China launched its first aircraft carrier, and Beijing anticipates breaking "a pillar of US superpower status" by becoming the world's leading economy.

Step one in the "unrelenting strategy" can now be implemented, which is to confuse the opponent's judgments. Washington has been consistently surprised by the PLA's rapid development, a phenomenon that is compounded by the tendency of policy makers to take Chinese public statements at face value without fully understanding CCP thinking. According to a 2012 report prepared for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, the US government and most analysts missed the significance of China's new attack submarines and stealth fighters, its anti-satellite missile system, and aircraft carrier-killing missiles. The geopolitical consequences of not knowing an opponent's full capabilities could result in miscalculation and a failure in strategic planning.

Step two in the "unrelenting strategy" seeks to induce the opponent's internal political conflicts. This is evident in the divisions between the US business and security communities. Despite regulatory barriers and security concerns, US companies continue their investments in China and remove incentives for Beijing to foster a better business environment for foreign companies. Moreover, the 89 percent of US companies operating in China that made a profit in 2011 press the US to go easy on Beijing to protect those profits. China also profits from US corporate engagement by violating intellectual property law, hacking into US cyber networks, and espionage designed to acquire sensitive information and technologies. The lack of coordination between the US government and private industry is being exploited by Beijing to its economic and strategic advantage.

Step two also strives to create tension in US relations with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. China seeks to divide and conquer with its preference for bilateral mechanisms. Through bilateral means, Beijing is able to entice parties with short-term economic benefits that the CCP can forgo, or coerce smaller and weaker parties in the region, for its longer-term gains.

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In the context of the Asia-Pacific security environment, step three – “launching an offensive attack” – is Beijing’s long-term strategy and aims at eliminating Washington’s influence. In the short-run, the CCP/PLA will not hesitate to demonstrate its military capabilities to US allies and partners in the region. Thus far, Beijing has been testing the waters by intimidating Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam with assertive behavior over territorial disputes. Ultimately, China seeks to discredit a security alliance with the US, and eliminate or reduce Washington’s influence.

There are several ways the US can deal with the “unrelenting strategy.” First, the US must get its own house in order. This is important in countering the belief that the US is in decline. Moreover, Washington must lead by example and better manage the adversarial-like relations with China. At the same time that Washington attempts to work with Beijing on issues such as protecting intellectual property rights and cyber networks, it must be aware of the CCP’s goal to strengthen itself and try to supplant the US in Asia.

Second, the US should strive for better relations between its public and private sectors. Washington should reassess whether US companies are truly competitive in an environment in which countries such as China, South Korea, and Germany have more coordination and synergy between public and private entities. The US should develop long-term planning mechanisms to help create these synergies. Policies that rejuvenate the domestic economy and boost US businesses’ competitiveness should be a focus for the Obama administration. In fact, the US is off to a good start. President Obama has put restoring the US economy as priority number one, as evidenced most recently by last week’s State of the Union address.

To counter the “unrelenting strategy,” Washington must remember that its essence is a set of strategies that aim to reduce an opponent’s strength before an attack. Because it is used against a more powerful opponent, vigilance is a first step to counter this strategy. Be aware of internal weaknesses that can be exploited and buttress them accordingly. Washington should develop its own “unrelenting strategy” that includes counterintelligence, and make the cost of stealing information and technology unbearably high for the CCP.

Ultimately, however, given CCP/PLA behavior and its “unrelenting strategy,” it is unlikely that the US and China can foster a constructive relationship without the CCP abandoning its strategic intent to reduce US influence in the Asia Pacific.

For further reading on this subject, please refer to Issues & Insights, Vol. 12 No. 10 titled, “The US-China Relationship: Avoiding a New Cold War” [<http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-12-no-10>].