Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

September 2026 Issue

DEAKIN CENTRE FOR
FUTURE DEFENCE & NATIONAL SECURITY

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

Introduction

Welcome to the sixth issue of Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence! Signal is a monthly publication by the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security. We publish short articles focused on contemporary strategic and security issues, as well as important debates in fields relevant to understanding our strategic environment and defence strategy. Our initial issues have drawn on the depth of expertise present in our Centre, but as we continue we also aim to draw on external expertise and insight where possible. If you are interested in writing for Signal please get in touch!

In this September issue Michael Clarke and Jade Guan offer their insights on what the Lin Biao affair might tell us about contemporary civil-military challenges in China. Michael Hatherell then proposes the concept of a 'strategic narrative terrain' to better map the conditions shaping the contest of narratives in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, Michael Clarke assesses the recent state visit by Xi Jinping to the United States and what this might tell us about 'constructive strategic stability'.

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About Signal

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ISSN: 3083-2225 (Online)

The Enduring Shadow of the Lin Biao Affair

Michael Clarke and Jade Guan

On 13 September 1971, Mao Zedong's "closest comrade-in-arms" and anointed successor, Lin Biao, was killed in a plane crash in Mongolia. He was en route to the Soviet Union after an alleged failed coup against the Great Helmsman.

There remains significant debate about the exact sequence of events that led to Lin's spectacular fall. Scholarly interpretations of the affair have moved over time from interpretations derived from the official narrative of events released in June 1972 - wherein an ambitious Lin attempts to subvert Mao but is outmanoeuvred and flees for his life - to ones that have emphasised a combination of Maoist succession politics and institutional breakdown during the Cultural Revolution as primary causes.

What, then, does this arcane episode from over half a century ago have to do with contemporary China?

Lin's rise and dramatic fall revealed three major structural problems in Chinese politics that continue to resonate: the challenge of managing Party-military relations; the principal-agent problem (i.e. Party delegation of authority and specialised responsibilities to the military); and the instability of succession under authoritarian, personalised rule.

Despite a period of post-Mao institutionalisation and the 'normalisation' of politics, these problems have returned to prominence under Xi Jinping. The Lin Biao affair exposed an enduring dilemma of personalised Leninist rule: supreme leaders must delegate substantial authority to capable military subordinates while preventing delegated authority from becoming an autonomous political base. Post-Mao institutionalisation changed how this dilemma was managed rather than eliminating it. Under Xi Jinping, the Party has sought to strengthen control through re-centralised authority, organisational reform, political work, and oversight of the military by the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). These measures represent new institutional mechanisms for ensuring PLA compliance with Party objectives. Yet the scale and persistence of recent purges suggest that the underlying problems of delegation and political loyalty remain unresolved, particularly when managing leadership succession.

Managing Party-military Relations

Lin's rise to become the anointed successor of Mao at the 9th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in April 1969 was enabled and accelerated by the Chairman's purging of veteran leaders during the Cultural Revolution. The subjection of leading figures such as Peng Zhen, Deng Xiaoping, and Liu Shaoqi to sustained criticism and the dismantling of the Party's organisational system during the 'high tide' of the mass campaigns of Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1969 left Mao more reliant on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to restore order, administer the country, and sustain his ideological programme.

This expansion of the military's political role greatly increased the institutional weight of Lin, already Mao's principal military lieutenant. Yet it also created the conditions for a new political-security problem as the more authority Mao delegated to Lin and the PLA, the greater their capacity to constitute an autonomous centre of organisational power.

Party-military relations until that point had been determined by Mao's dictum that "the Party controls the gun, and the gun shall never be allowed to control the Party". But by the 9th Party Congress in April 1969 just over half of the CCP Central Committee was comprised of either PLA commanders (including generals closely connected to Lin) or political commissars. The rise of Lin Biao and the PLA more broadly, as Ellis Joffe astutely observed in 1974, was therefore "more the product of unforeseen circumstances than of long-range planning and preparation".

One core outcome of Lin (and the PLA's) rise was to establish the military as a potential alternative locus of political power in the absence of the pre-Cultural Revolution Party apparatus. This, as multiple studies have demonstrated, was something that ultimately Mao could not abide. This contributed to the breakdown of Mao's trust in Lin by the Second Plenum of the Ninth Party Congress in August 1970 at Lushan, precipitating a series of political machinations that resulted in Lin's attempted flight and death in September 1971.

This dramatic episode helps explain why Party leaders have remained intensely focused on reinforcing the longstanding Leninist concern that the Party "commands the gun" at all costs. One of the core effects of the Lin Biao affair therefore was to reinforce the Party's belief in the necessity of monitoring the PLA, limiting opportunities for the development of autonomy, and guarding against opportunities for the military to become directly involved in intra-Party struggles.

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The Principal-agent Problem

Part of the Party's post-Mao approach to these issues has been based on what and James Mulvenon described as a "conditional compliance" model of Party-military relations in which the PLA's loyalty and obedience was conditional on the recognition and protection of its professional interests "including institutional autonomy in purely military affairs, budgets and resources necessary for modernization" by the Party elite.

This model while promoting professionalisation was also seen as having generated serious problems of PLA involvement in business, widespread corruption, and an emergent "disconnect between the attitudes and perspectives of civilian and military elites" throughout the 1990s and 2000s. By the 2000s, Party-military relations were arguably defined by a classic principal-agent problem: how could the Party, as principal, ensure that the PLA as its agent, complied with its directives under these conditions?

The principal-agent model assumes that delegation is necessary in complex organisations. Such delegation however creates challenges because principals and agents may have divergent preferences and agents typically possess informational advantages over principals. The general implication of the application of the model to civil-military relations is that under such conditions, information asymmetries and divergent interests between principals and agents produce conflict or bargaining about whether military agents 'work' with or 'shirk' civilian oversight.

This has been more difficult to resolve in the Chinese context as all of China's post-Deng rulers – while formally the final decision-maker by virtue of their chairmanship of the CMC - lack revolutionary prestige or direct military experience, increasing their dependence on their uniformed subordinates. The potential for 'shirking' civilian oversight has been readily apparent in some of the charges levelled against high-ranking officers during Xi's purges which have described them as and personnel appointments, engaging in corruption, and violating Party 'discipline' and developing patronage networks.

Xi's 'above the neck' and 'below the neck' reforms of the PLA in 2015 and 2017 respectively can be seen as an attempt to resolve these problems by strengthening the principal's (i.e. the Party's) agency of its agent. Significantly, Xi prepared the ground for these reforms by a limited purge of the PLA that targeted generals such as Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong who were seen as loyal to either his predecessor or his political rivals as a means of asserting control over the PLA.

The 'above the neck' reforms begun in 2015 reorganised the PLA's senior command architecture. This included reinforcement of the CMC 'Chairman Responsibility System' through which the CMC Chairman determines 'all significant' military issues and commands for the entire military. It led to the disbanding of the four 'general departments' of the PLA and the transferring of their functions to fifteen smaller departments within a revised CMC structure, and the restructuring of the seven geographically-based military regions into five joint-theatre commands. The disbanding of the general departments, as Joel Wuthnow and Phillip Saunders note, was arguably the most significant in terms of reinforcing Party control as the departments had evolved over many years into "semi-autonomous fiefdoms with responsibility for operations, political work, equipment and logistics" creating opportunities for corruption and development of institutional autonomy.

The 'below the neck reforms', in turn, pushed restructuring down into the PLA's corps, group-army, brigade, battalion and tactical levels. Their central purpose was to transform the PLA from a large, Army-dominated force organised around divisions and regiments into a more modular, combined-arms and joint force. The reforms also standardised formations, expanded specialised capabilities such as army aviation, special operations and air assault forces, and reduced headquarters and personnel. Comparable changes occurred in other services, including the PLAAF's movement from division-regiment structures toward a more streamlined base-brigade system. These organisational changes were accompanied by reforms to training, professional military education, personnel management and joint exercises.

The 'below the neck' reforms therefore did not merely improve military efficiency and better position the military to adapt to modern joint operations, but contributed to the imperative of reasserting Party control by disrupting longstanding institutional networks and redistributing authority through systematic structural reorganisation.

The general trend of the reassertion of the Party – and indeed that of the 'core leader' – over the PLA has been further underscored by the scope and nature of the purges of senior PLA officers since 2022. Over 101 senior figures have now been removed, placed under investigation or expelled from the PLA and the Party. These have included former Defence Ministers General Wei Fenghe and General Li Shangfu, Admiral Miao Hua (and CMC member) and CMC Vice-Chairmen General He Weidong and General Yang Youxia.

These more recent purges, as Joel Wuthnow has noted, have targeted senior leaders and operational commanders. CSIS's dataset on the 2022-2026 purges, for example, shows that nearly half of those purged have been from each of the four services (i.e. PLA-Army, PLA-Navy, PLA-Airforce, and PLA Rocket Force) and the five theatre commands. This lends some weight to the argument that Xi has progressively narrowed the sphere of autonomous professional discretion assumed by the 'conditional-compliance' model of Party-military relations. Indeed, Phillip Saunders has argued in this vein that the latest purges indicate a significant reduction in the autonomy previously permitted to the PLA even in professional military affairs.

Yet if Xi has effectively broken with the 'conditional compliance' model of Party-military relations, the question remains as to what he will replace it with. We might speculate here that the purges suggest Xi regards political reliability, clean personnel systems, and effective war-fighting as mutually reinforcing, even though the instruments used to enforce the first two may impose costs on the third.

Authoritarian Succession Dilemmas and the PLA

A final structural issue revealed by the Lin Biao affair with continued resonance today is that of succession.

Rather than resolving the long simmering politics of succession, Lin Biao's elevation to be Mao's formally designated successor in 1969 after the demise of Liu Shaoqi intensified it. The key dilemma for Mao was that once Lin possessed sufficient authority to become a pillar of support for his agenda during the Cultural Revolution, that same authority could potentially be used to threaten his paramount position.

This ultimately contributed to the souring of the Mao-Lin relationship and rising political tensions between them, such as the controversy over the 'state chairman' position and whether to codify Mao's thought as 'genius' at the 1970 Lushan Plenum. Mao subsequently framed these tensions as evidence of intra-Party struggle, characterising events at the plenum as a "struggle between two mountaintops" (i.e. a struggle for leadership of the Party). Lin had appeared to be the ultimate loyalist throughout the Cultural Revolution until his death, promoting Mao's personality cult and institutionalising study of Mao's thought within the PLA. Yet, Mao ultimately came to regard this supposedly loyal subordinate as a threat.

One immediate lesson that can be derived from the Lin Biao affair here is that in highly personalised, authoritarian systems, succession is dangerous because a credible successor must accumulate political authority before the incumbent relinquishes power. If this is correct, then the Lin case suggests that in the contemporary context the absence of explicit succession arrangements should not necessarily be interpreted merely as evidence of Xi's strength. It may instead reflect Xi's recognition of the inherent danger of such a designation within the system as doing so logically creates an alternative focus of elite loyalty.

One link to the ongoing purges of the PLA is that formal expressions of loyalty in Leninist systems provide imperfect information about actual elite relationships. Notably, many of the post-2022 PLA officers to be purged – especially at the highest levels – have been figures that had risen through Xi's own imprimatur and patronage.

The current wave of purges in the military therefore creates a similar analytical puzzle to the Lin Biao affair: why must a powerful leader purge senior officials whom his own system selected? One answer is that the scale of the purges demonstrates Xi's ability to remove powerful subordinates, but their persistence also demonstrates his difficulty ensuring bureaucratic compliance. From this perspective, Xi may have reasserted the Party's authority but not necessarily its control.

However, another answer to the puzzle may lie in the nature of the system itself. In Leninist systems, as historian Joseph Torigian has pointedly noted, it is often "individuals who are closest to the top" who "need to be the most careful" as they may "put too much faith in their ties with the leader" and become victims of not correctly intuiting the desires of the "core" leader.

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Conclusion

The enduring significance of the Lin Biao affair lies less in the still-contested question of Lin's intentions than in the political and structural dilemmas his rise and fall exposed. "Core leaders" in highly personalised, authoritarian systems cannot govern complex military organisations without delegating authority; however, delegation gives senior officers expertise, information, and organisational relationships unavailable to the paramount leader.

The challenge is therefore not simply to ensure formal subordination but to make delegated authority politically reliable without destroying the initiative and expertise for which it was delegated in the first place.

Post-Mao professionalisation and Xi Jinping's recentralisation of Party control represent very different institutional responses to this problem. Neither implies a return to Mao-era Party–military relations. The contemporary resonance of 1971 lies instead in the persistence of three connected uncertainties: whether loyalty can be credibly observed; whether delegated authority can be exercised without producing autonomous networks; and whether highly personalised command authority can eventually be transferred to a successor.

Ultimately, Xi's repeated purges demonstrate a formidable capacity to discipline the PLA, but by themselves they do not demonstrate that these underlying structural problems have been resolved.

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Mapping the Strategic Narrative Terrain

Michael Hatherell

There are many different dynamics shaping the complexity of the contemporary international order. Some of these dynamics are material and structural in nature – geography, access to resources, control over choke-points and material sources of national power such as population size, economic weight and military capability. Some, such as artificial intelligence and the energy transition, rely on national progress in technological development as well as competition for access to resources.

Yet some of the most important dynamics shaping our international order are ideational in nature. They are about the dominant ideas and narratives that shape perception, policy preferences and political outcomes. In a world where human beings must come to grips with their relationship to technology, the environment and their place in a changing order, the ideational forces that variously bind us and divide us are arguably more important than ever.

In this context strategic narrative takes on even more importance. Defined by Miskimmon, O'loughlin and Roselle as "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics", strategic narratives are tools used by strategic actors to influence the perception and behaviour of individuals, groups and even whole states. In a world also shaped by social media and a rapidly evolving information environment, the contest between strategic narratives to define our world takes place in digital environments just as much as physical ones. And the contest to define our times through narrative is not just the domain of states – multinational companies, powerful individuals, military alliances like NATO and international advocacy groups can all contribute to the narrative struggle. As Zaffran has argued, "the new media ecology today is therefore one where multiple strategic narratives coexist, merge, and compete simultaneously."

This article argues that given this context, we need to develop a better understanding of the relationship between strategic narratives and the 'terrain' in which they operate. Strategic narratives operate in an environment already full of existing ideas and shaped by forces that influence whether a given narrative will be accepted, rejected or reshaped. These forces also decide which actors are exposed to a particular narrative and the way in which that exposure takes place. This article argues that thinking of these forces as forming something akin to 'terrain' turns them into a suitable object of analysis in their own right. By gaining a better understanding of the 'strategic narrative terrain', we are better placed to understand how contemporary and future narratives will shape conflict, competition and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The Strategic Narrative Terrain

In the study of strategic narrative, considerable attention has been dedicated to analysing existing strategic narratives and their intent. Hobbs, Li, Huang and Desmoulines, for instance, study Xi Jingping's political rhetoric and identify how his political storytelling "aims to shape domestic and international perceptions of history, employing rhetorical strategies that signal the aspirations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within the broader international order" (p.2). Wehner similarly assesses the use of strategic narrative by the United States under the second Trump administration, arguing that the external aspects of the Trump strategic narrative are about "indicating to external peers the need to show more deference and respect to the U.S., further to being a means by which to justify policy positions and new ways of dealing with friends and foes alike".

Beyond the great powers, analysis of strategic narrative helps to understand how a range of regional actors are positioning themselves. Vu Le Thai Hoang and Ngo di Lan's assessment of Vietnam's contemporary strategic narrative, for instance, highlights the role of ideas like more 'friends, fewer enemies' ('thêm bạn, bớt thù') and efforts to transform challenging relationships with former adversaries into constructive partnerships ('từ cựu thù thành đối tác'). Their analysis also examines more recent additions to Vietnam's strategic narrative as part of the "new era" under General Secretary Tô Lâm. Similar analysis can be found of ASEAN's strategic narrative and Japan's evolving strategic narrative.

Collectively, analysis of the strategic narrative of Indo-Pacific actors is important as it helps to understand the rhetorical features of each actor's strategy in the region. When combined with an analysis of the actions and policies adopted by these actors, we gain a holistic understanding of how they are pursuing their goals. Words and deeds in international relations are, after-all, closely connected. This analysis of strategic narratives also helps us understand how actors must consider at least two distinct audiences: international actors and domestic constituents.

What is less explored is what makes strategic narratives effective in achieving their purpose. While states, leaders and international organisations may regularly engage in storytelling in international politics, this does not mean that their efforts will have the impact they seek. Strategic narratives are only a useful object of analysis in strategic studies because they have the potential to achieve the ends that a strategic actor intends – their whole value, as Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle declared, is "to influence the behavior of others". It is essential therefore to also address the impact of strategic narrative.

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While the literature on the impact of strategic narrative is smaller, there are some very valuable examples of this type of analysis. Joanne Wallis and her colleagues, for instance, have examined how China's use of 'ideational resources' in the Pacific is met by its audience, concluding that "China's narratives have not been adopted wholesale by Pacific countries, nor have they necessarily influenced how those countries have behaved. Instead, those narratives have been instrumentalised by Pacific countries, revealing the importance of accounting for the agency of the audience of strategic narratives". Anna Kruglova's recent analysis of the impact of Russian strategic narratives is another interesting example of this type of analysis – this time in relation to regular citizens rather than other states and societies.

The concept of strategic narrative terrain extends beyond this type of analysis to focus on an object of study that exists independently of efforts to engage in strategic narrative. It captures features of the regional information environment and political reality that set the scene for narrative power and asks how these features will impact attempts to shape the beliefs of political actors. The strategic narrative terrain is not something that comes into being when a strategic narrative is employed – it is made up of pre-existing elements of the environment that we can try to understand before an intervention in that environment is made.

What Features Shape the Strategic Narrative Terrain?

In seeking to map the strategic narrative terrain, there are at least four key features that we should focus on.

The first are pre-existing ideas. Domestic societies are rich in existing ideational elements, and these arguably play a significant role in shaping how a new strategic narrative will be received. Dominant ideas about the history of the nation and collective historical memory are one factor that shapes the existing ideational environment. Schmitt's analysis of existing domestic 'political myths' is also useful in identifying the way existing ideas of the world frame how new information is processed. Based on historical memory and existing political myths in Indonesia, for instance, we should expect strategic narratives shared by the United States will often be received differently there than they are in Australia or France. The ideas that shape how China's statecraft should be perceived are very different in Taiwan compared to Cambodia. A significant priority in mapping the strategic narrative terrain is to assess influential domestic and international ideas already in existence and how they are likely to frame understanding of future strategic and security issues.

The second feature is institutional design. Each political system has its own 'rules of the game' that shape how national power is formed and how decisions are made. Whether a state is a more open democracy or a more closed authoritarian system has a significant bearing on the role played by government versus other societal forces in shaping the national narrative. Other institutional features shape the electoral strategies needed to win office and which audiences matter in doing so. At the international level, the institutional design of multilateral and minilateral organisations can also contribute to the narrative terrain. ASEAN's institutional design, for instance, shapes what the organisation can and cannot do with its own efforts at narrative power.

The third feature are structures of power. Structural forces shape the economic and political foundations of power in every nation, regardless of how institutions are designed. These forces shape not just who is able to enter government but who is able to regularly influence political decision-making. Structural imbalances are often class-based, but they can also relate to cultural, ethnic, linguistic and regional distinctions. These structural differences can shape the resonance of ideas – a citizen's perception of their context arguably derives from their sense of how their economic and political position compares to others around them. Economic realities also shape media ownership and can impact how the media 'narrates' political events. These differences are not just domestic but also international – nations have different levels of power within the international system, leading to different levels of influence and vulnerability. Combining institutional and structural features of the terrain helps to understand how responses to narratives do or do not lead to policy changes or shifts in national strategy.

Finally, the media and linguistic landscape is also important in shaping the strategic narrative terrain. The influence of major sources of news and opinion within each nation play a role in shaping which narratives are heard and the lens through which they are received. In today's media environment, that also means the role of social media in spreading ideas. Given the diversity of languages and cultures across the Indo-Pacific, the way in which narratives are interpreted relies on translation and the use of relatable cultural content.

Together, these features can be combined to provide a suitable starting point for analysing the strategic narrative terrain. These features should not be understood as discrete and separate – there are clearly important relationships between them that contribute to the overall terrain.

Why Assess the Strategic Narrative Terrain?

What is the value in studying the strategic narrative terrain as something distinct rather than individual cases of strategic narrative production and reception? I see several potential benefits.

The first is that it can arguably provide a useful tool for futures analysis. Most of the important questions in strategic studies today are about how our strategic environment will evolve as structural realities shift and potential crises impact our region. How will the AI revolution, for instance, reshape domestic and global governance? How might intensifying great power competition reshape our regional strategic order? How will a breakdown in international trust and increasing economic nationalism disrupt our regional economic environment? Forecasting potential change in our strategic environment in response to these types of questions relies not just on an assessment of material shifts, but also the ideational forces that shape how people vote, which elites gain influence and power and the way in which ideas shape government decisions. Any useful forecasting relies not just on assessment of the likely strategic narratives that actors will use to achieve their goals, but also how those narratives will most likely be received.

Second, by examining the strategic narrative terrain we can begin to understand continuity and change in a comparative sense. Analysis of individual episodes of narrative delivery and reception are unlikely to give us a broader sense of how the strategic narrative terrain itself is shifting over time. This terrain is a dependent variable as much as it is an independent variable - narrative contests play a role in reshaping the strategic narrative terrain in a way that matters for future contests of ideas.

Third, there is value for policy-makers in better understanding this terrain. Appreciating how existing ideational, institutional, structural and media features of the strategic narrative terrain shape audience perceptions is an important part of designing effective strategic narrative. Without this holistic understanding, strategic narratives may fall flat with target audiences - or even backfire and weaken the influence of the strategic actor. Strategic narratives also have intended and unintended audiences, making an appreciation of the numerous unintended audiences important too. Assessing the strategic narrative terrain places emphasis on the audience of ideas and the factors shaping their perspective and lived experience.

Appreciating how existing ideational, institutional, structural and media features of the strategic narrative terrain will shape audience perceptions is an important part of designing effective strategic narrative

Finally, it should be remembered that political narratives do not just divide- they can also be used to bind. In a world in which many statecraft challenges are shared, such as great power behaviour, climate change and AI adoption, there is value in understanding the potential for strategic narratives that bring together states and societies for common purposes rather than just narrow self-interest. Mapping the strategic narrative terrain helps us to better understand the openings for shared interests and common stories that will be needed to achieve greater levels of international cooperation.

The analogy of terrain is not a perfect one, and for some readers may bring to mind the controversial 'Human Terrain System'. One argument against the use of terrain is that geographical terrain is relatively fixed and unchanging, whereas we might expect a 'strategic narrative terrain' to be more flexible and changeable. But I think the analogy does still hold up quite well. While physical terrain includes features that do not change much, such as physical geography, the built human environment is constantly changing and has the potential to transform terrain over time. China's development of islands in the South China Sea, for instance, is one prominent example of a change in the physical terrain of the region. When it comes to the narrative terrain, some features are also relatively fixed. Strategic culture, for instance, changes relatively slowly. Historical memory, too, tends to shape ideas that linger for decades or even centuries. One purpose of the analogous use of 'terrain' is to highlight that we should avoid exaggerating the impact that strategic narratives can have in the short term. The idea of terrain communicates this idea in a way broader terms like 'landscape' or 'environment' do not.

Conclusion

The contest of narratives in the Indo-Pacific is significant and an important part of any strategic analysis. A large body of research points to the significance of narrative in shaping human perception, decision-making and organisation. Researchers are also increasingly exploring the role of narrative in shaping international security and grand strategy. In this context there is a pressing need to deepen our analysis of contemporary and future strategic narratives in the Indo-Pacific and how they will shape cooperation, competition and conflict. Within this research agenda the role of domestic politics is crucial, with states seeking to shape external audiences while simultaneously building domestic resilience and shared understandings of security.

This article argues that a direct analysis of the strategic narrative terrain can be a valuable part of this research agenda. Research focusing on this terrain would provide a better understanding of the factors that shape how contemporary and future narratives are received and what audiences do with them. It would allow for better informed futures analysis, while also helping those tasked with developing and communicating strategic narrative a better understanding of intended and unintended audiences.

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Strategic Stalemate: Xi's "Tremendous" but Not Very Exciting Visit to Washington?

Michael Clarke

From 23 to 25 September, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), undertook a state visit to the United States, concluding with a dinner at the White House. President Donald Trump declared that the two leaders had made "tremendous strides" on many issues in the bilateral relationship. Yet the summit's most consequential outcome may have been a diplomatic gain for Beijing: the incorporation of China's preferred formulation, "constructive strategic stability", into both countries' official statements.

Most observers, however, have judged the visit to be high on pomp and short on substance. Trump personally greeted Xi at Andrews Air Force Base and subsequently praised his health, exclaiming on his Truth Social platform that "I met President Xi at the plane (Airport!) yesterday and he looks strong, vibrant, and fit". Such gestures reflect the US President's apparent belief – also mirrored in his treatment of Russian leader Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un - that personal rapport is the key to stable or productive interstate relations.

Personal diplomacy, of course, has long been recognised as important in mediating great power politics. Whether it can overcome the structural determinants of contemporary US–China relations, however, remains uncertain, as does Xi's receptiveness to such overtures.

The summit is therefore better understood as an effort to manage a relationship that appears to have reached a strategic stalemate

The summit is therefore better understood as an effort to manage a relationship that appears to have reached a strategic stalemate. Neither side appears willing to make major concessions on the core sources of tension including Taiwan, trade and technology, the regional military balance, and their competing conceptions of the regional order. Simultaneously, however, both have demonstrated an interest in preventing competition from escalating into direct conflict. The limited practical outcomes of the meeting reflect this impasse. Nevertheless, the apparent embedding of 'constructive strategic stability' in the discourse of bilateral relations gives Beijing an opportunity to shape the terms on which this competition is managed.

Contested Interpretations of the Summit

In some febrile corners of the internet, the summit has been portrayed as an exercise in presidential trolling of Xi. These interpretations reveal how readily ceremonial details can become proxies for debates about the wider relationship.

The US Army Choir's singing of "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from the musical Les Miserable at the White House state dinner, for example, has been framed as a rebuke to Xi as anti-Beijing protestors in Hong Kong also sang it in 2019. Perhaps. But a deliberate, and somewhat churlish, provocation such as this would sit awkwardly with Trump's overt flattery of the Chinese leader. The choice may equally have reflected presidential taste: Trump has a history of using such "classical crossover" music at political events to "convey wealth without the accompanying snobbery".

The dispute over a song choice perhaps reflects both the contested interpretations of US–China summitry, as well as the scarcity of substantive outcomes on which to base a judgement.

The prevailing consensus is that neither side gained much, but neither lost nor conceded much either. The Trump administration has been able to tout the leaders' agreement to reduce tariffs on some US$30 billion worth of "non-sensitive" goods as evidence that the President has "advanced the U.S.-China relationship and put the American people first". Chinese state media, meanwhile, has emphasized the "realities of China-U.S. relations" where, in Xi's words, "China and the United States, as two major countries, shoulder a historic responsibility of advancing human development and progress".

The Significance of 'Constructive Strategic Stability'

This restrained language can obscure a tactical gain for Beijing. Although the summit produced few substantive breakthroughs, it consolidated China's preferred formulation for managing the relationship.

At the leaders' previous summit in Beijing in May, China succeeded in first introducing "constructive strategic stability" into official bilateral discourse. The Washington summit appears to have embedded that formulation more firmly with the phrase now appearing in both the Chinese and US readouts.

This matters for three reasons, although agreement on language does not necessarily imply agreement on its meaning or implementation.

First, Beijing has signalled a clear interest in managing US–China competition. In his statement at the White House, Xi said that competition "should be a healthy one and should be kept within bounds", describing it as "a race of catching up with one another, not a wrestle in which one either wins or loses". This emphasis contrasts with Chinese statements during the Biden administration that tended to frame China as having time on its side in 'strategic competition'.

Second, the shared formulation gives Beijing a basis for presenting the relationship as one between equals. The official Chinese statement outlining the summit's "eight deliverables and understandings" leads with the assertion that "the two sides" agreed to "build a constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability on the basis of respect, fairness, and reciprocity". The White House readout uses the same wording, albeit near the end of its statement. At the discursive level, Beijing can plausibly portray this as recognition of China as a peer and not simply a competitor of the United States. Shared wording alone, however, does not establish that Washington accepts Beijing's understanding of that status.

Third, the prominence of 'constructive strategic stability' in Chinese official statements and state media commentary may indicate a broader adjustment in Beijing's assessment of the relationship. As Tanner Greer reminds us, while Western strategists tend to understand strategy as the alignment of ends, ways and means, "Chinese planners emphasize a fourth element": the "contradictions", "inherent tendencies", or "great trends" of their historical moment.

From this perspective, the “far-sighted statesman does not fight these tides of history - he rides them”. Xi has assiduously concerned himself with discerning these trends since becoming CCP General Secretary. The predominant trend has been framed as “great changes unseen in a century”, driven by increasing multipolarity, economic globalisation and China’s growing national power. Yet this assessment also encompasses danger. In his report to the Party’s 20th Congress in October 2022, Xi famously asserted that “strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent” and that the Party-state “must be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms”.

Riding the Tide of History?

Read in this light, 'constructive strategic stability' may offer Beijing a way to manage the risks of competition while pursuing the opportunities it associates with China’s growing power. Its incorporation into bilateral discourse may help create more favourable conditions for that effort. Whether it will also shape the practice of bilateral relations remains to be seen.

A report issued after the May summit by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a Ministry of State Security-affiliated think tank, helps explain this logic. It stated that US–China relations had entered a period of “strategic stalemate”, in which “the two sides' strengths are increasingly close, that each is on the offensive in some areas and on the defensive in others, and that each is a ‘worthy opponent’ of the other”. In these circumstances, the report argued, “mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation between the two countries” constitute both an “objective requirement” and “a rational choice”. The Washington summit is consistent with this assessment.

Strategic stalemate provides an incentive to contain competition, even as the underlying rivalry persists. For Beijing, the tactical gain lies in securing US endorsement of language through which China can frame that process. Trump’s personal diplomacy may have helped sustain the dialogue, but the summit’s longer-term significance will depend on whether the two governments translate their shared formulation into a shared understanding of how competition should be bounded.

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