Re-evaluating U.S. Intelligence Estimates of China's Strategic Intentions: a new rationalist baseline.

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Indicator theories tell us that rational intelligence analysts should revise estimates about a rival’s strategic intentions following militaristic or illiberal actions. Why did the US intelligence community (IC) fail to warn that China held aggressive intentions as China rapidly militarized, instigated crises, and brutally suppressed its domestic population? What explains the sudden (rather than gradual) shift in estimates circa 2011? Critics argue the IC made a mistake. I argue that indicator theory is an incomplete rationalist baseline because it overly simplifies variation in motives and ignores information analysts collect about a rival’s history. I develop a rationalist model that re-defines optimal estimates to account for these issues. Using interviews with 200+ national security elites and a review of declassified and public estimates on China, I re-evaluate IC estimates from my baseline. I find that the IC behaved as my rationalist theory expects. They failed to update because China’s militaristic and illiberal actions pre-2011 all fit with China’s limited nationalist ambitions. Based on their read of China’s history, the IC could not reconcile militaristic behaviors circa 2011 with these limited aims. I find criticisms of the IC and calls for reform are unfounded. My general theory holds important implications for studies of great power competition and threat perceptions.

How *should* status quo powers evaluate the strategic intentions of an emerging threat? Scholars argue that if analysts are rational, they will scrutinize key indicators.[[1]](#footnote-1) Specifically, if they observe costly military signals[[2]](#footnote-2) and illiberal actions[[3]](#footnote-3) they should raise their confidence that their rival holds aggressive strategic intentions. Many use this theoretical framework to criticize United States intelligence community (IC) estimates of China’s strategic intentions during the post-Cold War period. Some critics note that until about 2010, the IC remained reliably uncertain about China’s intentions despite a slew of violent events, including the Tiawan Straits Crisis, the Hainan Spy-plane incident, the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and China’s announcement of military modernization. They argue that the IC’s failure to warn was a mistake.[[4]](#footnote-4) Others note that, around 2011, the IC suddenly raised their confidence that China’s intentions were adversarial to the United States. These critics point out that China’s behavior did not change much on key indicators. Thus, intelligence estimates should not have changed so abruptly.[[5]](#footnote-5) These critics argue these failures to warn are severe, and call for more oversight and even intelligence reform.[[6]](#footnote-6)

But the signaling arguments these critics draw from, identify rational (i.e., ideal) threat estimates in a stylized world. The theories assume away variation in how motives can vary, and information status quo powers holds about the emerging threat’s history and culture.[[7]](#footnote-7) But they accept that an ideal estimate would weigh all the information that an analyst collects.[[8]](#footnote-8) The question, then, is what are ideal threat perception if we account for both the strategic dynamics of great power politics, and the historical and cultural information that real-world intelligence analysts collect?

Using a simple model between the *Target* of an intelligence estimate and a rational *Analyst*, I argue that historical and cultural information systematically moderates the logic of indicator theory. Thus, I report a revised rationalist baseline that (1) expects rational Analysts will not always revise estimates following the Target’s repeated violent or illiberal actions; (2) predicts punctuated (rather than gradual) shifts in threat perceptions; and (3) identifies which of the Target’s specific costly actions will activate the logic of costly signaling and cause a revised threat estimate.

My different predictions follow from a novel conceptualization of state-motives. I argue that a Target can hold many intrinsic foreign policy motivations—which I call a principle. Like the classic realist model, they could be motivated by security (one principle). But they also could be motivated by ethno-nationalism, prestige, uniting historical borders, etc.[[9]](#footnote-9) Each principle interacts with a state’s history and culture to determine the specific territories, and normative issues that form a state’s core foreign policy interests. Like standard signaling models, I assume that analysts are initially uncertain about their rival’s true motivations. However, Analysts collect considerable information about the Target’s history and culture and exploit that information to draw nuanced inferences from the Target’s costly actions. For example, in the US-China case, analysts in 1989 knew that if China was primarily motivated by restoring its historical position in Asia, that it intensely values Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, among other issues, but has little interest in Central and South Asia. Starting from this position, the IC should have drawn a different inference about China’s strategic intentions if China’s costly actions signaled that it cared about expanding its influence in Taiwan or Pakistan. By contrast, the standard rationalist baseline supplied by indicator theory tells us that the IC should updates equally given violent military actions across these contexts.

Starting from my rationalist baseline, I re-examine US intelligence estimates of China’s strategic intentions in the post-Cold War period. I find that China’s militaristic and illiberal policies before 2011 fit with the IC’s understanding of what China would want if China held limited aims. By contrast, China’s actions circa 2011 did not obviously fit China’s limited intentions. I interrogate the IC’s decision-making logic using novel interview data with hundreds of China-watchers in Washington DC, interviews with senior National Security Elites as well as a review of declassified intelligence estimates, memoirs, and other documents. Overall, I find that IC reported nuanced estimates of China’s strategic intentions. They developed an assessment framework that accounted for China’s strategic incentives to misrepresent, and China’s historical context. They then drew inferences about China’s motives by interpreting China’s actions through this historical framework.

My findings have timely policy implications. They explain that criticisms of the IC and subsequent calls for reform are unfounded. These reforms will, at minimum, waste valuable resources at a time that the US faces a severe national security threat from China. At maximum, they will re-configure IC practices to conform to a simplistic understanding of what good intelligence estimates are. This raises the risk of poor estimates in the future.

Because estimates of strategic intentions are fundamental to great power relations, my theory holds broader implications for Sino-American research. Arguments about the fate of East Asia and trajectory of Sino-American relations,[[10]](#footnote-10) the logic of China’s force posture[[11]](#footnote-11) and coercive behavior,[[12]](#footnote-12) and how the US should respond,[[13]](#footnote-13) all hinge on assumptions about estimates of China’s strategic intentions. But since scholars are puzzled by US estimates of China’s intentions, it is hard to know what assumptions to make about future threat perceptions. I provide a general theory of threat perceptions that fits historical patterns of US estimates. Thus, I provide a more reliable baseline for others to use.

My general theory holds broader implications for research into great power competition. I answer Fearon and Wendt’s (2002)[[14]](#footnote-14) call to systematically integrate normative motivations, and historical context into strategic theories of great power politics. In doing so, I resolve broad discrepancies between signaling theory and data that has caused some to question whether costly signaling is useful.[[15]](#footnote-15) I also illuminate how domestic politics signals strategic motives, clarify offense offense-defense theory, and explain how less costly signals, even costless diplomacy, may sometimes provide a stronger signal of strategic intentions.[[16]](#footnote-16) Finally, my framework holds important implications for those who explain estimates through bureaucratic and cognitive distortions, as well as other individual theories of how threat perceptions form.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. The Factual Pattern: IC Estimates of China’s strategic intentions.

Did the IC provide the *correct* estimates of China’s strategic intentions? To answer this question, I first need to code their estimates during the post-Cold War period. This a hard task because the US intelligence community is large compartmentalized, the consensus estimates that make the president’s desk remain classified, and publicly available threat estimates often couple China’s intentions and capabilities to measure an overall threat.[[18]](#footnote-18) There is also some disagreement about how estimates have changed.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In a recent (2020) inquiry, the bipartisan House Select Committee on Intelligence reviewed all intelligence products on China written since the post-Cold War period. The year-long review culminated in a critical report, titled “*The China Deep Dive: A Report on the Intelligence Community’s Capabilities and Competencies with Respect to the People’s Republic of China.*" The Select Committee assert that between 1989 and sometime during the Obama Administration, the IC was reliably uncertain about China’s strategic intentions. The IC thought China could hold expansive aims. But the IC also believed it was plausible that China’s interests were, or could become, compatible with US interests.[[20]](#footnote-20) During the Obama Administration the consensus IC estimate suddenly shifted towards a more alarmist view, and this estimate has persistently held during subsequent Administrations.

I largely accept the Select Committee’s case-coding.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, the Committee’s coding is imprecise in two ways that have limited academic analysis.[[22]](#footnote-22) First, it asserts a sudden shift during Obama’s presidency, but does not pinpoint the exact timing. Second, it is unclear exactly what estimates their analysis covers. I collect additional data to more precisely code IC estimates. This will allow all researchers to more effectively evaluate their arguments about threat perceptions.[[23]](#footnote-23)

I find that the consensus view across the IC shifted between 2010-2011, and the views of NSC officials responsible for whole-of-government estimates most likely shifted between 2011 and 2012. These results suggest that 2011 as the most likely shift-point (but accept a margin of error of a year) that factors in the IC consensus, and the estimates that arrived on the president’s desk.

I used two types of evidence to arrive at this finding. First, I interviewed 207 mid-level National Security Professionals between 2014 and 2019 who focused on China issues. Interview subjects included congressional staff, employees at National Security affiliated agencies, and the military, and think tanks employees. The opinions of mid-level China experts are important for two reasons. First, evidence shows that the mean of group responses is close to the true estimate.[[24]](#footnote-24) Second, the IC uses a consensus model to write National Intelligence Estimates. As a result, the overall views of intelligence professionals are largely reflected in national level estimates.[[25]](#footnote-25) As a result, the responses help me appreciate how the consensus view shifts among professional China experts within the United States.

During these interviews I asked subjects some variant of the following questions.

1. *Among those who think about China’s strategic ambitions, is the consensus view that China has limited aims in East Asia, or that China has expansive aims that are unacceptable for US policy in the long run?*
2. *If the consensus is that China is a competitor when did that consensus form?*
3. *What is your personal views on China’s ambitions?*
4. *If pessimistic, what event caused you to change your estimate?*

Figure 1 visualizes perceptions about when the “consensus view,” shifted among this elite population. Most analysts (93%) believed that the consensus view had shifted. Some subjects (n=138) provided a specific year or episode that they believed drove the shift in US assessments. However, a large portion were uncertain about exactly when the shift took place (n=53). The most common answer was sometime between 2010 and 2012. But several subjects said sometime during the Obama Administration.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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Note: Proportion of responses from elite interviews with 207 U.S. Experts on China

Figure 1: When did the elite consensus of China's motives change?

Over 70% of analysts who believe a shift had happened pin-point a 3-year window where perceptions change that includes 2011. 90% pin-point the Obama Administration. Notice that the earliest year any analysts suggested a change took place is 2008. No analyst suggested that perceptions began to change during the 1990s. Indeed, this amplifies the critic’s concern because the Tiananmen Square Massacre and Taiwan Straits Crisis occurred during the 1990s. As I discuss later, personal assessments follow a similar pattern.

Second, I coupled publicly available estimates of China's intentions with elite interviews to identify shifts in assessments at the national level. The documents I reviewed included unclassified, whole of intelligence community estimates of China’s motives. These included short estimates written in the National Security Strategy, the 5-yearly Global Trends Reports, the Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments in the People’s Republic of China. I also reviewed testimony and public writings by the most senior NSC staff who command vast intelligence agencies notably the Director of Central Intelligence, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Secretary of Defense.

Using these documents, I identified a change in the tone and content of publicly available, whole of government estimates of China’s intentions around 2011.[[27]](#footnote-27) In 2011, intelligence reports no longer emphasized the prospect of cooperation under the current Chinese regime. The tone of these estimates started to shift towards revisionist China. For example, the Director of National Intelligence (Denis Blair) discussed China's strategic intentions during his nomination hearing in January, 2009. He noted, the “*Intelligence Community also needs to support policymakers who are looking for opportunities to work with Chinese leaders who believe that Asia is big enough for both of us and can be an Asia in which both countries can benefit as well as contribute to the common good*.[[28]](#footnote-28)” In the 2010 report, Blair no longer expresses optimism. Instead, he notes “*Beijing has tempered its cooperation, however, in areas where China views its interests or priorities as different from ours*.” He describes China’s intentions as including “*international status and influence*.” [[29]](#footnote-29)

Blair was succeeded by James Clapper in late 2010. Clapper’s 2011 report to Congress is even more grim, claiming, “*China’s rise drew increased international attention of the past year, as several episodes of assertive Chinese behavior fueled perceptions of Beijing as a more imposing and potentially difficult international actor*.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The changes in publicly available documents were subtle. To supplement my coding, I interviewed senior intelligence elites who were responsible for publishing the documents written during this period. These interviews included the former Director of National Intelligence, and former Deputy Director for Analysis at the Central Intelligence Agency, and 5 other senior elites who either served as CIA executives or on the NSC. Several respondents confirmed that I accurately identified the shift in net assessment as occurring around 2011. I'll discuss these interviews more in section 4 where I clarify the logic behind their estimates.

1. The critics and their implicit rationalist baseline.

During the post-Cold War period, “*Inferring China's strategic intentions was the single most difficult and important challenge that we* [the IC] *faced.*”[[31]](#footnote-31) It was difficult because Chinese leaders closely guards their foreign policy motives, and China acted in a complex strategic environment. Given this complexity, researchers argue that estimates (and associated confidence levels) of China’s strategic intentions should be graded against the optimal estimate given the information the IC had.[[32]](#footnote-32) Scholars argue that structural, rationalist theories of great power security relations supply this optimal baseline estimate.[[33]](#footnote-33) These theories are an attractive “ideal” for three reasons. First, they are built to study cases like Sino-American relations. They focus on great power security dynamics between an emerging threat who could revise the status quo, and a status quo power who is uncertain about the scope of the emerging threat’s intentions. Second, they assume utility-maximizing states, which means the beliefs and choices they predict reflect what states should do to serve the national interest.[[34]](#footnote-34) Third, they assume that states optimally compute the ideal inference based on a complete accounting of the observed choices across history, the strategic incentives to misrepresent, and all the potential outcomes.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Different structural theories yield different predictions on questions of competition and peace. But many[[36]](#footnote-36) share a common logic for forming perceptions of strategic intentions. They assume that the Target’s intrinsic motivations vary along a continuum from status quo to greedy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Status quo powers are usually assumed to hold security motivations.[[38]](#footnote-38) That is, to the extent that they arm, they do so only to ensure they can offset their fears of foreign threats. By contrast, greedy states intrinsically value revision of the status quo. Substantively, this assumption means that the Target’s true motives fall along this continuum, and the continuum represents available estimates of a Target’s intentions that an Analyst could reach.

Starting from this assumption, these theories explain how an Analyst’s threat perceptions should change in response to the Target’s behavior. There are two complimentary logics. Costly signaling theories find that the greedier a Target is, the more likely that Target is to engage in militaristic actions that either alter the status quo directly, or facilitate future revision. As a result, when Analysts observe an invasion, rapid and offensive militarization, coercive threats, withdrawing from a binding institution, or predatory economic behaviors, they should raise their confidence that the Target is greedy.[[39]](#footnote-39) Neoliberal theories argue that illiberal states are more likely to hold greedy intentions. Thus, regime-type and economic openness should affect initial threat perceptions. Further, autocratic backsliding, violent domestic repression, or illiberal economic and social reforms signal greedy intentions.[[40]](#footnote-40) Empirical scholars treat the accumulation of these findings as the list of key indicators that should shift an Analyst’s estimates of a Target’s strategic intentions.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Indeed, the assumption that indicator theory is the rationalist baseline supplies the most important criticisms of the IC’s China estimates.[[42]](#footnote-42) In “*The China Deep Dive,”* TheSenate Select Committee (for brevity, and because it was bipartisan and accepted by Congress, I refer to the Select Committee’s report as Congress’s opinion, henceforth) chastised the IC.[[43]](#footnote-43) Their most damning criticism relates to how the IC has evaluated China’s intentions. Notably, Congress laid out a clear statement of the indicators that the IC should have focused on:

*China's ascendance has been spectacular in its scale and far less benign than initially expected. During the 1990s and 2000s there was a consensus in the West that, as China became more prosperous and developed, it would also become freer and play a constructive role in international relations in the 21st Century. Observers convinced themselves that the leadership in Beijing learned the “right” lessons from the international and domestic reaction to the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. As a result, the broad trend as one of convergence between China and the West was assumed. Confidence that China would choose to liberalize was central to the decision to admit China to the WTO and to award the 2008 Summer Olympics to Beijing. This optimism was not entirely unfounded. Indeed, the introduction of village elections within China was considered by some to be a harbinger of liberalization.*

*However, the last decade has shown those expectations to have been deeply misplaced. Western policy-makers’ belief that our own democratic systems were globally inevitable blinded observers to the Chinese Communist Party’s overriding objective of retaining and growing its power. In the interim, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has increasingly sought to revise the international order and global norms in a way that furthers its own strategic interests and undermines those of the United States specifically, and the West generally. Beijing has sought to expand its economic and political influence through its “One Belt, One Road” Initiative and the large-scale co-option of media outlets throughout the world. Militarily, China has embarked on a massive modernization drive - creating a “blue water” navy, investing heavily in hyper-sonic weapons, developing its own fifth-generation fighter, militarizing a series of atolls and islets in the South China Sea to strengthen its claims in the region, and building its first overseas military base in Djibouti.*

Clearly, Congress assumes that illiberal regimes are war prone. Based on this theory, Congress believes autocratic behaviors dating back to the Tienanmen Square Massacre (1989) should have convinced the IC that China was an illiberal regime, and not capable of liberalizing. Congress also assumes that all costly actions communicate expansive aims. Based on this assumption, Congress believes that IC should have drawn an inference from China's spending on offensive military weapons, China's efforts to undermine the liberal order in East Asia, military crises that China started, and China's territorial demands. Congress asserts that the IC did not appropriately update following these indicators.

Clearly, Congress has internalized that the logic of indicator theories applies broadly. But rationalist theories from which these indicators are taken are sensitive to their assumptions. As Jervis (1989) reminds us, *“the actor's values, beliefs, and calculations are exogenous to rational theories and can only be supplied by empirical analysis.”*[[44]](#footnote-44) Thus, before we evaluate IC estimates of China’s intentions against this baseline, we need to know: do the basic rationalist assumptions about how a Target’s motives can vary fit the initial conditions of IC estimates starting in the post- Cold War period? If they did, we would expect to see (a) To the extent that the IC believed China held limited intentions, they assessed that China was intrinsically motivated by security from foreign threats; (b) No matter China’s true intentions, China would assert that it was motivated by security; (c) If China asserted anything else, the IC would infer China was greedy.

Later we will scrutinize the IC assessment framework. But even a quick review suggests that it did not perfectly fit the assumptions of existing structural theory. For example, since the 1950s, the CIA assessed that Taiwan provided China with enormous historical and nationalistic benefits but fewer security benefits.[[45]](#footnote-45) Throughout the Cold War, the CIA estimated that China cared intensely about Taiwan, but never inferred that China must be greedy because Taiwan did not fit a security motivation.[[46]](#footnote-46) Similarly, China has not asserted, and the US never estimated that Hong Kong, Tibet or many other territories were vital for China’s security from foreign threat. Realists admit their core assumptions about motives do not perfectly fit Sino-American relations. For example, Glaser (2015)[[47]](#footnote-47) argued the US should not be concerned about China’s militaristic posture towards Tiawan because China and the US disagree about what the status quo is.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Interestingly, this mismatch is not unique to the Sino-American case. The initial assumptions of indicator theory do not fit other critical cases where threat perceptions do not match the predictions that indicator theory produces. For example, Hitler asserted he held limited aims because he was motivated by uniting ethnic-Germans under one Government. Hitler did not claim, and the British did not infer, that the Anschluss or the July Putsch raised German security.[[49]](#footnote-49) The United States asserted its limited aims in the Monroe Doctrine, which had little to do with security against a foreign threat.[[50]](#footnote-50) The British were optimistic that cooperation was possible as the US rapidly militarized and instigated crises in Alaska, Venezuela and elsewhere.

1. A new rationalist baseline

Given these cases do not perfectly fit the basic assumption or predictions for indicator theories, we are left with two lingering questions: what are reasonable assumptions about how a Target’s motives can vary? If we develop a theory that accounts for this variation, do we generate different predictions about the conditions under which estimates of the Target’s strategic intentions should respond to core indicators? In this section, I develop a general theory to answer these questions. Along the way, I develop case-specific expectations for the IC estimates of China that I summarize in Table 1. The Table holds me accountable to the assumptions I make (section 1), as well as the pattern of estimates we observed in the Sino-American case. I will discuss these predictions as I work through the theory.

3.1 How state motives vary.

I argue that the Challenger's intrinsic motivations are determined by an interaction between (1) the *principles* that motivate the Challenger's foreign policy and (2) its historical, cultural and geo-strategic *context*.

In my theory, a principle is any fundamental truth or proposition that could serve as a state’s intrinsic motivation. Recent studies have shown that states throughout history have been motivated by many different principles. Some states seek revisionist policies to unify their ethnic or religious group under one Government,[[51]](#footnote-51) honor,[[52]](#footnote-52) restore historical borders,[[53]](#footnote-53) revenge,[[54]](#footnote-54) security, status,[[55]](#footnote-55) the spread of human rights[[56]](#footnote-56) or the global spread of their ideology. Each of these studies convincingly shows that each of these principles has served as the intrinsic motivation for some states at some moments in history. But there is considerable unexplained variance in each study, and even contradictory findings across them. For example, Lee and Altman (2022)[[57]](#footnote-57) show that ethnic nationalism and security do not well predict motives for conflict, but Schultz and Goemans (2015) show they can. The divergent findings are likely explained because no single principle motivates all states in all cases. Rather, some states in some moments in history care about some principles more than others, and not all states are taking costly military actions to serve the same underlying motivations.

For ease of exposition, I discuss my theory as if Targets are motivated by a single principle. Of course, Targets could be truly motivated by a combination of many principles. But in many cases, states with limited aims are motivated by a few principles much more than the rest. For example, from the middle of the 19th Century, the United States prioritized the principles laid out in the Monroe Doctrine, and not R2P, or the safety of Christians living in Europe. If I account for the possibility that Targets can prioritize certain combinations of principles all my predictions hold.

Holding the Target's true principle constant, the tangible, real-world objectives the Target wants to achieve depend on its historical, and cultural *context*. A state motivated by ethnic nationalism, for example, will be most interested in territories that contain its ethnic group, and may seek to overturn international norms that call for the fair treatment of minorities. But if that same state, with the same context, was motivated by revenge from a prior conflict it would seek different objectives. Further, two states that are motivated by the same principle will value different concessions. For example, if China and Poland both wanted to restore their historical borders their foreign policy objectives would be different because Poland's historical context is different from China's.

I argue that Analysts are uncertain about the principle that the Target prioritizes. While Analysts do not know the principle that drives the Target, they know a lot about the Target’s history and culture. Status quo powers acquire that information by employing intelligence and foreign policy experts that read about the Target, and otherwise communicate with the Target 's elite (hence why I label them Analysts). As a result, Analysts have a reasonable understanding about what the Target would want if the Target was motivated by a specific principle.

It is tempting to say that some principles uniquely drive expansive aims and others uniquely drive states towards limited aims. Indeed, the conventional wisdom makes this claim.[[58]](#footnote-58) But variation in historical context means that one principle has widely different implications in different historical contexts. Consider globalist ideologies. We typically think that globalist ideologies generate extreme tension between great powers. For example, the Western allies believed it was intolerable for Russia to pursue the global spread of communism. But some globalist ideologies can lead to collaboration. For example, at the end of the Second World War it became clear that the United States would surpass Britain as the world leader.[[59]](#footnote-59) At this point in history, the United States pursued a global foreign policy that included a commitment to the Liberal International Order, free markets, and democracy.[[60]](#footnote-60) US ambitions were global. But these global ambitions were largely consistent with Britain's interests.[[61]](#footnote-61) Thus, Britain did not perceive US global ambitions as a threat. I conjecture that, if hypothetically the US was certain that China wanted to promote and protected the existing Liberal International Order, then the US would continue to facilitate China's rise.

Now consider restoring historical borders. If Australia was motivated by restoring its historical borders, then it would hold no territorial ambitions, and no revisionist demands over international laws and norms. In contrast, if, as Putin recently claimed, Russia was motivated to restore Soviet borders it means that Russia would seek direct control over Eastern Europe, and the Balkan states, informal influence over Finland and Central Asia, and the dis-memberment of Germany.

The nationalism example causes us to question whether the common realist assumption that status quo preferences are intrinsic motivations at all. In many cases, status quo preferences follow from an interaction between a Target’s true motivation and the geo-strategic context. Australia is a status quo nation because it controls all the territory that it cares about, and benefits from existing world order. However, if China took Tasmania from Australia next year, Australia would not be a status quo power any longer, even though Australia’s intrinsic motives remain constant.

*3.1.1 Predictions for Sino-American relations:*

The discussion above supply the assumptions in my signaling theory. When I analyze the case, I will check to see that they better explain the IC assessment framework for evaluating China’s intentions than the standard realist assumptions. Table 1 explains what I expect to see if they an appropriate starting place to analyze IC estimates of China’s intentions in the post-Cold War world. I expect that before the Cold War ends that the IC will use the logic of principles to develop an assessment framework for evaluating China’s future behavior. Specifically, the IC will hypothesis about the principles that could motivate China. For the principles that are most likely to drive China’s foreign policy the IC should write detailed high-level estimates about what China would want if China was motivated by a specific principle. These estimates should be grounded in detailed knowledge of China’s history and culture.

If I am wrong, then either the IC (a) will not theorize about different principles that could motivate China, or (b) will not review China’s history and culture to understand what specific issues China will want given each particular principle. (a) may follow if they either assume the worst, or that China’s motives vary along a continuum from security to greedy. (b) may follow if the IC is unable to map specific issues onto principles, or the IC believes that costly and illiberal actions provide a consistent meaning absent historical context. I could also be wrong if the IC believed that they could not estimate China’s intentions either because it is not possible, or because China’s strategic intentions will shift too frequently so that a long-term estimate is not fruitful.

3.2 The rationalist signaling implications:

In what follows, I explore the signaling implications of these conceptual insights. First, I develop a highly stylized decision-theoretic model of Bayesian signaling when Targets are motivated by distinct principles and Analysts know the Targets historical and cultural context. This model is valuable because it clearly illustrates how these more realistic assumptions moderate the standard predictions of indicator theory. Second, I address concerns that could arise from stronger strategic incentives to misrepresent, and other ambiguities. Third, I consider the broader implications of the argument and its implications for active debates about how threat perceptions form and change.

* + 1. *Explaining the signaling implications with a stylistic model.*

In this section, I will show that allowing for more complex variation in the Target’s motives can dramatically moderate the logic of signaling theory. To make the argument as clearly as possible, I consider a stylized decision-theoretic model where the Target’s motives are drawn from the set of principles visualized in Figure 2. In this example, I assume 9 issues that the Target could contest (labeled 1-9). These could represent territories the Target could capture, norms the Target could overturn, etc. The Target does not value each issue equally. Rather, depending on the Target’s intrinsic motivation, it values some high (core interests) and others low (peripheral interests). I assume that the Target is motivated by one of 7 principles (labeled A-G). Each row represents what the Target’s core interests would be if the Target was motivated by a specific principle. Notice principles A and G represent status quo and greedy Targets respectively. Based on the discussion above, I assume that Analysts are deeply uncertain about the Target’s true motives. Therefore, they start out believing that there is a 1/7 change the Target could be motivated by each of the 7 principles. However, the Analyst knows about the Target’s history and culture, and therefore knows which issues fit which principles. Standard rationalist theories predict that if the Target engages in (avoids) militaristic behavior over any issue that Analysts will raise (reduce) their confidence that that Target’s intentions are greedy. I’ll show that inferences depend on what specific issue the Target contests.

Principle How much Target values each issue if

Target is motivated by *this* principle.

A graph of a number of objects

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Note: Assumes states contest 9 issues (1-9), and Target is motivated by one of 7 principles (A-G) that could serve as Target’s motivations. Each row represents how much the Target values each specific issue depending on the motivating principle.

Figure 2 Stylistic Presentation of motives tied to principles.

To be clear, this type-space is a stylized example. But it includes three important features that are common across cases, and which depart from the standard assumptions made in costly signaling theory. First, some Target-types hold more core interests than others. Second, there are some issues that several Target-types value high. Third, Target-types are not perfectly nested meaning types with fewer core interests can hold some different core interests than types with more core interests. My theoretical predictions all hold if these assumptions hold. The richer the variation in issues and types, and the better the Analysts information is about the Target’s history, the more Analysts should interpret costly signals through their knowledge of historical context in the following way. But as the type-space moves towards the classic assumptions; more estimates should rely on indicators without considering historical and cultural context.

I’ll focus on the question at the heart of structural theories: Are the Target’s aims vast or limited? For simplicity, we will define Targets with vast aims as those who hold 5 or more core interests. Under this definition, the Analyst begins with a 3/7 expectation that the Target holds vast aims (approximately 42%).

To illustrate how context moderates the core costly signaling logic, I describe a setting where the Analyst is an outside observer, and the Target is faced with opportunities to take costly military actions. Perhaps the clearest example of a costly action arises when the Target is faced with an opportunity to invade a particular territory.[[62]](#footnote-62) Consistent with the standard signaling logic, I find that if the Target chose to invade a specific territory, the Analyst infers that the Target values that issue high. By contrast, if the Target avoids invasion, the Analyst infers that the Target valued that issue low. In standard signaling theory it does not matter what the issue is. Rather, if the Analyst learns that the Target was willing to contest any issue, they raise their confidence that the Target holds vast aims in a reliable way.

In my theory, the context surrounding each issue moderates what the Analyst infers. For example, if the Target invaded issue 4, the Analyst would rule out principles A-E, and report a high confidence (100%) estimate that the Target holds expansive aims. If instead, the Target invaded issue 5, the Analyst would rule out principle A and F and estimate that the Target holds vast aims with 2/5 probability (40%). This is a minimal change from the prior estimate.

Even though the Analyst observed a similar costly action in both examples, the inference he draws is different because the strategic context is different. Specifically, the Analyst uses his knowledge of how each issue fits with each principle to narrow his focus to the principles that correspond with the Target’s costly signals.

The logic of distinctive issues clarifies puzzling empirical patterns. For example, Yarhi-Milo (2014) notes that Analysts create litmus tests, wherein they force a Target to act on a specific issue and draw especially strong inferences from the Target’s response in that case.[[63]](#footnote-63) In standard indicator theories, it is hard to explain why the Target draws such strong inferences in a particular case. But my theory shows that certain issues are strong tests, because they rule out a large number of principles. For example, if the Analyst was uncertain if the Target held principle D or E they would not update at all if the Target contested issue 6. However, issues 2 and 4 discriminate between these types. Therefore, if they wanted to learn about the Target’s motives they may force a choice over these issues.

This inferential process can drive some remarkable rationalist inferences. Consider if the Target invaded issue 2, the Analyst would rule out principles A, B, E, F, and estimate that the Target holds vast aims with 1/3 probability. This example is somewhat shocking because the rational Analyst *reduces* his confidence that the Target holds vast aims after a costly military action. But the logic behind it is compelling. Issue 2 is especially discriminating for types with vast aims.

The discussion so far has emphasized a situation where the Analyst observed the Target take a single action. But qualitative inferences are cumulative. That is, as the Analyst observes more of the Target’s choices, they put the different pieces together to make nuanced inferences about which principles could motivate the Target. Each new piece adds a specific insight depending on how it fits with the other pieces.

Let's start with the assumption that the Target first takes issue 2. Following that observation, Analysts infer that the Target is motivated by C, D or G. Now if Analysts observes the Target invade issue 5, he draws no additional inference because C, D and G all value issues 2 and 5. By contrast, if the Target invades issue 7 the Analyst becomes certain the Target is greedy.

The costly inferences accumulate this way because learning reflects a narrowing process. Analysts start out believing that all principles could motivate the Target. Then, over time, costly military actions only allow them to rule out certain principles to the extent that future actions discriminate. In practice, this means Analysts can usually use early events to narrow down the set of plausible principles substantially to those that share some common issues. But then there can be long periods where no learning takes place because the remaining types share many of the same core interests. Indeed, to the extent that the Target can select the order of issues that the Target contests, it makes sense that the Target will select the order that allows herself to minimize updating. In a situation like this, Analysts should fail to update in the face of costly signals until an issue arises that allows them to discriminate between the remaining types.

* + 1. *Broad implications for IC estimates of China’s intentions.*

At the broadest levels, and summarized in Table 1, my framework expects that the IC will scrutinize China’s costly military and illiberal actions. Like standard indicator theories, when they observe China take an action over a specific issue or territory, they will infer that China intensely values that specific issue or territory (e.g, they infer China cares intensely about Hong Kong after they demand it back). However, unlike standard theories, the IC will not instantly convert that information into an estimate of China’s strategic intentions. Rather, they will consider what they know about how that specific issue or territory fits with different principles that could plausibly motivate China’s intentions. When China’s actions fit the available limited aims principles, the IC will not adjust their estimate of China’s intrinsic motivations. No matter how brutal China’s domestic politics are, how rapidly they militarize, or how many crises they instigate, the IC estimates will be invariant so long as China’s actions fit a limited aims principle.

By contrast, when China’s takes military or illiberal actions that communicate it values an issue that cannot be explained by a limited aims principle, then the IC will update. Even if China’s actions are not extremely costly, or only slightly illiberal, these actions will profoundly effect estimates of China’s strategic intentions. The reason is that the IC can use its knowledge of the historical and cultural context to rule out the possibility that China holds limited aims.

Given that we know estimates shifted suddenly circa 2011, this implies that China’s actions at that time cannot be explained by a limited aims principle, but China’s actions before 2011 can be.

* + 1. *Strategic factors, ambiguities and their empirical implications for disagreements between individual analysts:*

The logic above shows that even in the simplest decision-model, historical context causes different inferences than what standard costly signaling theories can explain. This speaks to the value of introducing historical context into our rationalist baseline. Still, one might wonder if my logic survives if greedy Targets face strategic incentives to understate their intentions. Incentives to understate intentions do not ruin my result because historical context *moderates*, but does not change, the logic of costly signaling. In my theory, as in the standard theory, greedy Targets face weaker incentives to contest their peripheral interests. Therefore, like the basic logic of costly signaling, greedier Target’s will play mixed strategies. However, all Targets are always more likely to conform to their true preferences. As a result, when the Analyst observes an action that would directly benefit a limited aims Target, the Analyst still updates in the way that my theory expects. However, the inference that Analysts draw are weaker once we account for the incentive to misrepresent.

Critically, these strategic concerns only moderate inferences in one direction. Targets with limited aims never contest territories that only greedy Targets care about. This has important implications for when updating should arise in the US-China case. I expect that analysts should barely alter their estimates when China’s costly actions directly benefit limited or greedy principles. By contrast, if China contests an issue that do not fit its limited principles, then it should drive a sharp shift in IC estimates in spite if incentives to misrepresent.

A second concern is that individual Analysts may disagree about how to interpret the Target’s history. Thus, some may believe that a specific action or issue is tied to a specific principle, but others may not. It is worth noting that in many historical case, more issues clearly fit or not. For example, it was clear that Africa, Asia, and the Americas did not fit into Hitler's nationalist aims but that parts of Austria, France and Czechoslovakia did. The ambiguous issues, such as parts of Poland, are few. Nevertheless, introducing ambiguity has much the same affect as incentives to misrepresent. To the extent that analysts are uncertain about how an issue ties to a specific principle, it diminishes the inference that the Analyst can draw, because the Analyst can only probabilistically rule out a principle.

This result gives me additional predictions about the kinds of disagreements I expect between individual analysts in the Sino-American case. If my theory is correct, the source of disagreement should center around whether China’s actions fit a specific principle or not. Those who do not alter their threat perceptions should argue that China’s costly actions indicate the Target’s actions over the contested issue fit the principle that the Target claims. Those who do alter their threat perceptions should argue that the Target’s actions do not fit.

* + 1. *Broader insights that the framework supplies.*

Before moving onto the empirical evaluation, I want to note that my theory is simply a description of the way that motives can vary that departs from classic assumptions. I use it to understand perceptions of strategic intentions in structural theories of great power politics. But many other frameworks that are salient for Sino-American relations assert state-motives vary on a continuum from security to greedy (or weakly to highly resolved). My framework will hold at least three important implications for these broader theoretical debates that are also salient for Sino-American relations.

One debate surrounds the relative strength of different costly actions.[[64]](#footnote-64) Targets utilize many kinds of costly signals. What signals should be most informative. The conventional view is that the costlier the action, the more informative it ought to be.[[65]](#footnote-65) However, my theory suggests that holding constant the cost, actions that most clearly discriminate are likely to be the most informative. For example, military interventions provide a clear signal because they isolate a specific issue. Other costly actions are more ambiguous because they could serve a wider range of principles. For example, rapid increases in military spending can help states achieve many different foreign policy objectives. This insight may help to explain the surprisingly persuasive effect of private diplomatic communications during a crisis.[[66]](#footnote-66) Afterall, verbal speech allows states to precisely articulate the principle that they serve.

A second question surrounds qualitative differences in military expenditures. Indeed, many realists have theorized that purchasing offensive weapons should communicate expansive motivations.[[67]](#footnote-67) The evidence in support of this logic is weaker than these theorists would like.[[68]](#footnote-68) The challenge is that even when states hold limited aims, they require offensive weapons to take the few issues they care about My theory explains a complimentary way that qualitative differences across weapons systems, especially different offensive systems, can signal intentions. This basic line of reasoning is used by recent scholars to understand differences in China’s nuclear intentions (i.e., how China intends to use its nuclear forces).[[69]](#footnote-69) But it could apply more broadly to China’s strategic intentions. For example, if China only purchased ships that were effective at littoral combat, and radar systems that covered nearby Islands, we might infer an interest in capturing proximate Islands. If instead, China invested in military satellite systems and land forces that were useful for invading the mountainous borders near India, we would infer that China cared about different objectives, that are connected to different principles. Thus, like offense-defense theory, I expect Analysts to examine qualitative features of Chinese military spending to infer China’s intentions. However, I expect that they will infer intentions by thinking about how China’s objectives fit with specific principles.

A third question surrounds the signaling value of domestic, and especially illiberal, policies.[[70]](#footnote-70) Many principles that could motivate a state’s foreign policy preferences will weigh on their domestic choices. For example, a state that was motivated by the responsibility to protect, would be highly sensitive to the costs of brutally suppressing domestic protestors. Therefore, after the Tiannamen Square Massacre, it was hard for China to intervene in the Rwandan Genocide under the pretext that China cared intensely about human rights.

This clarifies the conditions under which a Target’s domestic illiberal signal aggressive motives. It depends on whether a specific illiberal policy is consistent with the principles that likely supply a Target’s limited aims. In many cases they can. For example, in the early 1930s Hitler passed several anti-Zionist decrees that severely discriminated against Jewish populations living in Germany. This was clearly a domestic policy action, but it caught the attention of British analysts leading to two kinds of inferences. First, British analysts inferred that Hitler would not promote the liberal principles that underpin the League of Nations.[[71]](#footnote-71) Second, some British elites were partly reassured by Hitler’s actions because they were consistent with his extremely racist, hyper-nationalist principles. [[72]](#footnote-72) It is plausible to think that these actions could potentially provide a signal that Hitler prioritized German unification and purification at all costs, because they were so extreme, and engendered considerable international backlash.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **My theory predicts/assumes the IC** | **My theory does not fit if the IC** |
| *Section 4.1: Verifying my assumptions about how China’s motives vary, and the IC’s initial assessment framework?* | |
| * Theorizes about plausible principles that could motivate China. * Makes historical and cultural arguments for why specific issues fit specific principles. * Develops a list of indicators to watch that account for costly actions and historical context. | * Assume that China is motivated by security/status quo if not greedy. * Make no effort to (or cannot in most cases) understand which specific issues are tied to principles. * Discuss limited aims without reference to a specific principle. |
| *Section 4.2:* 1989-2010 China’s military and autocratic behaviors do not alter IC estimates of China’s intrinsic motivations. | |
| * Studies China’s illiberal / costly military activities. * Interprets them within an assessment framework that accounts for China’s historical and cultural context. * Fails to update threat perceptions if China’s military and illiberal behaviors fit a limited aims principle. | * Becomes incrementally alarmed by China’s military/autocratic behaviors. * Avoid shifting estimates for some reason other than they fit a single, limiting principle. * Ignores China’s military and illiberal actions altogether (rather than analyzes them, and judges that they fit a limiting principle). * Asserts behaviors fit China’s principle, but it is obvious to an outsider they do not. |
| *Section 4.3:*  2011-2013: Estimates of China’s strategic intentions change | |
| * Updates their beliefs rapidly based on one or a few of China’s military / illiberal behaviors. * Justifies revised assessment because they could not explain how those few behaviors fit China’s limited aims principles. Thus, they knew China was motivated by something else. * Disagreements among analysts are based on disagreements about how to interpret specific issues/territories as connected to specific principles. | * Becomes alarmed because of power and not a new estimate of motives. * Relies on any other logic to explain their revised estimate. This might include   + Xi is uniquely aggressive, and China’s intentions will revert to more peaceful relations with a new leader.  + Events other than China’s behaviors, such as an intercepted communique or well placed HUMINT source.   * Asserts behaviors no longer fit China’s principle, but it is obvious to an outsider they do. |

Note: Predictions are broken down based on case-coding described in section 1. These are not exhaustive predictions. See text for more nuance.

*Table 1: Summary of Main, case-specific predictions.*

1. Evaluating US Intelligence Estimates of China under my rationalist baseline.

In what follows, I treat my theory as a rationalist baseline and re-analyze the IC estimates of China’s intentions. My analysis proceeds in three sections that are summarized in Table 1. Overall, I find that the IC reliably provided a nuanced estimate close to the rationalist ideal throughout the post-Cold War period. Their estimates evaluate China’s actions using the basic logic of costly signaling, but the inferences they draw were appropriately moderated by China’s historical and cultural context. To be clear, I do not evaluate US policy, which factors in power, economic interdependence, domestic politics, and other variables.[[73]](#footnote-73)

4.1 Building the Assessment Framework:

In 1969, the US realized that Sino-Soviet relations were unusually tense. Henry Kissinger reasoned that if the US extended diplomatic and commercial support to China, that the US could feasibly coax China out of the Soviet-led communist bloc.[[74]](#footnote-74) Kissinger's goal was to meet with Mao and determine if a compromise was possible. Indeed, this presents a key moment to test the basic assumptions of my theory about how Analysts construct an assessment framework. Afterall, US estimates of China had largely seen it as one part of broader Cold War competition. Kissinger’s visit demanded estimates of China’s strategic intentions on their own terms.

If the case fits my assumptions, then the CIA[[75]](#footnote-75) will start out by constructing an assessment framework in three main steps. First, I expect that the CIA’s initial estimates will begin by theorizing about the principles that motivate China. This is what we observe. For example, in 1969 the CIA assessed that China's objectives could include “treatment as a major world power and as a primary source of revolutionary leadership; accommodation of its policies by other Asian states…'' as well as territorial re-unification, and recognition as a nuclear power.[[76]](#footnote-76) But even this report was not sure which of these interests China would prioritize.

Second, I expect that the CIA should report on China’s strategic intentions. If I am right, the CIA will not assume that if holds limited aims that it is motivated by security. Rather, the CIA should scrutinize China’s domestic and international actions, and the profiles of Chinese elites to identify the most likely principles and write about their implications in detail. This is exactly what I find. In November 1970, two months after Nixon's visit, the CIA produced National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 30-7-70 titled *“Communist China’s International Posture*,” and circulated it to the White House and NSC. NIE 30-7-70 details four principles that could motivate China. In the second paragraph explains that China’s “basic goals” are most likely determined by one of two principals. Either China sees itself as “*a great power and leader of the world revolution or as a more traditional but highly nationalistic country concerned primarily with Asian interests.*”

Third, I expect that the CIA will detail the historical context that surrounds the principles to identify which issues and territories fit each principle. NIE 30-7-70 does that. It spends two pages fleshing out what nationalism means for China. It notes that the “*Sino-centric view of the Middle Kingdom*,” is the dominant narrative of China’s nationalism. And that “*The past century has left a residue of bitterness and frustration among those Chinese whose sense of nationalism and patriotism has been outraged by what they see as unfair treatment of China by foreigners*.” NIE 30-7-70 goes on to distinguish between the principal of Nationalism and other potential motivating ideologies that would likely drive broader ambitions. Consistent with my theory, the CIA believes that their assessment is not leader specific. Rather, their assessment framework is valuable for understanding China's long-term aims. It states, “*Unlike the ideology of Maoism, which may not long survive its creator, the traditional sense of China’s privileged role in the world will probably remain a consistent theme in this and any foreseeable Chinese government*.”

Finally, my theory expects that the CIA will use historical and cultural context to explain to policymakers the issues and territories that fit and do not fit with China’s conceptualization of nationalism. NIE 30-7-70 does that. It states that territorial control of Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong unambiguously fit China’s long-term interests. It also explains that China would like to resolve border disputes with India, and the Soviet Union, noting that China views these territories as part of its sovereign territory. However, it assesses these as less important because they have less salience to nationalism.

NIE 30-7-70 provides additional nuances that illustrate the CIA understood the difference between China's underlying principles and the instrumental strategy it could use to serve those principles. Specifically, NIE 30-7-70 clarifies a difference between China’s actual interests and additional military actions China might take given the regional security situation. For example, NIE 30-7-30 states that China may make “defensive” military deployments if US or Soviet forces threaten to disrupt peace along China’s borders. But the report clearly distinguishes between these military deployments which depend on the strategic situation, and China’s core interests, which China will pursue in any strategic situation. This insight is far more nuanced than many realist theories allow for. It shows that the CIA can distinguish between territories of intrinsic value, and instrumental objectives that states seek to achieve their true aims.[[77]](#footnote-77)

One concern is that China's nationalist ambitions are somewhat ambiguous. There are several specific territories and normative issues that could fit (or not) within China's core interests. Indeed, if the CIA cannot identify the ambiguous issues, and render at least a moderate confidence judgement over whether they fit, then they may have trouble exploiting historical context as my theory expects. However, NIE 30-7-70 explicitly deals with ambiguous claims by showing that they map onto slightly different interpretations of China’s nationalist identity. Specifically, the Middle Kingdom refers to a pre-Westphalian period where China exerted broad influence and not direct control over surrounding territories. It was not exactly clear what level of control China would want over Southeast Asia and Korea under a nationalist ideology. Consistent with my theory, NIE 30-7-30 renders a moderate confidence estimate on ambiguous issues, and explains the exact indicators that could help resolve this sort of ambiguity. It claims that if China’s desire is for minimal control, then “*China is likely to persist in encouraging local revolutionaries, but… significant material assistance is unlikely to be provided.*”

This assessment framework closely fits the assumptions of my theory. The CIA identified different principals that could motivate China, isolates the most likely candidates based on China’s actions to that point, then uses an analysis of China's history and culture to detail what China wants depending on what principle motivates it.

4.1.1 Did this assessment framework persist?

To evaluate my theory in the post-Cold War world, I need to code the assessment framework that the US government uses starting at the end of the Cold War. Partly because later estimates remain classified, I assume the basic framework articulated in NIE 30-7-70 carried through. Of course, a lot changed between 1970-1989. In the late 1970s, Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended. These changes brought about major governance reforms in China. It is plausible that the incoming CCP leadership held entirely different intentions.[[78]](#footnote-78) Another concern is that the collapse of the Soviet Union altered China's strategic position. It is possible the Soviet collapse de-legitimized the principle of global communism. It is plausible that China re-formulated its intrinsic motives at this moment. [[79]](#footnote-79)

Fortunately, the evidence I have suggests that the US relied on the same basic assessment framework that is laid out in NIE 3-7-70. Whether or not this followed from an entirely new assessment effort in 1976, or 1990, or was a continuation of NIE 3-7-70 does not matter. To evaluate my theory, all I need to do is code the assessment framework that the IC utilized at the onset of the post-Cold War period. The following pieces of evidence suggest continuity in the assessment framework. In 1982, President Reagan ordered two National Security Study Directives (NSSD 1, 12) that caused the IC to provide a holistic assessment of China’s Strategic intentions. Both studies remain classified, but the initial outline and study plans are declassified. Consistent with NIE 30-7-70, these documents reveal that the US appreciated that China could pose a strategic threat to US security interests. However, it could also hold regional aims grounded in nationalist ideology. In 1989 President HW Bush ordered a National Security Review (summarized in his executive orders NSR-12 and NSR-29) to assess any and all threats to US interests in the post-Cold War world. These far-reaching reviews took two full years to complete (there was no National Security Strategy in 1990). Most of the study documents remain classified. However, I interviewed the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Amb. Robert Kimmet who coordinated these reviews. Kimmet acknowledged that the study teams considered China as a potential threat based on the trajectory of its economic growth and population. However, the study team was uncertain about China's strategic aims. Since they were uncertain about China's aims, they where uncertain if China would pose a long-term threat to US interests.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Published interviews also suggest that the National Security Council up until the Obama Administration held the same core impression of China. For example, Obama’s Deputy National Security Adviser for East Asian Affairs, Jeffery Bader, has noted, “*we were, for the most part, inheriting a general framework for dealing with China that went back decades*.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Publicly available documents published since 2000 communicate that the intelligence community continued to follow this assessment rubric. For example, the 2005 Report to Congress on the *“The Military Power of the People’s Republic of China,*” included a 10 page declassified assessment of China’s future strategic intentions. It started by noting that “*Direct insights into China’s national strategies are difficult to acquire. To assess China’s intent, analysis of official Chinese strategy documents and White Papers must be augmented by examination of what China has accomplished in recent years and is attempting to accomplish in the future.*” In other words, the best estimate must take China’s actions in the context of its stated aims. The report then goes on to outline two potential strategic orientations that are consistent with NIE 3-7-70. In another example, a 2010 Department of Defense Report to Congress that included an assessment of China’s strategic aims affirms a statement made by President Obama earlier that year, the Sino-American “*relationship has not been without disagreement and difficulty. But the notion that we must be adversaries is not pre-destined.*”[[82]](#footnote-82) While the report does not go into as much detail about the basis of the estimate as NIE 3-7-70, it is clear that the Department of Defenses’ strategic estimate is that China could prove to be either a “partner” or an “adversary.”

Interviews I conducted also suggest that this basic framework was consistent with how the IC approached China-analysis up until 2012. Notably, when I asked the DNI how the IC went about understanding China's interest. He explained that *''Determining core interests has a long and honorable place in analysis, [*however*] that’s not that difficult. You ask any 50 China-analysts and they’d give you that same list of things that I came up with.*”[[83]](#footnote-83)

Beyond this evidence, there are two theoretical reasons that the US would plausibly continue to rely on the same assessment framework. First, China’s historical and cultural context did not change when the Cold War ended. China’s understanding of the Middle Kingdom persisted, China still had outstanding territorial disputes in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet, and elsewhere, and China had large diaspora populations along its borders. Thus, it is still plausible to think that the principles listed in NIE 30-7-30 would account for the potential variation in China’s intentions. Second, China’s actions during the Cold War were largely constrained by the Soviets. Given this fact, the US began the post-Cold War period uncertain about China’s intentions precisely because China had not taken a set of clear costly actions that the US could use to rule out past principles.

Putting all of this together, it is plausible to think that the assessment framework the CIA developed during the Cold War persisted in the post-Cold War period where the most likely limiting principle that could motivate China is grounded in the concept of the Middle Kingdom discussed above, and therefore violent or illiberal actions in support of this principle would not trigger a shift in estimates.

4.2 Was the IC right to ignore China’s violent and autocratic behaviors 1989-2011?

One of the central criticisms levied against the IC is that they missed key indicators that China's aims were vast. Like these critics I take two sets of facts as given. First, China displayed many violent actions that clearly signaled it was an illiberal regime that desired revision of the status quo. Second, the IC did not alter their estimates of China's intentions during this period. But unlike those who assert that optimal Analysts will reliably respond costly military and illiberal actions, I argue that the IC should factor in information about China’s context. When China takes a military or illiberal action, the IC should ask: “does this action plausibly serve China’s limited aims principles? If it does, I will not update my estimate of China's strategic intentions. If it does not, I will rule out the possibility that China is motivated by that limiting principle, and this will cause me to change my estimate of China’s strategic intentions."

Even at a preliminary glance, it is easy to see that the events highlighted by Congressional critics are broadly consistent with China’s nationalist principles laid out in NIE 30-7-30. For example, in 1995 China sought to revise the status quo over Taiwan. China initiated an invasion plan, moved 150,000 forces to its coastline, and executed live-fire drills. China backed down only after the United States sailed a carrier through the Taiwan Strait. But even then China did not stop. In 1996, China invested in offensive battleships and used live-fire exercises to influence Taiwan's election. American foreign policy elites acknowledged that they had underestimated China's interest in violent territorial revision over Taiwan. The IC understood the importance of these actions and used them to update their inferences about China's resolve to fight for Taiwan. A declassified assessment from ONI, affirmed by the CIA, reads `*China is likely to conduct similar, politically motivated exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan in the near future.*' However, analysts drew a different inference about China's strategic intentions. Most analysts did not alter their estimates in response to the Taiwan Straits Crisis. Surprisingly, a handful of senior analysts even raised their confidence that China's long-term intentions were ``*limited to peaceful reunification.*"[[84]](#footnote-84)

Analysts at the time also acknowledged that, “China’s dramatic military buildup over the last several decades is perhaps the single most important challenge in strategic affairs.” This build-up includes modernizing offensive weapons such as “near top-of-the-line fighter jets in substantial numbers.”[[85]](#footnote-85) But the same analyst also acknowledged that “conflict is not a foregone conclusion…[because] China's leadership will pursue its interests as it sees them.” This analysis closely fits how I conceptualize the strength of different signals and why offensive arming need not signal aggressive intentions. Because China would need offensive weapons to complete its limited military missions, rapid arming did not cause too much concern.

Of course, just because the IC failed to alter their estimates in response to these events does not directly support my theory. It could be that the IC failed to update for a different reason. In fact, the Select Committee explicitly presents an alternative story. They argue that the IC's optimism was based on a naive hope that China would liberalize, and therefore China's intentions would change.[[86]](#footnote-86) A related criticism is that they believed China would become so enmeshed in the US economy that they would prefer to live in a compromise over Asia, rather than compete with the US and lose the economic benefits.[[87]](#footnote-87)

While certain estimates discussed the possibility that China’s strategic intentions may change, they likely did not drive uncertain estimates of China’s intentions to the degree that the Select Committee asserts. There are two reasons. First, this line of criticism assumes that China's regime type almost completely determines foreign policy aims. Second, it assumes that the main reason that the IC was unsure about China’s strategic aims was that the IC could not predict whether China would liberalize. However, and as we just detailed, this is not true. NIE 30-7-70 made no mention of the fact that China could liberalize. And yet, NIE 30-7-70 still estimated that *autocratic* China could hold limited strategic intentions. The reason is that it was plausible that autocratic China was motivated by restoring its historical position in Asia.

A closer look at China estimates at two critical periods shows that uncertainty about China’s future behavior did not rest on beliefs that China’s true intentions could change. The first period comes in the wake of the Tienanmen Square Massacre. We now know from declassified documents that Chinese leaders viewed liberalization and democratization as an extreme threat to their rule.[[88]](#footnote-88) During private deliberations the PRC agreed that economic and political isolation was better than risking enmeshment. The US intelligence community was aware of these deliberations and still estimated that China’s intentions could be limited. The second period comes in 2018. As stated earlier, the NSS reports a new, alarmist estimate of China’s intentions. This revised estimate still includes the caveat that if China democratized that cooperation could be possible.

Putting these two estimates together, it is clear that IC beliefs about whether China’s intentions *could change* did not determine their estimate about whether China's interests would cause a problem. In the 1990s, the IC believed that China would not liberalize and still thought long-term cooperation was possible. In 2018, the IC revised their estimate that China’s intentions were aggressive but continued to note that if China changed their regime that cooperation could follow.[[89]](#footnote-89)

4.3 Explaining the 2011 shift in estimates.

My theory predicts that intelligence analysts will update their estimates of China's intentions because China's specific actions do not fit with a limited aims principle. I've already argued that China's actions 1989-2010 were largely consistent with a nationalist project. For my theory to reasonably explain the sharp shift in estimates circa 2011, I need to know if China's actions circa 2011 represent a qualitative departure from this principle. My review of China's actions suggests that there was. Notably, China extended its claims over Islands in the South China Sea, expanded its military footprint to bases in Central Asia and Africa, built shadow institutions to subvert the international order in Central Asia. China also exploited predatory loans to gain political leverage over several states that did not fit its nationalist agenda.

To be clear, this summary is largely based on my interpretation of China's actions. The more important question is whether the IC used a similar logic to draw their inferences. The public estimates of China's intentions are not sufficiently detailed to explain why analysts updated their beliefs. However, through a combination of interviews and policy analysis I arrive at two tentative conclusions. First, available information suggests that the IC changed estimates followed the logic of qualitative inferences. Second, discrepancies between the estimates of individual analysts reasonably followed different interpretations of China’s limited aims claims.

Most of my evidence in support of this claim comes from elite interviews. The most direct evidence comes from a one hour interview with the former Director of National Intelligence responsible for National Level assessments between 2009 and 2011. As described, this period is critical because it is when the consensus view of China's intentions likely started to change. During the interview, I asked the DNI the following question.

**Question**: I want to talk about differences in the National Level Intelligence products published during your tenure between 2009 and 2010. I notice that there is a change in your language. In my reading, you are cautiously optimistic about China's strategic intentions and US-China cooperation during your confirmation hearing and in your 2009 report to Congress. But you are considerably more pessimistic in your reports during 2010. Am I correct in thinking that you changed your estimate during this period? If you did, is there something that China said or did in about 2010 that led you to reduce your confidence that they are peaceful?

**Answer:** Part of it was, speaking honestly, there was still good reason to leave room for China to develop in a benevolent fashion and not to drive them to believe that the United States was inevitably hostile. I believed in 2009, and I sort of believe it now that an overly aggressive policy would have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. And that it would be a mistake. When you look at the harder line that they have taken in the south China Sea since 2010. In that particular area at least they are pushing pretty hard to take control of that area. Pushing the US out. *It was out of character for what they’d been doing up until that point. It was different and it would be hard to interpret their actions in any way other than their intentions were aggressive.* That sort of made me think about this dual path that China could follow – we are beyond that point. They had chosen to take a hard line.

His response clearly indicates that his logic, which supports different estimates reported to the highest levels of government, closely matched my theoretical ideal. Critically, the DNI's correctly draws an inference by interpreting China's actions in the context of China's plausible motives.

Of course, it is possible that the DNI would have derived the same inference following any violent action over another issue. To make certain this was not the next exchange we had went as follows.

**Question**: Let me asked you as a hypothetical – if China had behaved the same way against Taiwan. So rather than go to the South China Sea and do these very provocative actions in the South China Seas, if they had instead ran the same bellicose and aggressive missions around the Strait of Taiwan would you have updated your assessment in the same way?

**Answer**: No – I don’t think it would have been the same. I would have seen that as speeding up the time-table on something they had long-declared that they had been serious about. I think it has been the taking on a new area that was not mentioned as a core interest that influenced the assessment.

Again his answer clearly demonstrates how his estimate was mediated through how he understood China's limited aims. In fact he clearly explains that what distinguishes the two issues is that China had no long-standing historical or cultural claim to the South China Sea in his view, and this drove the shift in his estimate.[[90]](#footnote-90)

To be clear, this was not the only event that drove the shift. Later in the interview I asked how we would know if China held global or regional ambitions. He explained that “*The one piece of evidence that I think I've written about that do show a global interest rather than a regional interest are their space systems. If you are just interested in knowing what goes on up to the second Island chain you don’t need satellites for intelligence and military applications. That’s the one piece I've seen – but I haven’t seen any other pieces.*" Again, this insight draws a clear link between China's choices, what kinds of objectives that those choices could plausibly serve, and then an appreciation of how to reconcile those choices with China's strategic context.

Blair was succeeded by James Clapper in late 2010. Clapper’s 2011 report to Congress is even more grim, claiming, “*China’s rise drew increased international attention of the past year, as several episodes of assertive Chinese behavior fueled perceptions of Beijing as a more imposing and potentially difficult international actor.*”[[91]](#footnote-91)

My recorded interviews with other intelligence elites rendered a similar result. For example, I interviewed the former Deputy Director of the CIA who was responsible for analysis and production, Mark Lowenthal.[[92]](#footnote-92) Consistent with the logic of my theory he explained that “*analysts need deep historical knowledge of China to properly appreciate China's interests.*" He also explained that, “*you can't just rely on indicators like military spending... analysts need detailed historical knowledge to understand the context that surrounds China's actions.*" While he did not go into specifics about the US estimates, he generally agreed that the CIA analysts followed these practices.

In addition to long form interviews with senior intelligence elites, I also conducted short, informal interviews with mid-level national security professionals. I asked the 171 subjects who had shifted their estimate on China, what information caused them to change their opinion. Figure 3 summarizes their answers. Several points are notable. First, almost all analysts point to specific events. Second, many analysts are focused on China’s actions in two specific issue-areas: the South China Sea, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes. The third-largest group focused on China’s expanding military footprint into regions outside East Asia. In total, these three events represent more than 65% of the reasons that analysts suddenly altered their estimate. The fact that so many analysts shifted their estimate suddenly based on a few, specific events is broadly supportive of my theory. What is more each of these three events is plausibly consistent with my theory.

Third, Different analysts disagree about exactly what event drove their pessimism. As a result, different analysts changed their beliefs at different points in time. However, the source of their disagreement usually hinged on a common logic: they all realized that China’s behaviors could not be explained by a limited pursuit of historically salient territories. China’s behavior therefore signaled a broader shift.

A graph of different sizes and colors

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Note: Summary of elite interviews with China-watchers (n=171). Mil. Expands regionally represents situations where China expanded military relations outside East Asia, including South Asia, Africa, and the Pacific.

Figure 3 Why did China Experts shift their estimate?

Although it is not easily seen in the quantified data, my discussions about how analysts saw the South China Sea dispute is instructive. Some analysts argued that China’s claims in 2010 concerned them because these Islands were not previously part of China’s nationalist project. Other analysts grew concerned in 2012 when China began to erect Islands on the Scarborough Shoal. In their view, China's decision to extend its territory was a qualitatively different demand from what it had historically held, and therefore signaled China wanted to extend beyond its historical borders. Others still argued that China held long-standing cultural claim over the Islands that it simply did not express. As a result, this incident did not affect them. What this example illustrates is that analysts interpreted this event differently. However, the differences hinge on the distinction that my theory predictions: how should we interpret China's actions in the context if its historical and cultural claims?

It is true that several analysts suggested that a range of factors influenced their estimate. This is different from the simplistic decision-model that I present. However, it fits my predictions once we account for ambiguities. For example, one analyst noted that it was a combination of China's expansion into the South China Sea; China's push to establish shadow institutions; China's expanding military presence in the Malacca Straits, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The analyst acknowledged that he did not have a complete picture of China's strategy. He could imagine a situation in which any one of these actions could be part of a broader strategy that was consistent with China's limited aims. However, when he looked at all of these choices together, he could not understand how China's actions were consistent with China's historical and cultural claims.

Overall, the evidence suggests that intelligence analysts thought about inferring China's motives as a puzzle. When they observed China’s specific military or autocratic behaviors, they drew inferences about the specific issues that China truly cared about. They then looked at China's actions and asked, “given what I know about China's history and culture, how do these actions fit together in service of a specific strategy towards a specific principal?'' So long as China's actions fit China's declared core interests grounded in China's historical experiences, analysts did not alter their estimates. But once they found a piece that did not fit, they revised their estimates suddenly.

This evidence also highlights something surprising about China's actions. Within a period of a few years, China engaged in many violent actions that were inconsistent with a nationalist ambition. Even if my theory well explains shifts in perceptions, one might wonder: why did China take so many provocative actions at the same time?

Others have sought to explain why China's rhetoric and actions became provocative circa 2012. The dominant explanation is that Xi Ji Ping held unusually hawkish goals, and quickly consolidated power when he was appointed General Secretary of the CCP.[[93]](#footnote-93) These accounts convincingly show that Xi pursued more hawkish policies.[[94]](#footnote-94) But there are limits to what they explain. First, and as others have argued, Xi was chosen by a small group of Party elites who knew of his hawkish preferences, and who shared them. As Doshi (2021), ``*Many aspects of an increasingly assertive Chinese policy that the United States finds disagreeable are not “bugs” introduced by Xi’s unique power consolidation and aggressiveness but enduring “features” of that consensus.'*'[[95]](#footnote-95)

Second, Xi was appointed General Secretary of the CCP in 2012. But as I just showed, US perceptions of China mainly changed in 2010 and 2011.[[96]](#footnote-96) The reason for this change was that US analysts inferred qualitative differences in China's strategy before Xi came to power.

If Xi does not explain a sudden increase in highly provocative actions after two decades of peaceful rise, then what does? My theory provides the following plausible answer. While the US was uncertain about China's strategic intentions, China avoided costly actions that implied its motives extended beyond what it had declared. Once China had tipped its hand to US analysts, then it had no incentive to hold back.

5. Conclusions.

Against the findings of Congress and many recent pundits, I find that the IC did a great job using the information they had to estimate China's intentions. At the earliest possible moment, the IC developed a comprehensive framework to evaluate China’s future behavior that accounted for strategic incentives to misrepresent, and China historical and cultural context. The evidence I have suggested that they used some variant of that framework from 1970 onward. They applied it despite political pressure from Congress to respond to China's aggressive behavior. In my opinion, their estimates were first rate and consistent with my understand of what a rational intelligence community would do if it was interested in serving the national interest (and not some bureaucratic interest).

As a result, Congress' choice to chastise the IC and demand reforms for its low confidence estimates risks damaging the IC's rigorous process. After all, if we tell the IC that they did a bad job, and force them to reform, they are likely to conform to Congress’s mistaken impression of what high-quality estimates would have looked like.

This does not mean the IC does not need to shift focus. Now that we know that China is a competitor with the United States, the IC must ask different questions including: what tools will China use to expand its influence, what will China target and what are the implications for our security, and how can we quickly identify China’s revisionist behaviors in cyber and covert operations? These different questions generate different intelligence requirements, and new demands on current and strategic intelligence priorities. My interviews suggest that the IC is aware of these new requirements and has chosen to reconfigure itself to meet these challenges. If we demand that they address Congress’ faulty criticisms, we will prevent them from making meaningful changes to address important questions they need to address.

My analysis sheds light on China's inflammatory behavior circa 2011. Consistent with recent insights, I argue that Xi's personal preferences did not determine wholly determine what appears to be a radical departure from the Peaceful rise policy. Rather, I argue that China took several provocative actions because they had revealed their true motives. Therefore, there was little incentive to hold back.

This result holds grim implications for future of Sino-American relations. It implies that this process is structural based on China’s enduring intrinsic interest to compete with the United States. This might explain why Sino-American competition has only deepened under presidents Trump and Biden despite their very different world views and experiences.

My general theory likely holds implications for other cases. It may explain, for example, why British elites remained hopeful as Hitler rapidly militarized, rampaged across the German-speaking parts of Europe and persecuted minorities.[[97]](#footnote-97) It may also explain why estimates mainly shifted when Hitler took the non-German speaking parts of Czechoslovakia.

Finally, my theory of motives can be applied in any strategic context. I conjecture it will help us understand why the reputation for resolve in repeated crises applies in some contexts but not others.[[98]](#footnote-98) These will be especially important now that the US believes China is likely a rival and repeated crises are likely to emerge.[[99]](#footnote-99)

1. On indicator theories for evaluating strategic intentions, see Jervis, R. (2017). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press; Yarhi-Milo, K. (2014). *Knowing the adversary : leaders, intelligence, and assessment of intentions in international relations*. Friedman, J. A. (2019). *War and chance : assessing uncertainty in international politics*. Oxford University Press. After first citation, I cite articles parenthetically. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an overview, Kydd, A. (2000). Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation. *International Organization*, *54*(2), 325–357; Glaser, C. L. (2010). *Rational Theory of International Politics*. Princeton University Press; Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, *30*(02), 167–214. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Oneal, J., Maoz, Z., & Russett, B. (1996). The Liberal Peace: Interdependence, Democracy, and International Conflict, 1950-85. *Journal of Peace Research*, *33*(1), 11–28; Huth, P., & Russett, B. (1990). Testing Deterrence Theory: Rigor Makes a Difference. *World Politics*, *42*(04), 466–501. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This criticism is most detailed in the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence’s 2020 Report, “The China Deep Dive: A Report on the Intelligence Community’s Capabilities and Competencies with Respect to the People’s Republic of China.” The ranking Committee member elaborated on it in Schiff, A. (2020). The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat. *Foreign Affairs*. See also, Kagan, R. (2005, May 15). The Illusion of “Managing” China. *The Washington Post*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnston, A. (2013). How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness? *International Security*, *37*(4), 7–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In addition to those above, Medeiros, E. S. (2005). Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability. The Washington Quarterly, 29(1); Crafano, J (2023), “These 5 China Intelligence Failures Are Even More Dangerous Than the Chinese Spy Balloon,” Heritage Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a review of rational theories in general, see Lake, D. A., & Powell, R. (1999). *Strategic choice and international relations*. Princeton University Press. For a description of the value of abstraction in structural theories see Kydd, A. H. (2010). Rationalist Approaches to Conflict Prevention and Resolution. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *13*(1), 101–121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, Jervis, R. (2010). *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*. Cornell University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For general arguments about the implications of diverse motivations see Finnemore, M. (1996). *National Interests in International Society*. Cornell University Press; Schultz, K., & Goemans, H. (2015). *Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model*. Below I review broader literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kang, D. (2017). *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First*. Cambridge; White, H. (2013). The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power. OUP Oxford; Goh, E. (2008). Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies. *International Security*, *32*(3), 113–157. Friedberg, A. (2005). The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable? *International Security*, *30*(2). Goldstein, A. (2005). Rising to the Challenge: China’s Grand Strategy and International Security. In *Studies in Asian security*. Stanford University Press. An exception is Beckley, M. (2023). The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China’s Next Decade. *International Security*, *48*(1), 7–46, who argues China’s rate of growth will slow. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Chase, M. S. (2018). *PLA Rocket Force Modernization and China’s Military Reforms*. RAND Corporation; Talmadge, C. (2017). Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States. *International Security*, *41*(4), 50–92. Fravel, M. T., & Medeiros, E. S. (2010). China’s Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure. *International Security*, *35*(2), 48–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Zhang, K. (2019). Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea. *International Security*, *44*(1), 117–159; Kim, T., Taffer, A., & Zhang, K. (2020). Correspondence: Is China a Cautious Bully? *International Security*, *45*(2), 187–193; Cha, V. (2023). Collective Resilience: Deterring China’s Weaponization of Economic Interdependence. *International Security*, *48*(1), 91–124. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In response to crises see: Goldstein, A. (2013). First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations. *International Security*, *37*(4), 49–89. In terms of concessions and commitments, see: Glaser, C. L. (2015). A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? *International Security*, *39*(4), 49–90 and Easley, L., Kim, P., & Glaser, C. L. (2016). Correspondence: Grand Bargain or Bad Idea? *International Security*, *40*(4), 178–191. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rationalism v. Constructivism: A Skeptical View. In *Handbook of International Relations* (pp. 52–72). SAGE [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rosato, S. (2015). The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers. *International Security*, *39*(3), 48–88; Glaser, C., Kydd, A., Haas, M., Owen, J., & Rosato, S. (2016). Correspondence: Can Great Powers Discern Intentions? International Security, 40(3), 197–215. In the context of resolve, see: Press, D. G. (2007). *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*. Cornell University Press; [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Each is an active theoretical debate. See Goldfien, M., Joseph, M, & McManus, R. (2022). The Domestic Sources of International Reputation. *American Political Science Review*, 1–20; Garfinkel, B., & Dafoe, A. (2019). How does the offense-defense balance scale? Journal of Strategic Studies, 42(6), 736–763; Katagiri, A., & Min, E. (2019). The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach. *American Political Science Review*, *113*(1), 156–172. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, Yarhi-Milo, K. (2014); Schweller, R. L. (2004). Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing. *International Security*, *29*(2), 159–201. Schub, R. (2023). Informing the Leader: Bureaucracies and International Crises. American Political Science Review. Friedman, J., Lerner, J., & Zeckhauser, R. (2017). Behavioral Consequences of Probabilistic Precision: Experimental Evidence from National Security Professionals. International Organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For example, Kim, S. J. (2020). Power, Uncertainty, and Subjectivity. *Journal of International and Area Studies*, *27*(1), 1–18 examines overall threat estimates. As I define more below, I focus exclusively on perceptions of China’s intrinsic motivations. Some purely analyze China’s power e.g, Beckley (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Friedberg, A. (2005) asserts they shifted gradually, and Kim (2020) asserts they shift only recently. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. To be clear, the IC knew China highly valued certain issues, such as Taiwan. But as we will explain below, debates about strategic intentions reflect a broader view of China’s overall intentions, not their interest in a specific issue. See, e.g., Glaser (2010) p38. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Doing so presents a tough test for my argument because the Select Committee argues that this pattern of estimates was a mistake. By contrast, I take this factual pattern as given, and argue that the IC rendered largely optimal estimates. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This likely follows from declassification restrictions. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This includes broad theories of threat perceptions such as Kydd (2005); Yarhi-Milo (2014), Goddard (2014), and Khong, Y. (1992) Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965. Princeton University Press. It also includes more specific analyses of US-China relations, such as Johnston (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Horowitz, M., Stewart, B. M., Tingley, D., Bishop, M., Resnick Samotin, L., Roberts, M., Chang, W., Mellers, B., & Tetlock, P. (2019). What Makes Foreign Policy Teams Tick: Explaining Variation in Group Performance at Geopolitical Forecasting. *The Journal of Politics*, *81*(4), 1388–1404. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The IC also regularly consults outside experts to forming their strategic estimates. For example, in Global Trends 2030, the National Intelligence Council explicitly acknowledged that they circulated classified documents with several experts out of Government and took their opinions seriously into the final report. See Lowenthal (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I average out range answers across the range. E.g. If a subject stated between 2010 and 2014, I added 1/5 to each of those 4 years. If I omit those that cannot pin-point a year, the 2011 shift-point is even starker. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Obama’s Adviser on East Asian policy, Amb. Jeffery Bader, has recently stated that while Obama was in office, he received “*the first indications that Beijing was moving away from Deng Xiaoping’s mantra about prudence and modesty in their international profile. In fact, that mantra and approach came into debate internally in China, and some of that spilled out. It was clear that it was being challenged by some who thought that China’s growing power deserved a different approach.*” See <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/obamas-past-and-bidens-future-with-china/> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. S. HRG. 111-125 “*Nomination of Dennis Blair to be Director of National Intelligence.*” p44. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Blair, D (2010, p27). Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Statement for the Record on the World Wide Threat Assessment of the U.S Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Armed Services. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20110310_testimony_clapper.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Author’s interview with former CIA Deputy Director for Analysis, Mark Lowenthal, April (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. There is a large debate about the best way to evaluate intelligence. My position is consistent with Kovacs, A. (1997). Using intelligence. *Intelligence and National Security*, *12*(4), 145–164. Marrin, S. (2012). Evaluating the Quality of Intelligence Analysis: By What (Mis) Measure? *Intelligence and National Security*, *27*(6), 896–912. Both echo seminal concerns raised by Kent, S. (1964). *Strategic intelligence for American world policy*. Quantitative studies show that rewarding the IC for giving the best estimate given available information produces reliable estimates on average Mandel, D. R., & Barnes, A. (2014). Accuracy of forecasts in strategic intelligence. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *111*(30), 10984–10989. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Specifically, the theories that account for uncertainty in the Target’s intentions, and the capacity to infer intentions. These theories include Waltz (179), defensive realist Glaser (2010), Edelstein (2017), and Jervis (1979); and neoliberal theories such as Keohane, R. (2005). *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press. Offensive realist theories are not appropriate because they assume Analysts should always expect the worst. Clearly, no critic thinks the IC should have always assumed the worst of China. See: Mearsheimer, J. (2001). for a seminal account. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. By contrast, bureaucratic theories assume that more specific agents serve personalist agendas or rely on constrained information. See Schub, R. (2023) for a recent example. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Lake, D. & Powell (1999). *Strategic choice and international relations*. Princeton University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. As stated, offensive realists argue learning should not occur. These arguments are not relevant to adjudicate intelligence estimates. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Glaser (2010), p39, and Glaser, C. L. (1995). Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help. *International Security*, *19*(3), 50–90, for review. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Waltz (1979), p126 asserts security is the “highest goal” under anarchy. Although Keohane (2005) accounts for prosperity and security, he still argues motives vary along a continuum from status quo to greedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Beyond those cited above Glaser, C. (2000); The causes and consequences of arms races. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *3*(1), 251–276; Sechser, T. (2010). Goliath’s Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power. *International Organization*, *64*(04), 627–660; Yoder, B. (2019). Hedging for Better Bets: Power Shifts, Credible Signals, and Preventive Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *63*(4), 923–949. Coe, A., & Vaynman, J. (2015). Collusion and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime. *The Journal of Politics*, *77*(4), 983–997; Yoder, B. (2019). Retrenchment as a Screening Mechanism: Power Shifts, Strategic Withdrawal, and Credible Signals. *American Journal of Political Science*, *63*(1), 130–145. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Beyond those cited above, Jackson, M. O., & Morelli, M. (2011). The Reasons for Wars: An Updated Survey. *The Handbook on the Political Economy of War*, 34–57; Lonardo, L., Sun, J., & Tyson, S. (2020). Autocratic Stability in the Shadow of Foreign Threats. *American Political Science Review*, *114*(4), 1247–1265; Kydd, A. (1997). Sheep in Sheep’s clothing: Why security seekers do not fight each other. *Security Studies*, *7*(1), 114–155. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This approach is common. Goddard (2018) *When right makes might : rising powers and world order*. Cornell University Press. focuses on a Target’s crisis instigation because she argues it should communicate greedy intentions. Weisiger, A. (2013) is similar. Yarhi-Milo (2014) asserts rational Analysts should respond to aggregate data on military spending, the decision to instigate crises, etc. Schweller (2004) examines rapid arming at the onset of power transitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Additionally, academic analyses of China usually treat this as the rationalist baseline. E.g., Johnston (2013), Glaser (2015) and Chubb (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The criticism extends beyond estimates of China’s intentions. The Committee asserts the IC did not dedicate enough collection resources to China; failed to predict specific crises; and did not properly attribute cyber operations to China. These particular criticisms are outside the scope of my theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Jervis, R. (1989). Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence. *World Politics*, *41*(02), 183–207, abstract. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Special National Intelligence Estimate (100-12-58) *Probable Developments in the Taiwan Straits Crisis*, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. E.g., SNIE (100-4-59) *Chinese Communist Intentions and Probable Courses of Action in the Taiwan Strait Area* [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation. *International Security*, *39*(4), 49–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. His argument is unsatisfying because it allows us to equate any revisionist intentions with a disagreement about what the status quo should be. For example, we could simply say that Putin disagrees about what the status quo over Ukraine is. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Blain, M. (1988). Fighting Words: What We Can Learn from Hitler’s Hyperbole. *Symbolic Interaction*, *11*(2), 257–276. McKercher, B. J. C. (2017). Anschluss: The Chamberlain Government and the First Test of Appeasement, February–March 1938. *The International History Review*, *39*(2), 274–294. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gilderhus, M. (2006). The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *36*(1), 5–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Schultz, K., & Goemans, H. (2015). *Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model*; Gartzke, E. (2006). Identity and Conflict: Ties that Bind and Differences that Divide. *European Journal of International Relations*, *12*(1), 53–87; Mylonas, H. (2013). *The politics of Nation Building*. Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. O’Neill, B. (1999). Honor, Symbols, and War. University of Michigan Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Carter, D. B., & Goemans, H. E. (2013). The Temporal Dynamics of New International Borders. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *31*(3), 285–302. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Stein, R. (2015). War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies. *American Political Science Review*, *109*(03), 556–573; Kaysen, C. (1990). Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay. *International Security*, *14*(4), 42–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Renshon, J. (2016). Status Deficits and War. *International Organization*, *70*(03), 513–550 shows status concerns drive war. Bell, M. S. (2015). Beyond Emboldenment: How Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Can Change Foreign Policy. *International Security*, *40*(1), 87–119 shows they drive nuclear proliferation. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Finnemore, M. (2003). Changing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention. In *The Purpose of Intervention* (pp. 52–84). Cornell University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Why Territorial Disputes Escalate: The Causes of Conquest Attempts since 1945. *International Studies Quarterly*, *66*(4). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Glaser, C. L. (1995). Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help. *International Security*, *19*(3), 50–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Friedberg, A. L. (2010). *The Weary Titan : Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905*. Princeton University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ikenberry, J. G. (1998). Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order. *International Security*, *23*(3), 43–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. There was disagreement over whether Western states should control colonies. But this was minor, relative to the scope of agreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. But the Target could also build a shadow institution to overthrow a specific status quo norm, or impose sanctions on a specific adversary, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. She asserts litmus tests follow because analysts rely on vividness in a way that is not consistent with indicator theories (e.g, pp45-46). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Zhang (2019) considers this point given China’s interest in communication high resolve to fight in a crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Trager, R. F. (2011). Multidimensional Diplomacy. *International Organization*, *65*(03), 469–506. Duffy, J., & Feltovich, N. (2002). Do Actions Speak Louder Than Words? An Experimental Comparison of Observation and Cheap Talk. *Games and Economic Behavior*, *39*(1), 1–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Katagiri, A., & Min, E. (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, *30*(02), 167–214. Glaser, C., & Kaufmann, C. (1998). Offense Defence Balance and Can We Measure It. *International Security*, *22*(4), 44–82. Hopf, T. (1991). Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War. *American Political Science Review*, *85*(2), 475–493. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Lieber, K. a. (2000). Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security. *International Security*, *25*(1), 71–104. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. At a lower level of analysis, scholars perform this sort of analysis with regard to China’s nuclear intentions. See Talmadge, C. (2017). Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States. *International Security*, *41*(4), 50–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
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72. Taylor, A. J. P. (1965). English History 1914-1945. Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. E.g., Beckley (2023), Cha (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
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75. Despite Kissinger’s reservations, CIA performed all major analysis of China’s intentions during this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Summary of the CIA Response to NSSM 14. National Archives, RG 59, S/S Files: Lot 80 D 212, NSSM 14. Date classified. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. See Glaser (2010) for a description of the differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. While reasonable, some note reasonable continuity in Chinese politics. See Torigian, J (2019) Elite politics and foreign policy in China from Mao to Xi. *Brookings.* <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/elite-politics-and-foreign-policy-in-china-from-mao-to-xi/> [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. See: Chen, Q. (1993). New Approaches in China’s Foreign Policy: The Post-Cold War Era. *Asian Survey*, *33*(3), 237–251. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. He did state that the US and China were destined to compete over Taiwan and Hong Kong. This indicates a broader view that the IC realized what specific issues fit within China's nationalist aims. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/obamas-past-and-bidens-future-with-china/ [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China (2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Author's interview with Denis Blair. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Qimao, C. (1996). The Taiwan Strait Crisis: Its Crux and Solutions. *Asian Survey*, *36*(11), 1055–1066. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Fisher, R. (2008), p i, ix. *China’s Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach*. Praeger. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. For a similar criticism, see Medeiros, E. S., & Blanchette, J. (2021). Beyond Colossus or Collapse: Five myths driving American debates about China. *War on the Rocks*. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Campbell, K. M., & Ratner, E. (2018). The China Reckoning How Beijing Defied American Expectations. *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Nathan, A. J. (2019). The New Tiananmen Papers Inside the Secret Meeting That Changed China. *Foreign Affairs*. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. During my interviews reported below, no subject argued that they were optimistic because they thought China's motives would change. Recall these interviews were conducted as early as 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. DNI Blair was not unique in his thinking. I posed similar counter-factual to five other elites that either served in the most senior roles at the CIA, on the NSC, or as senior diplomats working on East Asian issues. Each of them responded in a similar way. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Statement for the Record on the World Wide Threat Assessment of the U.S Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Armed Services. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Lowenthal was responsible for overhauling the CIA analytic training program (CAP) in the 1990s, and therefore had an over-sized impact on how our largest intelligence agency processes information to form beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Campbell, K. M., & Blackwill, R. D. (2016). *Xi Jinping on the Global Stage*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/report/xi-jinping-global-stage>; Shuman, M. (2021). Xi Jinping turned me into a China hawk. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/xi-jinping-turned-me-into-a-china-hawk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. It is not clear if these policies followed From Xi’s background or from institutional pressures. See Torigian, J. (2018). Historical Legacies and Leaders’ Worldviews: Communist Party History and Xi’s Learned (and Unlearned) Lessons. *China Perspectives*, *2018*(1–2), 7–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Doshi, R. (2021). Hu’s to blame for China’s foreign assertiveness? *Brookings Institution*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hus-to-blame-for-chinas-foreign-assertiveness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. It is true that Xi was the Party Secretariat and Vice President since 2008, but his ascension and assertiveness were not clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Wark (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Press, D. G. (2007), Yarhi-Milo, K. (2018). *Who fights for reputation : the psychology of leaders in international conflict*. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Zhang, K. (2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-99)