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# RESEARCH SHORT

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## Viewing China's Cognitive Warfare Through the Lens of Its Global Strategy

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China's cognitive warfare is a central element of its strategy, designed to achieve national rejuvenation, manage escalation, and gain advantage without armed conflict. By analyzing Chinese political and military writings and public opinion data, this study places cognitive warfare within China's whole-of-government approach. The findings highlight President Xi Jinping's distrust of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the unknown effects of cognitive warfare based on integration of emerging technologies. These factors increased Xi's focus on "war control." For the Intelligence Community (IC), applying a strategy-based analytic framework—ends—ways—means (and risk)—is essential to understanding and countering China's persistent influence operations, which have proven effective in shaping perceptions, especially across the Global South.

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## Unbounding China's Cognitive Warfare

The study of cognitive warfare in today's complex security environment yields an array of findings, some of which have the unintended consequence of delimiting the scope of its exercise and objectives. Literature on China's cognitive warfare that narrowly focuses on its evolution as an advanced technological development within the PLA—through the processes of “informatization” and transition to “intelligentized warfare”—particularly risks confining the IC's understanding to the context of military preparation for *future warfighting*. Chinese military writers define “informatization” as the ongoing process of integrating information technology across all aspects of military modernization<sup>1</sup> and “intelligentized warfare” as a new form of conflict driven by deep integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into every aspect of military operations.<sup>2</sup> As observed by Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung—scholars in Taiwan who collaborate to offer their respective insights in PLA studies, cognitive science, and AI—the concept of cognitive warfare “is often entangled with notions such as information warfare and cyber warfare.”<sup>3</sup>

A growing body of evidence suggests, however, that the aperture should be widened to understand China's efforts as part of its long-term, multifaceted strategy to build national power and global influence. US Air Force Colonel and specialist on cognition in future warfare Michael Cheatham and his former classmates from the Joint and Combined Warfare School assert that cognitive warfare is “not limited to the military or institutional world. Since the early 1990s, this capability tended to be applied to the political, economic, cultural, and societal fields.”<sup>4</sup> Nataliya Bugayova and Kateryna Stepanenko of the Institute for the Study of War describe cognitive warfare as the integration of “economic, diplomatic, and military actions” to influence “perceptions of the world and decisionmaking.”<sup>5</sup> The Hung scholars offered this working definition: “*activities undertaken to manipulate environmental stimuli to control the mental states and behaviors of enemies as well as followers in both hot and cold wars* [author's emphasis].”<sup>6</sup> Cognitive warfare, therefore, is waged across the spectrum of conflict from peacetime competition to total war and includes all elements of national power to achieve the national authority's goals.

China's political and military writings reinforce this broader perspective. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and President Xi pointed to China's increasing “international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape” global opinions, particularly citing diplomatic initiatives, when addressing the 19th Party Congress in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Yang Cunshe, of China's Academy of Military Science, tied Xi's perception more directly to cognitive warfare in a 2022 article in the *PLA Daily*: “Cognitive domain operations are continuous and dual-purpose—offensive and defensive—engaging all personnel, spanning all phases, shaping globally, and executed through whole-of-government efforts.”<sup>9</sup> In another 2022 *PLA Daily* article, Zhang Guangsheng emphasized that a central task of cognitive domain operations is to attack the “values” of the potential adversary while protecting and promoting China's own values.<sup>10</sup> Deeper dives into China's whole-of-society practice of cognitive warfare and its view of this activity as a critical element of “war control”—that is, achieving national aims abroad and at home without resorting to combat—will be key to strengthening US mitigation strategies.

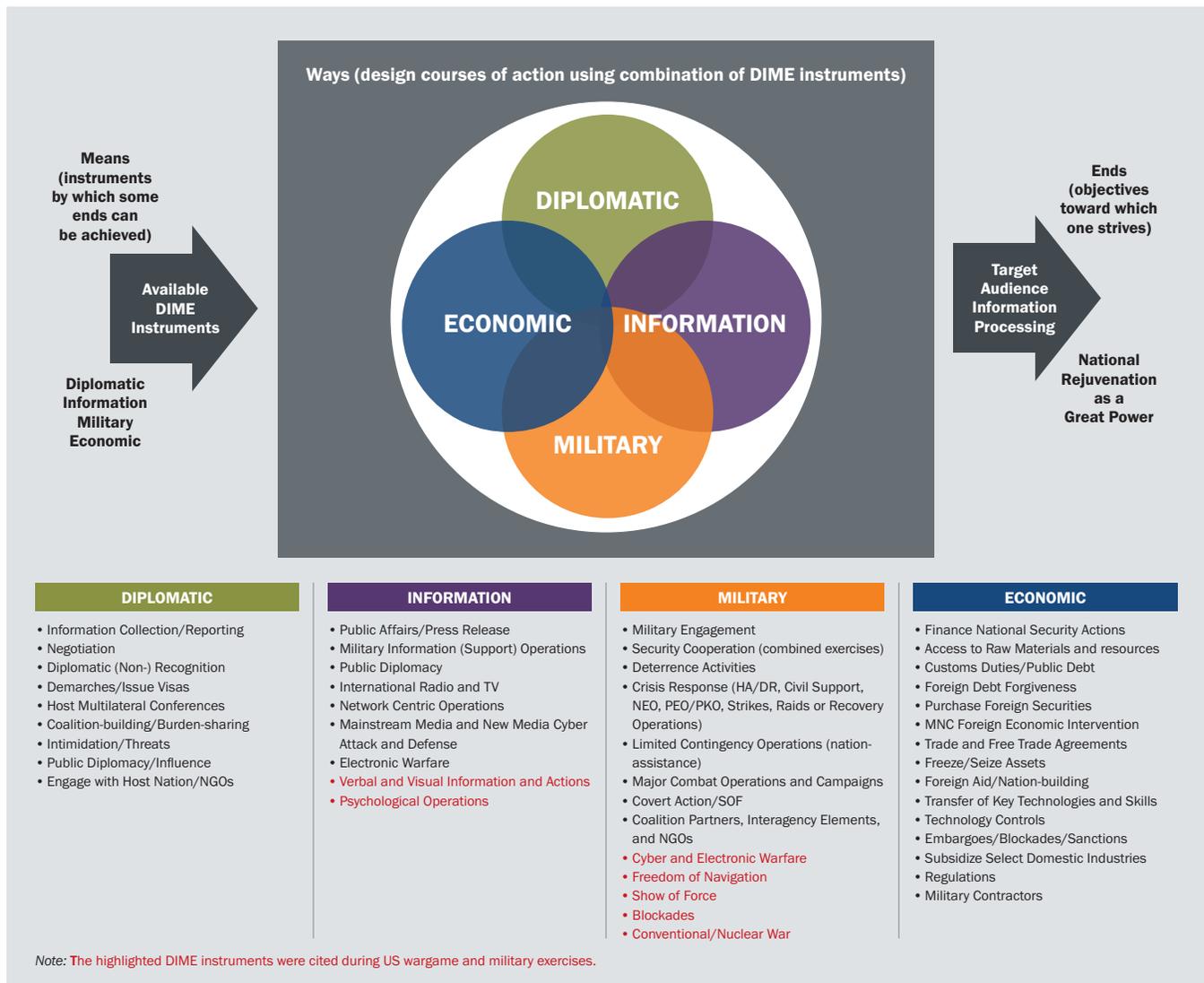
**“Cognitive domain operations are a new form of combat style and advanced warfare that integrates military, political, economic, public opinion, psychology, jurisprudence, and other means to narrate to achieve national security strategic goals, influence the cognition of target objects, and then change their decisionmaking and behavior.”<sup>7</sup>**

– Li Minghai  
China's National Defense University

## Engaging Whole-of-Government in Cognitive Warfare

Messaging at home and abroad has long been a key part of the CCP’s effort to fulfill its promise of prosperity to the Chinese people and elevation of China’s global status through “national rejuvenation”—a practice at which the CCP has grown increasingly sophisticated. Arguably a leading element of cognitive warfare, such messaging can range from verbal exchanges to kinetic activities and be exercised by a wide array of government and societal entities: diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) (Fig. 1). As Dinesh Mayal, of the Indian policy think tank Observer

**Figure 1. CCP’s “Struggle of All Kinds” Using DIME Instruments**



Source for Concept of National Power and DIME Tools: R. Craig Nation, “National Power,” Reed J. Fendrick, “Diplomacy as an Instrument of National Power,” Dennis M. Murphy, “Strategic Communication: Wielding the Information Element of Power,” John F. Troxell, “Military Power and the Use of Force,” and Clayton K. S. Chun, “Economics: A Key Element of National Power,” in *US Army War College Guide to National Security Issues*, Volume I: Theory of War and Strategy, ed. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr. (US Army War College Press, June 2012), 147–58, 159–72, 173–78, and 217–41. See link: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA564450.pdf>.

Research Foundation, has written, China pioneered the modern use of a whole-of-society approach to wage influence operations. Mayal’s argument that China conducts these operations “in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviours, or decisions... to further the state’s interests and objectives”<sup>11</sup> implies their use is part of a larger strategy.

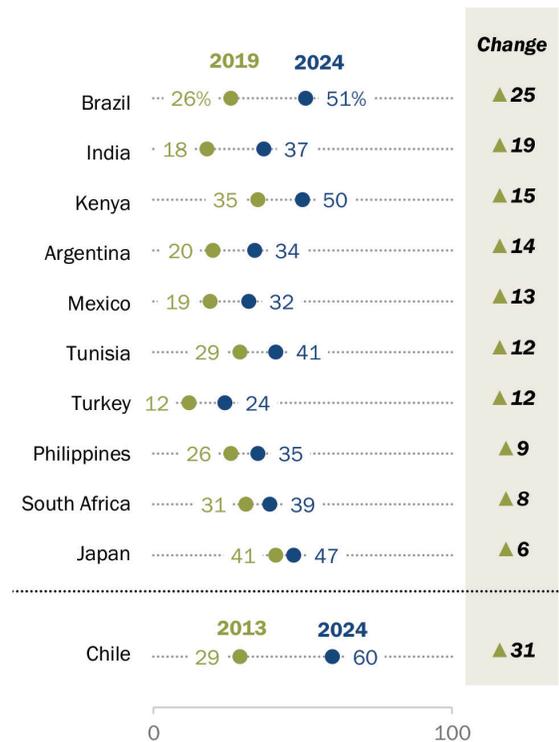
China’s whole-of-government approach to cognitive warfare appears to be gaining ground in its competition with the United States, particularly among the countries of the Global South. Diplomatic overtures (both coalition-building conferences and acts of intimidation), information tactics (public policy proclamations and cyber attacks), military engagement (from peacekeeping to show-of-force operations), and economic outreach (from development aid to technology controls) all serve as tools for shaping perceptions to manipulate decisionmaking—the essence of cognitive warfare.

A Pew Research Center global attitudes survey of 35 countries, published in July 2024, illustrates the divide between high- and middle-income countries’ views of China. Although not explicitly credited, the results appear to be a reasonable measure of China’s cognitive warfare success. For example, Pew’s comparison of the 2024 data with surveys taken earlier in Xi’s regime and the whole-of-government cognitive warfare effort shows that perceptions of China’s economic influence rose in at least nine middle-income countries between 2019 and 2024. Two high-income countries also reported this China-favorable growth: a modest six-point rise in Japan from 2019 and a more robust 31-point rise in Chile from an earlier benchmark set in 2013 (Fig. 2).

Looking ahead, China could be viewed even more favorably across the Global South after lifting tariffs on countries in Africa and Asia in September 2024 and relinquishing its status as a “developing country” in World Trade Organization agreements in September 2025.<sup>12</sup> The 17 middle-income countries in the 2024 Pew survey, especially those in Africa and Southeast Asia, tend to view China in a positive light, largely due to its economic influence in their regions (overall median positive 47 percent and negative 29 percent). With respect to their views on China’s contribution to world peace and stability, 60 percent of the 10 Asia-Pacific countries polled view China as playing a role, including the US-allied Philippines. Those polled in 18 high-income countries were more critical of China, citing their concerns about Xi’s leadership, territorial disputes, and China’s role in world peace and stability (overall median positive 28 percent and negative 57 percent).<sup>13</sup> (See Appendix A for more on Pew’s 2024 global views of China survey.)

**Figure 2. China’s Increasing Economic Influence**  
**Growing shares say China has a strong influence on their country’s economy**

*% who say China is having a great deal of influence on economic conditions in their country*



Note: Only statistically significant changes are shown.  
 Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey.  
 “Most People in 35 Countries Say China Has a Large Impact on Their National Economy”

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## **Xi's Distrust of the PLA Drives China's Evolving Concept of "War Control"**

In 2001, China's military scholars first addressed the concept of "war control," defining it as "preventing unintended escalation of a political crisis into a military conflict, or a small-scale conflict into a major war."<sup>14</sup> Although the military is the central element of this concept, war control emphasizes the employment of all instruments of national power; peace, development, and China's enduring economic goals generally override military objectives. Concern is rising in China, however, that the PLA's growing faith in technology and in planning to achieve war control, while simultaneously seeking the "initiative" during crisis and conflict, could increase the prospect of unintended escalation<sup>15</sup>—suggesting the CCP leadership fears such escalation could threaten its survival. The 2013 edition of China's *Science of Military Strategy* discussed the need for "war control" due to the prospect of widespread destruction in modern warfare, and the CCP continues to worry that war would cause instability, threaten China's economic interests, and jeopardize national development goals—imperiling its mandate for national rejuvenation.<sup>16</sup>

The CCP also harbors fears that its much-prized military modernization and push for intelligentized warfare could increase the PLA's autonomy and weaken its loyalty to the CCP, presenting another argument for exercising all instruments for war control. Masaaki Yatsuzuka, of Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies, has argued that the role of the PLA's political commissars could become marginal in intelligentized warfare due to its technical nature, fast-paced operations, and trend for technologies, such as AI, to assist or substitute human judgment in operational decisions.<sup>17</sup> Zhang Guangsheng, a contributor to the *PLA Daily*, offers an opposing argument to Yatsuzuka's by suggesting that "intelligent weapon systems," based on advanced technologies, such as AI, can "become the new commanding heights of war control."<sup>18</sup> That said, Luo Zhaocheng, cautions in an article in the *PLA Daily*, that urgently deploying "imperfect and unreliable AI systems" could be disastrous.<sup>19</sup>

More important, Xi's continuous purging of senior PLA officers indicates he does not trust them and has doubts about the PLA's ability to "fight and win wars," particularly against the United States in a Taiwan scenario. Xi is aware of the PLA's rogue tendencies, such as its clandestine spy balloon incident of 2023, and the rampant corruption and mismanagement within the PLA—all of which are likely to lead him to constrain the PLA from military adventurism.<sup>20</sup> In short, it appears Xi seeks near-total control of the PLA to prevent an accidental war, particularly with the United States.

## **Time To Consider China's Cognitive Warfare in the Context of Its Great Power Strategy**

China's long-term, whole-of-government exercise of cognitive warfare is best understood in the context of its overall strategy for achieving national rejuvenation and global recognition of its desired great power status. In 2023, Xi claimed, "Our Party uses strategies and tactics as powerful tools in leading the people to transform the world, seek change through action, and advance

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development.” Tactical successes during a period of strategic competition, such as those achieved through cognitive warfare, can help “seize the strategic initiative.”<sup>21</sup> And technological advances are likely to further strengthen China’s cognitive warfare capabilities. In 2024, Iida Masafumi of Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies warned that China could improve its ability to control human cognition with generative AI and brain-machine interface capabilities to achieve its “ultimate goal of ‘winning without fighting.’”<sup>22</sup> The key takeaway from Masafumi’s work is that Chinese strategic culture values the idea of “subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting,” and considers it “an achievable goal.”<sup>23</sup>

Going forward, examining China’s ongoing and future exercise of cognitive warfare through the lens of strategy will be key for the IC’s mission to inform the development of mitigation strategies by the US military and policymakers. One approach to applying a strategy-based analytic framework is a simplified but effective version proposed by COL Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., US Army, (Ret.), a former professor at the US Army War College (AWC). Adapting former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Maxwell Taylor’s theory on strategy, COL Lykke proposed this equation: “Strategy equals ends (objectives toward which one strives) plus ways (courses of action [COAs]) plus means (instruments by which some ends can be achieved).” COL Lykke added that his strategy framework can be applied to “any type of strategy—military, political, economic, and so forth, depending upon the element of national power employed.”<sup>24</sup> Applying COL Lykke’s equation, one could conclude that China’s long-term strategy *equals* achieving national rejuvenation to become a globally recognized great power (ends) *plus* cognitive warfare (a key COA) mixed with other DIME activities, such as senior government official’s speeches (ways), *plus* other available DIME elements of national power (means). COL Lykke’s AWC colleagues largely embraced his model but added the element of risk to the ends–ways–means (and risk) equation. Risk must be managed since one has finite resources, and one cannot account for all the COAs to “assure 100 percent success.”<sup>25</sup> (See Appendix B for strategy-related analytic questions and a conceptual framework).

A strategy-based analytic framework is essential for understanding how China’s expanding cognitive warfare capabilities, amplified by emerging technologies, advance its broader objective of achieving national rejuvenation and strategic advantage without resorting to fighting. Cognitive warfare, viewed through the lens of China’s global strategy, is understood as a critical element of an integrated diplomatic, informational, military, and economic action. This analytic approach is vital for shaping effective US policy and military doctrine, as cognitive warfare can bypass traditional defenses and undermine social cohesion.<sup>27</sup> Although Xi remains concerned about the PLA and war control, China’s recent promotion of initiatives, such as the Global Governance Initiative at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its push to assume greater responsibilities in world affairs at the United Nations General Assembly underscore its growing confidence in leveraging

**Political warfare, as defined by George Kennan, provides timeless clarity to the meaning of cognitive warfare, short of hot wars:**

**“The employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”<sup>26</sup>**

**– George F. Kennan, US diplomat, historian, and foreign policy strategist**

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cognitive warfare as a whole-of-government approach. These developments underscore the need for US intelligence analysis to treat Chinese cognitive warfare as a persistent, coordinated campaign central to China's grand strategy.<sup>28</sup>

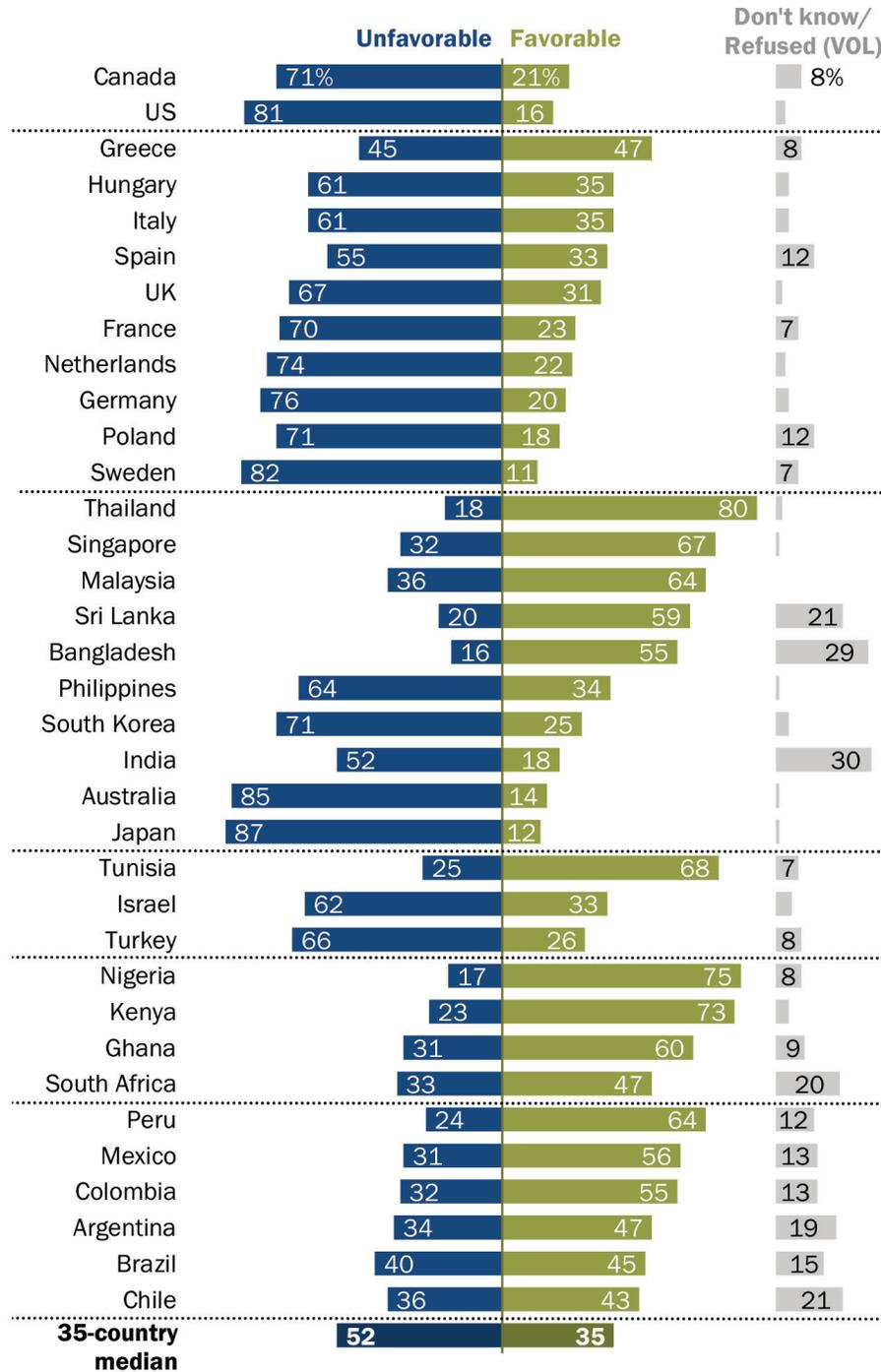
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## Appendix A: Attitudes Toward China Vary Widely Across Regions

% who have a(n) \_\_\_ opinion of China



Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey.

"Most People in 35 Countries Say China Has a Large Impact on Their National Economy"

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## Appendix B: Development of an Analytic Framework To Assess Strategy

Rick Swain's Strategy Questions	Joseph Nye's Strategy-Related Questions	Questions To Assess China's Strategy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the understanding of the context in which you are located?</li> <li>2. What are the ways?</li> <li>3. What do you want to do?</li> <li>4. What is the central element of the design?</li> <li>5. What adjustments are needed to achieve success?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the contextual intelligence for the situation?</li> <li>2. Which forms of power behavior are most likely to succeed?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does the China leadership's understanding of the strategic environment suggest about what needs to be done?</li> <li>2. What is the central element of China's strategy design and what was done to achieve success?</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. What are the ends?</li> <li>7. Where do you want to go?</li> <li>8. What are the one or two goals which will lead to desired outcomes?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. What goals or outcomes are preferred?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. What are the few vital objectives for the China leadership whose achievement would lead to favorable outcomes, and were they achieved?</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. What are the means?</li> <li>10. What are the resources and how are they prioritized?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. What resources are available and in which contexts?</li> <li>5. What is the information and communications plan?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. What resources were chosen and how were they prioritized to achieve the vital objectives?</li> <li>5. What was the information campaign to justify China's actions?</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Is there a reasonable probability of success?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. What is the probability of success?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. What was the China leadership's sense of the probability of success?</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. What are the various responses to your actions by the other interested parties, including those which oppose the desired ends?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. What are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence attempts?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Who opposed the China strategy and who supported it, and what was done by China to overcome the former and exploit the latter?</li> </ol>

Source: Produced by author. See additional information related to this analytic framework in David W. Shin, *Kim Jong-un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness* (Lexington Books, 2021), 7–9.

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## Endnotes

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