

# Deterrence Theory and US-China Nuclear Practices

Cameron Hunter  
RITUAL DETERRENCE Project, IFS

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



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# Overview

1. US and China share some similar understanding of deterrence theory
2. Ritual theory on the magic ingredient of deterrence – resolve/credibility
3. PLARF nuclear practices
4. US nuclear practices
5. Prospects for misinterpretation and overinterpretation

## Recent context

- Reorganisation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Artillery Corps into the Rocket Force
- China's apparent nuclear build-up
- US modernisation (and consensus for a kind of build-up)
- Xi Jinping's status quo-busting 3<sup>rd</sup> term in office
- More emphasis on reunification with Taiwan than in the Jiang and Hu years
- Trump II



# The twin roles of deterrence theory

- Deterrence theory as (public) explanation
- Deterrence theory to inform (secretive) state practices
- States in a deterrence relationship have to agree on at least some deterrence theory
- The paradox of secrecy

# Where do the US and China agree on deterrence theory?

- Both agree deterrence works
- Both draw on classical deterrence theorists, like Bernard Brodie
- Both emphasise the role of fear for successful deterrence
- Where they differ can be seen in their choice of practices and how they conduct them

# PLA Nuclear Practices

- “First, extensively carry out propaganda and agitation to arouse the fighting spirit of officers and soldiers, create an atmosphere of deterrence.” – Science of 2<sup>nd</sup> Artillery Campaigns
- Performance of total control over nuclear weapons
- Performance of the Party’s total control over the military
  - Officially defined emotional response – passion and love of the Party-State-Nation amalgam

# Mobilising ritual theory

- Ritual is “rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects... which they hold to be of special significance” – Steven Lukes
- “the term 'ritualization' ...draw[s] attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions” – Catherine Bell
- “micro-situational production of moments of intersubjectivity” – Randall Collins

# Ritual deterrence: forms and purposes

- Ritualisation will “1) give deterrence ... material, physical, emotional, political and social framing; 2) enhance or erode signals ... shaping the credibility of deterrence and assurance; and 3) provide concrete acts for ... actors to perform in critical situations.” – Maria Mälksoo
- Solidarity
- Repair
- Sacrifice



# PLARF Video Content



# Performing precision and control



# The Flag Salute Ceremony – Intra-elite solidarity



# PLARF rituals to “repair” deterrence

- Most notably, 2023 promotion of new PLARF commanders after corruption scandal
- Foreign media interpreted corruption as weakness
- Ritualisation restores proper power structure - Bell
- “Focus attention on ritual details rather than on the ... crisis” – Benford and Kurtz
- “Action itself always reduces reflexivity” - Collins



## PLARF ritualisation of sacrifice

- “Our first task is to complete the launch, even if there are sacrifices, you will still hit the enemy’s vitals” – Commander Wang Yue, PLARF
- Practicing taking casualties
- Performing suffering
- Taking oaths and singing songs that offer their lives to the Party-State



# Cuteness for Institutional Reproduction



# US Nuclear Deterrence Practices

- US strategy and culture emphasises operational level
- Emphasis on readiness = routinisation
- Room for improvisation in some practices = room for authenticity

~~SECRET~~

UNITED STATES STRATEGIC COMMAND

FOIA review completed on 12 January 2017. Portions of this document no longer meet the classification standards of E.O. 13526, Section 1.4. As such, I am downgrading specific portion-marked paragraphs as "UNCLASSIFIED."

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Chief of Staff  
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# Wargames and exercises – practicing sacrifice

- Wider US military culture of sacrifice
- Nuclear wargames allow performance of mass death and even defeat

## US staged 'limited' nuclear battle against Russia in war game

The Pentagon has briefed about the simulated exchange in a move that could signal readiness to fight and win nuclear conflict



📷 The US defence secretary, Mark Esper, played himself in the war game in which US forces responded to a Russian nuclear attack with a 'limited' nuclear response of their own. Photograph: Susan Walsh/AP



# Military ceremony and ritual – intra-elite solidarity

- Ceremony has a smaller signalling role
- Important public rituals e.g. Congressional hearings
- The “Football”



# US readiness practices – routinisation (or constant repair)



# US public outreach



# Gender and US nuclear practices



# Why no US missile parades?

- Pushback against Trump's 2018 and 2019 plans, and no nuclear component
- "Unamerican", "authoritarian"



# Interpretation, misinterpretation and overinterpretation

- Cultural differences in how emotion should be displayed officially in public
- Clash of aesthetics e.g. Communist Party nationalism “can be cute”
- Scripting and improvisation – styles of credibility
- US jokes and Chinese oaths/songs – overinterpretation?
- Practice gaps e.g. parades and semi-public wargames

# Conclusions

- Delicate job to be done – *precisely why ritualisation is the right tool*
- To perform deterrence, one must look capable of fighting a nuclear war. To look capable, one must have developed intra-elite solidarity and a moral code – *before the time of crisis and war begins*
- More difficult job for China? A general refused an order at Tiananmen Square in 1989 – would they do so again?
- Or more difficult for US? Isolationist streak and democratic dynamics