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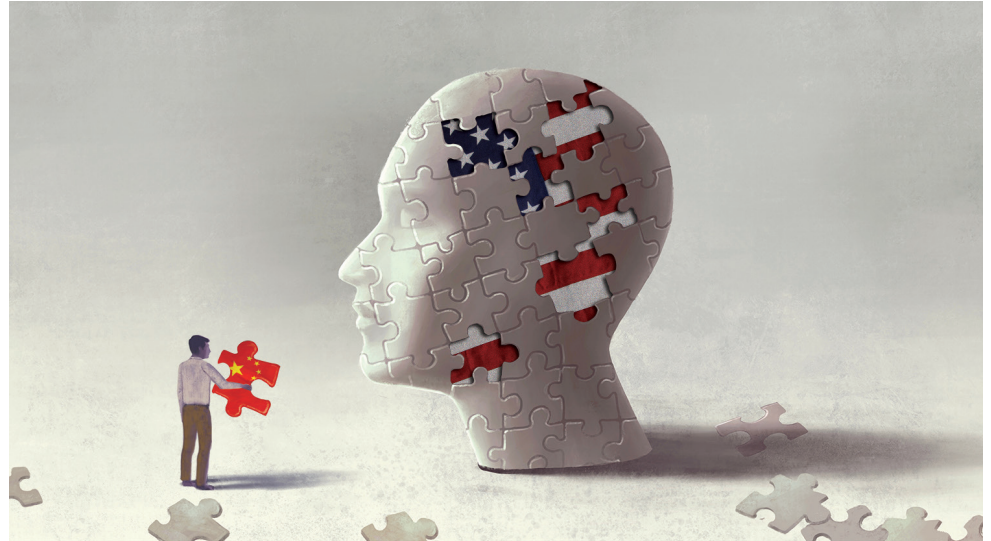
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# RESEARCH SHORT

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## To Better Understand China, the IC Should Look Harder at Itself

**Josh Kerbel**

The IC is hampered by an organizational culture deficient in introspection. To deliver robust intelligence support—regarding China and the full range of issues the IC addresses—we must get past our long-held tendency to view introspection as a distraction from the mission and begin to see it for what it really is—a prerequisite to mission success. Reframing our discussion of China—our metaphors—requires the reflection for which we are not making time. Academic literature shows the power of language to influence our thoughts: a good metaphor can enhance our understanding of the issues, while a bad metaphor can profoundly mislead us—and the policymakers we support. *This Research Short is adapted from the author's NIU Year of China Seminar, "On Bad Terms: How We Talk About China Shapes—And Too Often Distorts—How We Think About It," and the ensuing robust IC discussion.*

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## The Downside to Mission Focus

Not long ago, I was talking to an old friend and China analyst about the need for IC analysts to spend significantly more time looking at themselves and their agencies—to be more introspective. I thought this an uncontroversial assertion as it has been well established in management literature that healthy organizations have robust introspective proclivities.<sup>1</sup> But his response proved me wrong: “Do you have any idea what my read pile looks like? I have no time for navel-gazing.”

The above comment beautifully captures not only the IC’s aversion to introspection but also what is probably the main reason for that aversion—our “mission focus.” In fact, for most of us “mission, mission, mission” becomes a mantra from the day we take our oaths. The unintended but very real downside of this admirable mission focus is that we tend to see introspection as a distraction from the mission rather than as a prerequisite to mission success. Another, also compelling, reason is our historical and cultural aversion to examining anything that could be perceived as US-related rather than adversary-related.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this aversion to introspection is evident in the ways the IC tends to think about language. Mention language to an intelligence analyst and usually the first things that come to mind are foreign (often adversaries’) languages. Increasingly, large language models are mentioned. And for more technically adept officers, computer languages such as Python are often called out.

What rarely seems to come to the fore, however, are thoughts about our own everyday language—English. And when our attention does turn to English, it is usually in a “tradcrafty” way of thinking about style, grammar, concision, and precision. Indeed, as far as I have been able to discern, we rarely think about the ways our use of language influences and reflects *how* we—and the decisionmakers we inform—think about or understand the topical issues that we are writing about or discussing.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we typically think about our use of language merely as a means to communicate our thoughts—not as fundamental to the shaping and understanding of the thoughts themselves.

## Bad Metaphors Can Distort Our Perception

The power of language to influence our thoughts is particularly prominent in our choice and use of metaphor.<sup>3</sup> What are metaphors? (I ask only because metaphor—like Justice Potter Stewart’s observation regarding the definition of obscenity—is one of those things that most people cannot necessarily define but “know it when they see it.”<sup>4</sup>) Metaphors are cognitive-linguistic models—effectively mental models—in which a term is used in a way that is literally false but figuratively true.<sup>5</sup> As described in the cognitive psychology literature, metaphors are created by borrowing a term from one domain and applying it to another in such a way that it—we hope—enhances our understanding of the issue or domain to which it is applied. The danger, however, is that a bad metaphor can distort rather than enhance our understanding.

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Although metaphors exert this power across the entire range of issues the IC addresses, nowhere are they more evident—or more distortive—than in the ongoing debate in the United States about the challenge posed by China. And there are a few in particular that stand out and warrant scrutiny.

At the moment, there is perhaps no metaphor more pervasive in skewing the US discussion of China than the ubiquitous characterization of our relationship as some sort of latter-day Cold War—as we see in so much media, academic, and think-tank discourse.<sup>6, 7</sup> This metaphor's prevalence in public discussion cannot help but influence the IC's perceptions of China. On a cursory level, the Cold War metaphor seems applicable due to a few large and obvious similarities between the Soviet Union and China. Large nation-states—check. Large, capable militaries—check. Authoritarian/totalitarian political systems cloaked in Marxist-Leninist drapery—check. But look beyond these general similarities and the differences quickly begin to assert themselves.

Whereas the Soviet Union was predominantly a military threat, economically “decoupled,” and physically contained, that description simply does not hold for China. China is a multidimensional challenge, with extraordinary power in domains, such as economic, political, and technological, well beyond the military. Additionally, China is not—and cannot be—economically “decoupled” (more on this metaphor later) from the US, or the larger global, economy. Rather, it is fully and irrevocably entangled in the international economy. And finally, not only is China uncontained physically, but it is also uncontained virtually—a domain and distinction that did not even exist during *the* Cold War.

All told then, applying a Cold War metaphor—even if modified with the labels new, next, 2.0, and so forth—to the US competition with China is highly problematic because it encourages Americans to see and think about China as reminiscent of the Soviet Union. Worse, it also prompts us to think that the Cold War playbook that served us so well in the US struggle with the Soviet Union may also be a useful guide to dealing with China. But it won't be. More likely, it will simply encourage us to over-militarize our approach in the same way that the terrible “war on drugs” and “war on terror” metaphors did in their applications.

Another place where the Cold War metaphor is less than helpful is in its promotion of the idea that China can be thought of as a discrete entity from which we might somehow “decouple.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the decoupling metaphor is perhaps the next most dangerous metaphor after the Cold War metaphor.<sup>9</sup> Sure, the United States could break or weaken some of the direct ties that bind us to China. Many—and perhaps most—of those ties, however, run through other parts of this complex web of physical and virtual interconnectivity

**“If ‘Cold War’ once again becomes our primary strategic frame, we risk reverting to a playbook bereft of the creativity demanded by today’s complex strategic circumstances.”**

Josh Kerbel

*Research Note, “The Worst Thing We Can Do Is Call It a Cold War,” July 14, 2022*

**“Metaphors shape perception of the issues they are used to characterize. In the case of ‘decoupling,’ it encourages the United States to think of China—erroneously and dangerously—as a discrete issue.”**

Josh Kerbel

*Research Note, “When It Comes to US-China Relations, Don’t Call It ‘Decoupling,’” February 22, 2023*

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and interdependence that bind us to each other and the rest of the world. That is to say, the United States simply cannot decouple from China any more than China can decouple from us. Like it or not, we are stuck together in the sense that a clean break—precisely what decoupling implies—is not possible nor realistic.

The decoupling metaphor also highlights a larger problem: it is a mechanistic term that ignores the messy, organic reality of the US-China relationship. Unfortunately, our broader national security discourse is riddled with such Newtonian mechanistic metaphors.<sup>10</sup> We write of “tension” between nation-states. We discuss “leverage” in negotiations. We speculate on the “trajectory” of events. And this list continues—think of terms, such as “inertia,” “momentum,” “friction,” “backlash,” “pressure,” “linchpins,” “pivots,” and “centers of gravity,” that thoroughly pervade the literature of international affairs, including 75 years of intelligence analysis. For example, a sampling of *Global Trends* assessments and *Annual Threat Assessments*, produced by ODNI, revealed some of the above metaphors being used hundreds of times.<sup>11</sup>

The common thread in all of the aforementioned metaphors is that they contribute to a distorted portrayal of China as some sort of discrete and mechanistic entity that can be acted upon with linear precision and predictability. Of course, the real China could not be more different: it is so deeply entangled with us and the world in a kind of complex organic mass that any effort to shape it is inevitably rife with nonlinear imprecision and unpredictability. In sum then, our prevailing metaphors conceptually mischaracterize China and, in so doing, encourage us to misperceive it as well.

## The Power of the Framing Effect

How does our discourse regarding China—replete with metaphor—distort our understanding? Metaphors are *ingrained* in our speech and their use is deeply *rooted* in our habits of mind. Note how the previous sentence employs two metaphors. Indeed, metaphors are so commonly scattered throughout our speech that we are often unaware that we are speaking and thinking in metaphorical terms.

Metaphors exert such power on our thinking through a phenomenon called the framing effect. The framing effect is a cognitive bias—famously explored by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and

### REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF IC USE OF SELECT NEWTONIAN METAPHORS

*Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World:*  
pressure (35), tension (23), leverage (5), trajectory (4)

*Global Trends 2035: Paradox of Progress:*  
pressure (46), tension (84), leverage (9), trajectory (4)

*Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds:*  
pressure (28), tension (1), leverage (6), trajectory (3)

*Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World:*  
pressure (24), tension (23), leverage (8), trajectory (9)

### AND A SECOND REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

*Annual Threat Assessment 2024:* pressure (12),  
tension (11), leverage (6), trajectory (2)

*Annual Threat Assessment 2023:* pressure (7),  
tension (11), leverage (5), trajectory (1)

*Annual Threat Assessment 2022:* pressure (10),  
tension (9), leverage (1), trajectory (3)

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Amos Tversky—whereby **how** something is said (“framed”) exerts greater influence on one’s thinking than **what** is actually said.<sup>12, 13</sup>

For example, a doctor tells a patient that a procedure has a 90 percent success rate versus a 10 percent failure rate. The fact that patients are significantly more likely to opt for the procedure when framed as the former rather than the latter—although they are saying exactly the same thing—shows the power of framing.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of the framing effect’s power was demonstrated in a study that showed the different policy preferences people chose when crime was metaphorically characterized as a “beast” versus a “virus.” In the case of the former, study participants opted for more punitive and aggressive policy responses. But when characterized as the latter, they opted for more curative and preventative policy options.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the extensive and replicable research regarding the framing effect, most people—including many analysts with whom I have discussed this phenomenon—discount or push back against the notion that our common metaphors can subconsciously but powerfully shape, as well as reflect, our thoughts. On numerous occasions, analysts have said to me that the metaphors they employ are “just figures of speech” or “long-accepted terms.” Of course, these dismissals get at the essence of the problem—the world has changed, but in our desire to cling to comfortable if increasingly inapt metaphors, we inadvertently contribute to our misperception of those changes.

## Strategic Reframing of the China Challenge

To remedy the misperception and distortion promoted by our prevailing metaphors, we should strategically “reframe” China. This effort will entail us thinking carefully about deficiencies inherent in our default metaphors and consciously identifying and using new, more appropriate metaphors.

Encouraging signs on this front are already appearing. For instance, the use of the decoupling metaphor is notably decreasing in favor of “de-risking.” While de-risking is certainly an improvement, I would prefer to see “disentanglement” become our metaphor of choice for discussing the reordering of our connections to China. For one thing, this term aligns well with the enduring “web” metaphor that remains the universal metaphor for capturing the interconnectivity and interdependence of today’s ever more complex world. Moreover, disentanglement captures the more organic, Gordian-knot nature of the relationship and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of a full and clean break.

Some readers may hope to see a comprehensive list of our commonly used—but poor—metaphors mapped to preferable new—more effective—replacement metaphors. This *Research Short* does not provide such a mapped list, however, because that exercise is not just a matter of terms—but also of concepts.

**“In quantum science, which is the very science of smallness, the term entanglement is used to describe a phenomenon whereby particles—even if separated by vast distances—remain connected.”**

Josh Kerbel

*Research Note, “The Era of Entanglement”*

December 12, 2023

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To arrive at a better metaphor, one needs to be more deliberative in choosing words that better portray the concept in question. Put differently, the core problem here is the automatic, unthinking use of language. Cognitive biases, such as the framing effect, can only be countered via conscious and deliberate thought, not just awareness. Simply providing a list of alternatives would not promote—and might well discourage—such calculated thought.

That said, I do have a couple of suggestions as to the general nature of new metaphors that might truly help us—and, again, the decisionmakers we support—to better grasp the immensely complex challenge that is China. First, our new/future metaphors should be more organic, not mechanistic, drawn from domains such as biology, ecology, meteorology, and epidemiology. Second, they should also be less militaristic—“war” should be used very judiciously. War metaphors—recall the “war on drugs” and “global war on terror” mentioned earlier—have a problematic history of promoting simplistically aggressive policies toward complex challenges that realistically demand much broader and more nuanced perspectives and approaches.

## **Building a More Introspective Culture in the IC**

As mentioned at the outset of this *Research Short*, any healthy organization has robust introspective tendencies. With this in mind, the IC should make a concerted effort to address its deficiencies in this vein. Not just with regard to China and our use of metaphors, but also with regard to the entirety of our practices, procedures, and habits of mind.

Undoubtedly, our aversion to introspection might well be disputed by some observers.<sup>16</sup> After all, most of us take multiple personality assessments (for example, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or DISC profile) during the course of our service. Additionally, we do have many of the trappings of an introspective community: organizations (such as National Intelligence University (NIU) and Center for the Study of Intelligence), personnel (such as methodologists, tradecraft specialists, and historians), and publications (including NIU’s *Research Shorts* and *Monographs* and CIA’s *Studies in Intelligence*) that are specifically dedicated to thinking about the practice of intelligence. Why, then, do I posit that we are not sufficiently introspective?

Relative to the IC’s size, the aforementioned trappings are, by any measure, tiny. Although a sub-community of extraordinarily introspective officers exists, the majority of them are at their most introspective when—and because—they are not working on the line. As part of my research, I talk to many intelligence officers, especially line analysts. And in doing so I never fail to be amazed at how few seem to view routine introspective activities as vital to high performance. Yes, they see value in the occasional class, tradecraft-focused article, or checking off the boxes on an Intelligence Community Directive 203 (*Analytic Standards*) checklist. But as a systematic, thorough, and routine activity? Not so much.

Which brings me to my final point: in endeavoring to foster a much stronger culture of introspection, the IC should start building introspective activity into the regular routines of officers *actively* and *directly* working on the mission. Just as practicing doctors and lawyers are required (at least on

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paper) to engage in self-assessment—“reflective practice”—even as they confront ever-increasing numbers of patients and caseloads,<sup>17</sup> intelligence professionals also must consciously invest time and thought in regularly reflecting on how we conduct our work and ways in which we could better achieve our mission. There is no set form that this reflective practice must take. It could be conducted in a group, individual, or hybrid format. The only aspects that are non-negotiable are that it be regular, resourced (particularly with regard to time), and required. And that means introspection must be reconceived and incentivized as a fundamental prerequisite to mission success and not remain the distraction or “navel gazing” that it too often is deemed to be.

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