



**“I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS
WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS”
Information Power and Deterrence**

MAJ Kevin Piercy, USA

A historical black and white photograph of the Wright Flyer biplane in flight over a rural landscape. The plane is a two-winged aircraft with a propeller and landing gear. In the background, there are several buildings and trees under a clear sky.

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**“I Do Not Think It Means What You Think
It Means”**

Information Power and Deterrence

MAJ KEVIN PIERCY, USA

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Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present another issue of the Wright Flyer Papers. Through this series, Air Command and Staff College presents a sampling of exemplary research produced by our resident and distance-learning students. This series has long showcased the kind of visionary thinking that drove the aspirations and activities of the earliest aviation pioneers. This year's selection of essays admirably extends that tradition. As the series title indicates, these papers aim to present cutting-edge, actionable knowledge—research that addresses some of the most complex security and defense challenges facing us today.

Recently, the Wright Flyer Papers transitioned to an exclusively electronic publication format. It is our hope that our migration from print editions to an electronic-only format will foster even greater intellectual debate among Airmen and fellow members of the profession of arms as the series reaches a growing global audience. By publishing these papers via the Air University Press website, ACSC hopes not only to reach more readers, but also to support Air Force-wide efforts to conserve resources.

Thank you for supporting the Wright Flyer Papers and our efforts to disseminate outstanding ACSC student research for the benefit of our Air Force and warfighters everywhere. We trust that what follows will stimulate thinking, invite debate, and further encourage today's air, space, and cyber warfighters in their continuing search for innovative and improved ways to defend our nation and way of life.



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Abstract

Could a state win a crisis without fighting? Under what conditions does a state's use of information power ease—or complicate—its ability to achieve its objectives in a crisis? The author answers these questions by offering a new definition of a state's information power: an interaction between data collection, data protection, and data transmission capabilities to influence a desired population. Based on this definition, this paper discusses how coordinated and synchronized use of words and actions can help a state reach its defensive compellence or immediate deterrence objectives. Case studies of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis underpin the research.

The author proposes that to become more effective at using information power in deterrence, the US must learn from its mistakes and improve its data handling. Integrating data across the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of power—rather than relying solely on the military for deterrence actions—is an inherent requirement. If the US hopes to subdue its enemies without fighting, it must fundamentally update its approach to information power and deterrence.

Introduction

“The ability to subdue the enemy without any battle is the ultimate reflection of the most supreme strategy.”¹ If a state subscribed to Sun Tzu’s argument, how would it achieve such a bloodless victory? After the use of the world’s first atomic weapon in World War II, Thomas Schelling offered a theory to use nuclear weapons in an innovative way for coercive aims.² Schelling argued that by being the most willing to risk escalation, even when a state may not rationally choose war otherwise, a state could win a crisis without fighting.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 raised a question that links information power and deterrence theory. Under what conditions does a state’s use of information power ease or complicate its ability to achieve its objectives in a crisis? To answer this question, this paper will offer a new definition of information power as an interaction of data collection, data protection, and data transmission capabilities meant to influence a desired population. Based on this definition of information power, this paper argues that coordinated and synchronized use of words and actions makes achieving a state’s defensive compellence or immediate deterrence objectives easier to accomplish.

The following chapters will define information power in detail and present a theory of how states use information power to win without fighting. The hypotheses generated by this theory will be tested against case studies of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and of the 2014 Sino-Vietnam Oil Rig Crisis. The paper will conclude with policy implications for deterrence professionals and civilian leaders as they seek to improve and adapt existing deterrence strategies.

Information Power

Given the low barrier to entry and low cost to using information power, it should not be surprising that multiple information power users exist. There are four broad categories of information power users: governments, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and individuals. While each group merits additional research, this paper focuses on information power used by nation-state governments.

Before defining information power, one must define power. John Mearsheimer argues that a state’s power is “embedded mainly in its army and the air and naval forces that directly support it.”³ Matthew Kroenig argues that a state’s power comes from its economy, diplomacy and alliances, and military.⁴ While the many variations of how to define a state’s power have merit,

for this paper, power is more simplistically defined as “the ability of A to get B to do something that A wants.”

According to Department of Defense (DOD) Joint Publication (JP) 1, the instruments of national power are diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.⁵ These instruments are commonly referred to by the acronym DIME. While JP1 focuses solely on each instrument’s impact on the DOD, it provides a starting point to understand the relationship between instruments of national power and achieving national objectives.

Defining information power continues to be a hotly debated topic. The only common theme among all definitions of information power is the goal of influencing a target. As an instrument of national power, information power is defined as the interaction of three components:

- The ability to collect data, protected or unprotected, analyze that data, and integrate it for use with other elements of national power.
- The ability to protect one’s own data and domains from an opponent’s attempt at acquisition, insertion, or influence.
- The ability to transmit data into protected or unprotected domains to influence a specified audience.

Each of these components of information power is used by states to achieve their political objectives.

A state’s intelligence activities are the most significant contribution to the first component. Freeman describes intelligence as the “sensory apparatus of the state.”⁶ The data gained from the breaking of the Nazi Enigma code machine during World War II was critical to the success of the Allies. While information collection is a critical component of information power, collection alone is insufficient to achieve a state’s objectives.

Defensive activities described in the second component are aimed at the two poles of information power: technology and ideology.⁷ The technological pole has been researched extensively and is where most of the attention has focused. Trying to learn from past failures, the Biden administration has focused on improving cybersecurity through government–private industry cooperation.⁸ Focusing on the other pole, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) targets its population with information operations to promote “stability and harmony” and distract from political issues that may risk internal unrest.⁹ However, like information collection, defense of one’s own data and domains is insufficient to get “B” to do what “A” wants.

While the first two components are important, neither explains how information has power. The power of information can be understood in existing concepts such as Joseph Nye’s “soft power.” Soft power is the spreading of mes-

sages about a nation's culture, beliefs, and ideals to whoever will accept it. Nye describes it as the ability to affect what other countries want.¹⁰ This process of influencing a target is slow and may yield unpredictable results. However, given enough time and effective application, information power can turn today's opponent into tomorrow's partner.

Information also has power when it is integrated into the "D," "M," and "E." Displayed during the ongoing 2022 Russian-Ukraine crisis, the US Department of State and other agencies frequently published information that detailed suspected Russian plans and activities prior to and during the invasion.¹¹ Information integrated with diplomacy tried, as State Department spokesman Ned Price stated, to "prevent a war."¹²

Militaries have long studied how information power can provide an advantage on the battlefield. The Allies in World War II established an army of inflatable tanks, rubber airplanes, and costumed soldiers that eased the amphibious assault on Normandy and eventually led to the defeat of the Nazis.¹³ During the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Russian military used deception to convince the local population that Russian forces were self-defense or local police forces while obscuring true Russian intentions. Military information power has been and continues to be the collection and distribution of information to lift one's fog of war while simultaneously manipulating an opponent's fog of war.

Like information power, economic power integrates with other elements of national power to achieve a state's objectives. While Joseph Nye's original conception of soft power was as a part of diplomacy, soft power is also driven by economics.¹⁴ Development and distribution of media and consumer goods representing a state's culture spreads a message to those who consume it. A state's economic power, in part, determines how wide the message is sent and how many see it.

Theory

Information power is used in two ways: words and actions.¹⁵ This paper argues that coordinated and synchronized use of words and actions makes achieving a state's defensive compellence or immediate deterrence objectives easier. Immediate deterrence seeks to prevent an opponent from taking an unfavorable action in a defined time frame while defensive compellence seeks to force an opponent to give up gains and return to the status quo. These two subsets of Schelling's concept of coercion reflect methods used by states attempting to win without fighting. Success in defensive compellence or immediate deterrence means a return to or the maintenance of the status quo.

Why deterrence and not compellence? Schelling argued that brinksmanship “means exploiting the danger that somebody may inadvertently go over the brink, dragging the other with him.”¹⁶ In a game of brinksmanship, clear signals communicated through synchronized words and actions reduce the risk of escalation. In today’s geopolitical environment, clear messaging benefits defenders of the status quo as they seek an advantage by supporting established international norms. Ambiguous messaging is advantageous for revisionist states that seek to change the status quo.

On 27 February 2022, President Putin issued a veiled threat to the West of a nuclear response for any country that “tries to interfere with us” in Russia’s war with Ukraine.¹⁷ The vagueness of what constitutes “interference” and what the Russian response would be are designed to create doubt in the minds of Western leaders and increase the potential costs for continuing to support Ukraine. By contrast, on 29 November 1990, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized the use of military force against Iraq if Iraq failed to withdraw from Kuwait by 15 January 1991.¹⁸ Three months prior, President George H. W. Bush ordered the start of Operation Desert Shield and the subsequent build up US military forces in the region.¹⁹ The US and UN clearly messaged to Iraq the UN objective, threat, and consequence of inaction. This coordinated use of words and actions eventually eased America’s and the UN’s defensive compellence objective of reestablishing Kuwaiti sovereignty.

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses generated by this theory will be evaluated against historical crises to prove or disprove the theory presented.

H₀: Synchronized words and actions lead to defensive compellence or immediate deterrence success.

Synchronize is defined as making things “to happen at the same time” or to “represent or arrange (events) to indicate coincidence or coexistence.”²⁰ Therefore, unsynchronized words and actions can most readily be seen in timing.

H₁: Coordinated words and actions lead to defensive compellence or immediate deterrence success.

Coordination is defined as “the process of organizing people or groups so that they work properly and well” or the “harmonious functioning of parts for effective results.”²¹ Uncoordinated messaging includes opposing messages de-

livered by the same or different parts of the government. Instances where an action appears to contradict a verbal message are also uncoordinated.

H₂: States that use clear and explained words and actions are likely to succeed in defensive compellence or immediate deterrence objectives.

Ambiguous is defined as “capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways.”²² States with defensive compellence or immediate deterrence objectives are inherently status quo seeking. Therefore, these states are more likely to achieve their deterrence objectives when their messaging clearly defines actions that must be taken and the expected consequences of noncompliance.

H₃: States that effectively use the three components of information power will find success in their defensive compellence of immediate deterrence objectives.

The inability of a state to collect important information and disseminate it for use limits effective decision making and reduces the effectiveness of the other instruments of national power. A failure to defend a state’s information domains and populations could lead to a lack of support for a desired course of action or cause strategic paralysis. If a state cannot apply information offensively to send clear messages or work to influence a foreign population or leadership, it is unlikely that state will achieve success.

H₄: States that effectively integrate information into their other elements of national power are likely to achieve their defense compellence or immediate deterrence objectives.

As previously stated, integration of information power with the other elements of the DIME increases the chance that “A” will get “B” to do what “A” wants. Given that information power requires large time horizons to affect change, information power alone is unlikely to effectively achieve a state’s immediate deterrence or defensive compellence objectives. Information power must integrate with a state’s diplomatic, military, and economic powers for maximum effect.

Methodology

The hypotheses will be used to analyze two case studies. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is the most recent military crisis between China and the United States. This case study serves as an example of how a state with a significant

disparity in military capability used information power to try and achieve its immediate deterrence objectives.

The 2014 Sino-Vietnam Oil Rig Crisis demonstrates how a less militarily powerful state used information power. Vietnam has historically been able to maintain its independence from China while resisting People's Republic of China (PRC) attempts to coerce compliance with PRC goals and objectives. This case study is an example of how a less powerful state used information power to achieve its defensive compellence objectives.

Several questions will be applied to evaluate if a state's words and actions are synchronized. First, if a state uses words prior to a linked action then does the linked action occur within the specified timeline? If no timeline is specified, then does the linked action occur within 30 days of the official statement or threat? While timelines of crises vary widely, 30 days is a reasonable average based upon historical examples. Second, if a state uses an action prior to the linked words, then do the linked words occur within seven days of the action? Individuals and states often demand explanations immediately after an action. If a state makes no statement on its own and only responds to a query, this represents unsynchronized words and actions. Deliberate or unintentional, no official statement creates ambiguity regarding the originator of the action and its intended purpose. If the answer to these questions is "no," then the words and actions are considered unsynchronized.

A comparison of words and statements regarding the same action is necessary to determine coordination. Importance of the sender based on that specific country's structure is also important. Words are not uncoordinated just because contradictory statements are made if the people making those statements are of different importance in the government. However, words are uncoordinated if the same person (a head of state) makes contradictory statements or if two people of the same relative importance (US Secretary of State and US Secretary of Defense) make contradictory remarks. While the perception of the receiver is considered more important than the sender's intention, the inability of a sender to coordinate words and actions represents a failure to use information power correctly. Evaluation of coordinated words and actions will be based upon available information regarding the intent of each state's efforts and the perception of those words and actions by the receiver.

1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

In July 1995, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait less than 100 miles from mainland Taiwan.²³ This was a response to the US granting a visa for and the subsequent visit of Republic

of China's (ROC) President Lee Teng-hui to the US.²⁴ In December 1995, the US sent the USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier to transit the Taiwan Strait.²⁵ While tensions in 1995 eventually subsided, on 8 March 1996 the PLA fired three surface-to-surface missiles into the Taiwan Strait and announced it would conduct live ammunition tests within 55 kilometers of Taiwan's west coast.²⁶ On 9 March 1996, President Clinton ordered a second carrier battle group, led by the USS *Nimitz*, to join a carrier group led by the USS *Independence* already stationed near Taiwan.²⁷ On 19 March, four days before the first direct presidential election in ROC history, the PRC and ROC began lowering the level of their threats; however, a return to normal relations appeared stalled.²⁸

Chinese objectives in 1995 were to stop a perceived Taiwanese independence movement ahead of ROC elections and to stop ROC collaboration with foreign forces.²⁹ From the PRC's perspective, the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was an immediate deterrence situation where the PRC sought to prevent any declaration of independence by the ROC government. Additionally, it was a defensive compellence situation where the PRC desired to stop ongoing security cooperation between Taiwan and the United States.

China's Information Power

On 30 January 1995, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary and PRC President Jiang Zemin presented an eight-point proposal on ending hostilities between the PRC and ROC to accomplish peaceful reunification.³⁰ ROC officials announced in February 1995 that the PLA had transferred surface-to-surface missiles from elsewhere in China to Fujian Province directly across the Taiwan Strait.³¹ This first messaging campaign demonstrated synchronized but uncoordinated words and actions by the PRC. The movement of missiles by the PRC less than 30 days after President Jiang Zemin's reunification proposal were viewed as synchronized by the ROC government. Additionally, the movement of weapons systems that threatened mainland Taiwan did not send the same message as the message sent by President Zemin's peaceful reunification plan. The eight-point proposal for peaceful reunification was not ambiguous nor was the increased threat posed by China's surface to surface missiles. There is no evidence to suggest that the PRC failed to adequately implement any of the three components of information power or integrate it with the rest of the DIME.

Between 7 July and 21 October 1995, the PRC published a series of synchronized anti-ROC leadership articles that were coordinated with the commencement of PLA missile test launches and amphibious exercises.³² The messaging campaign by Chinese state media occurred between 39 days and 5

days prior to the start of a PLA live-fire exercise. Unlike the previous attempt, this second campaign consisted of unambiguous messages and demonstrated the PRC's desire for the ROC to immediately cease a trend toward declared independence.³³ Additionally, the PRC sought to warn the US to stay out of internal Chinese affairs.³⁴ This second campaign demonstrated the PRC's skill at coordinating the various components of information power and integrating it effectively across the DIME. This campaign is coded as a success for the Chinese. Tensions appeared to subside as the PLA concluded its military drills in November 1995, and in January 1996 the PRC offered another round of negotiations to normalize relations.³⁵

The third messaging campaign occurred in March 1996. Over concerns regarding the transit of the USS *Nimitz* through the Taiwan Strait in December 1995, the PRC announced a new set of military exercises.³⁶ This third campaign was not accompanied by messages from CCP officials or government media and is coded as unsynchronized. While the exercises were aimed at reminding the US of the three Sino-US communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act, that message was either ignored or misinterpreted. The lack of messaging by the PRC represented a failure to synchronize and coordinate words and actions and resulted in a vague and ambiguous message. While nothing suggests the PRC failed to use each component of information power, the third messaging campaign failed to integrate messaging across the DIME.

Table 1. PRC campaign effectiveness

Event	H ₀	H ₁	H ₂	H ₃	H ₄	PRC objectives achieved?
PRC First Campaign January–May 1995	1	0	0	1	1	No
PRC Second Campaign July–October 1995	1	1	1	1	1	Yes
PRC Third Campaign March–April 1996	0	0	0	1	0	No

US Information Power

American declaratory policy regarding Taiwan in 1995 was ambiguous and contradictory.³⁷ However, to the PRC, the Clinton administration's approval of a tourist visa for President Lee represented a doubling back on stated US policy.³⁸ Perhaps more confusing for the Chinese, the Clinton administration had initially denied the visa request in early 1995.³⁹ After a successful Taiwanese lobbying campaign, the administration reversed itself due to congressional demand for visa approval.⁴⁰ Senior Clinton administration officials stated the US would approve the visa on the same day the action was taken, there-

fore coding these words and actions as synchronized.⁴¹ While the conflicting messages sent by the initial rejection and subsequent approval of the visa were unintended, the Clinton administration failed to discuss its actions with the US Congress, which resulted in uncoordinated words and actions. This ambiguous message, ironically in line with US policy, was interpreted by the PRC as tacit support for Taiwanese independence.⁴² The Clinton administration also failed to defend US senators and representatives from Taiwanese information power. There is nothing to suggest that the administration failed to integrate information power across the DIME because the instruments of national power do not include internal political behavior.

The Clinton administration made no protest after the initial slew of PLA missile tests in July 1995 and instead chose to downplay the seriousness of the tests.⁴³ President Clinton ordered the transit of the USS *Nimitz* through the Taiwan Strait in December 1995 as an attempt to remind the Chinese government of US desires to find a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue. When asked, the administration explained the transit as a weather diversion.⁴⁴ Given no official statement accompanied the USS *Nimitz* transit and the three-month difference between the conclusion of PRC exercises and the transit, the message sent by this action is coded as unsynchronized. Additionally, the explanation of a weather diversion is coded as uncoordinated words and actions. The failure to receive, interpret, and act on messages by the PRC during their second information campaign between July and October 1995 demonstrates the Clinton administration's failure to effectively use two components of information power. This failure also led to the poor integration of information into the other elements of national power. Much like the visa approval resulted in the first round of missile tests, the transit of the USS *Nimitz* only served to inflame tensions, causing the second round of PRC missile tests in March 1996.

After the March 1996 missile tests, then-Secretary of Defense William Perry spoke with China's equivalent to the US national security advisor, Liu Huaqiu, and stated that continued Chinese targeting of Taiwan may result in "grave consequences."⁴⁵ On 11 March, President Clinton ordered the USS *Nimitz* back to Taiwan to join the USS *Independence*.⁴⁶ Administration officials testified to Congress that the two carrier strike groups were meant to remind China that the "premier military power in the Western Pacific is the US."⁴⁷ Statements by US officials threatening consequences occurred less than a week prior to the deployment of a second carrier strike group and is coded as synchronized. Additionally, the words and actions conveyed an unambiguous message that integrated across the DIME using all elements of information power.

Table 2. US campaign effectiveness

Event	H ₀	H ₁	H ₂	H ₃	H ₄	US objectives achieved?
US Policy/Visa April-May 1995	1	0	0	0	N/A	No
First US Campaign December 1995	0	0	0	0	0	No
Second US Campaign March-April 1996	1	1	1	1	1	Yes

Review

This paper argues that coordinated and synchronized words and actions make achieving a state's defensive compellence or deterrence objectives easier to accomplish. The PRC's Second Campaign passes each hypothesis test and validates the theory. While the 1996 Taiwanese elections saw a high turnout, the Democratic Progressive Party (pro-independence platform) performance was an all-time low of only 21 percent of the total vote.⁴⁸ However, this success should not be viewed outside of its historical context. The CCP has long used information power to try and influence the population of Taiwan to accept peaceful reunification under PRC control. The PRC's success was undoubtedly due to the groundwork that had been previously laid. As the March 1996 election demonstrated, many of the Taiwanese population desired a shift away from extreme positions like independence or reunification and voted to return to the status quo.⁴⁹

The US success in the Second Information Campaign from March to April 1996 was due to the alignment of objectives with the PRC's desire to return to the status quo. While some view the deployment of two American aircraft carrier battle groups to Taiwan as the proximate cause of China's missile tests ending, it was really because the PRC achieved its objectives. More importantly, ineffective use of information power by the US caused both escalations of tensions between 1995 and 1996.

2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis

In May 2014, state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation moved the Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HYSY-981) oil rig into waters surrounding the Paracel Islands.⁵⁰ Between May and July 2014, Vietnamese and Chinese civilian and law enforcement vessels engaged one another with ramming and water cannons.⁵¹ Two anti-China riots in Vietnam turned deadly and resulted in the burning down of foreign-owned factories.⁵² This crisis is viewed as the worst period of relations between Vietnam and China since normalization in 1991.⁵³

Vietnam's Information Power

Nhan Dan (*The People*), Vietnamese official media, published an astounding 224 articles regarding the crisis.⁵⁴ Averaging three articles a day, *Nhan Dan* did not shy away from accusing the Chinese of instigating the crisis and demanding the withdrawal of HYSY-981.⁵⁵ Unexpectedly, the Vietnamese also allowed international journalists to board Vietnamese vessels to the crisis location.⁵⁶ The articles and images showing Chinese vessels ramming Vietnamese ships were widely broadcast throughout Vietnam.⁵⁷ Simultaneously, the Vietnamese Communist Party attempted to engage in party-to-party negotiations with the CCP.⁵⁸ Counter to its previous behavior, the Vietnamese government initially allowed anti-China protests to organize across the country.⁵⁹

One Vietnamese information campaign is present. The Vietnamese government coordinated the deployment of law enforcement vessels (action) with media publications (words) that sent the same message. It is apparent that these words and actions were synchronized within days of each other to create the maximum effect of pressuring Chinese leaders. Finally, the approval of organized anti-Chinese protests supported government messaging and represented an escalation by the Vietnamese government that messaged the seriousness of the situation. The end of the crisis saw the achievement of the Vietnamese defensive compellence objective of protecting its maritime claim to the region and the removal of HYSY-981 from disputed waters.⁶⁰ Vietnam's objectives were achieved in all five hypotheses.

China's Information Power

In contrast to Vietnamese state media, China's *People's Daily* only published a total of 36 articles during the crisis.⁶¹ None of these articles made the front page, and the majority only contained copies of the Foreign Ministry's official statements.⁶² The CCP also prohibited media outlets from "hyped" the dispute.⁶³ Chinese words during this crisis do not align with its aggressive actions. Chinese officials even publicly softened their tone in accusing Vietnam, often referring to violence as criminal.⁶⁴

It is unclear whether China achieved any of its objectives during this crisis. The reasoning behind the PRC's behavior remains a mystery but is in line with its history of South China Sea salami slicing. Seemingly caught off-guard by the speed and intensity of the Vietnamese response, the Chinese decided to withdraw HYSY-981 in July 2014, one month ahead of its scheduled departure.⁶⁵ Almost certainly to save face, the CCP announced that HYSY-981 had finished its planned operations ahead of schedule.⁶⁶

Considering China's objectives were an attempt at compellence, the argument of this paper does not apply. However, given the lack of official statements accompanying the deployment of HYSY-981, the PRC's actions and words are coded as unsynchronized. The messages sent by the words and actions also did not align and are coded as uncoordinated. The contradictory messages sent by the PRC gave Vietnam the narrative advantage that resulted in public statements of support for Vietnam by the United States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). No available evidence suggests that China failed at any of the components of information power, including effectively controlling the narrative within China. However, Chinese information power was not effectively integrated into the other elements of national power. Although CCP officials met senior Vietnamese officials several times to negotiate a resolution, the following section describes the clear disconnect between the PLA and the CCP that made managing the crisis extremely difficult. If China's objectives were to advance its claims in the Parcel Islands, it failed.

Review

The confusing and ambiguous Chinese information campaign represents the disjointed planning and execution of the operation. Interviews with Chinese officials indicate that the decision to deploy HYSY-981 was made by the PLA without consultation with the Chinese Foreign Ministry and possibly without the approval of senior CCP leadership.⁶⁷ Although this paper's argument does not apply to the Chinese compellence objective, it suggests that coordinated words and actions are still required to enable the achievement of compellence objectives. The uncoordinated messaging between the PLA's action and the CCP's official statements demonstrates a desire to exit the crisis rather than achieving the PLA's compellence objectives.

The Vietnamese information campaign during this crisis passes each of the hypothesis tests and supports this paper's argument. The Vietnamese government sent an unambiguous message to the PRC through its words and actions. While China's history in the South China Sea loomed large, the aggressiveness and clarity of the Vietnamese message enabled Vietnam to rally international support. It may be impossible to determine which of Vietnam's words or actions were the most impactful. However, it is clear the coordination and synchronization of the whole campaign enabled Vietnam to achieve its defensive compellence objectives.

Findings

Three of the seven information campaigns meant to achieve defensive compellence or deterrence objectives pass every hypothesis test. Only two of those campaigns directly achieved their objectives and suggest that coordination plays a more critical role than synchronization. The evidence also suggests that all three components of information power are equally important. Finally, perhaps the most important instrument of national power is information because of the increased chance for success when all are integrated effectively.

Coordination over Synchronization

The information campaigns studied only saw success when using coordinated words and actions. The US, China, and Vietnam all saw success when their words and actions were coordinated and sent the same message. Whether intended or unintended, opponents often saw words and actions as linked. This suggests that synchronization is a more of a consideration than a vital component for success. When planning an information campaign, a state could reasonably assume that an opponent would view any word and action as linked if it occurs within the same crisis. Governments should be cautious of transmitting messages it views as unrelated to the current conflict because opponents will likely not view it the same way.

Information Power Matters

Both crises studied contained examples of effective and ineffective use of the three components of information power. While the cases studied may suggest that democracies have a weakness in information power compared to an authoritarian government, the distinction is between which populations were targeted and the messages used. The PRC achieved success by influencing the Taiwanese electorate towards a more moderate position regarding independence. The US failure to achieve its objectives in 1996 was a result of targeting the wrong population with the wrong message. The US chose to target CCP leadership when a better center of gravity was ROC President Lee. After altering the status quo by approving President Lee's visa, the US should have targeted its efforts at influencing President Lee to alter course. If the US and China both directed efforts at changing President Lee's course of action, this combined effort might have seen an end to the crisis in 1995.

Integration Matters More

The failure to integrate information gained during the October 1995 discussions between the PRC and US led to the disastrous decision to have the USS *Nimitz* transit the Taiwan Strait in December 1995. Given the three-month difference between diplomatic talks and the USS *Nimitz* transit, the only logical interpretation of an American aircraft carrier transit through the Taiwan Strait was escalation. Emulating America's poor performance in 1995, the inability to communicate or integrate information power between the PLA and the CCP leadership led to the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis. The Vietnamese government integrated information power extremely well between all its instruments of national power to maintain a physical presence in disputed waters while working towards a diplomatic solution. Beyond the existence of state media, nothing suggests that Vietnam's success with information power is out of the reach of the US or other democratic nations.

Policy Implications

Still Getting It Wrong

America demonstrated the ability to coordinate messages and integrate across the DIME to achieve its objectives. Unfortunately, recent history demonstrates that the US continues to fail at identifying the correct population and the correct message to achieve its desired effect. The Biden administration's stated goal in 2022 was to deter Russia from invading Ukraine. While the American efforts effectively built support among allies and partners, it did little to stop the start of the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022. Why?

The Biden administration failed to use information power correctly. Revisionist states, including Russia, have continued to act through a realpolitik lens. In response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the US and Europe imposed a series of economic sanctions on President Putin, his inner circle, and to a lesser extent the greater Russian economy.⁶⁸ It did not work. Prior to the invasion, Russia controlled Crimea and acted through proxies in Eastern Ukraine. History and current intelligence were not adequately integrated into the decision-making process by the Biden administration. Either the means used to deter Russia from invading Ukraine were wrong or the objective was infeasible given the means the Biden administration was willing to use.

A failure to understand that Russia and President Putin would not be deterred by economic sanctions alone represents a failure of the first component of information power. On 24 February 2022, President Biden finally admitted

that “no one expected the sanctions to prevent anything from happening.”⁶⁹ This failure to understand Putin’s realpolitik world view resulted in an uncoordinated message being sent by Biden’s words and actions. President Biden and his administration’s senior officials publicly stated the objective was to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine. When asked about the small deployments of American military personnel to Europe, President Biden stated that the moves were defensive and that the US “has no intention of fighting Russia.”⁷⁰ Given these conflicting messages, one can only assume that the US objective of deterring a Russian invasion was infeasible given the means it was willing to deploy.

While some may view the Biden administration’s words and actions as failing to heed Schelling’s advice, the administration did leave something to chance. It was the wrong thing. If Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, is to be believed, then no one in the Russian government anticipated the scale and scope of the imposed Western economic sanctions.⁷¹ Nevertheless, a lack of integration of information across the DIME to aid in decision making made the message sent by the threat of economic sanctions ineffective. The thing that would matter to Putin—the threat of Western military force—was messaged as off the table by both the incredible deployment and posturing of NATO forces and the statements of both American and NATO officials.

Integrated Deterrence

Speaking at the US Indo-Pacific Command change of command ceremony in April 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that “integrated deterrence” is the new approach to defending America.⁷² Unfortunately for Secretary Austin and the DOD, the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy published in February 2022 puts integrated deterrence squarely within the DOD’s domain. It leaves out any reference to integration across the DIME. It states that the US “will more tightly integrate our efforts across warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflict to ensure that the United States, alongside our allies and partners, can dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain.”⁷³ The Biden administration’s definition of integrated deterrence appears to only rebrand of what it means to act as a “joint force.”

American actions during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrate the US government’s fundamental lack of understanding of what deterrence is and how to do it. The DOD’s dictionary defines deterrence as “the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits.”⁷⁴

Bernard Brodie recognized that deterrence requires credibility, which is the ability to link capability and willingness.⁷⁵ For the DOD's definition of deterrence to be true, the DOD must have the capability to impose unacceptable costs but also be able to message its willingness to do so. For the US (and any other nation with strong civilian control of the military), the DOD is incapable of messaging willingness. Therefore, it is unable to unilaterally provide a credible threat. In nations with strong civilian control, deterrence is inherently integrated across the DIME, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

On 1 March 2022, Adm Charles Richard, the commander of US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), testified to the House Armed Services Committee that USSTRATCOM is responsible for “strategic deterrence, nuclear operations, global strike, joint electromagnetic spectrum operations, analysis and targeting, and missile threat assessment.”⁷⁶ USSTRATCOM does not do deterrence. Just as each of the US military services train, staff, and equip forces to provide a war-fighting capability to a combatant commander, the Department of Defense trains, staffs, and equips capabilities for the president of the United States to threaten a willingness to use. This concept is reinforced by every administration when it reaffirms that only the president of the United States will decide how and when America will use its nuclear weapons. In the US, the president is the only person or entity capable of “doing” deterrence. The DOD only plays a part.

Moving Forward

Just as Inigo Montoya said in *The Princess Bride*, “you keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”⁷⁷ The DOD fundamentally misunderstands *deterrence* and, by extension, information power. A state messages its credibility through words and actions. The failure of the US to effectively deter opponents in crisis since the end of the Cold War results from the inability to consistently integrate capability, willingness, and information effectively across the DIME.

Deterrence works when the correct cost is threatened. Collecting data, protected and unprotected, helps identify what an opponent holds dear and what that opponent views as an unacceptable cost. This allows states to use concepts like cross-domain deterrence to threaten actions other than military force. Defense of a state's data and domains obscures what a state holds dear and reduces the number of tools that can be effectively employed against it. Finally, transmitting data into an opponent's domains, either by words or actions, demonstrates capability and willingness. Improving information power improves a state's credibility. Improving credibility improves deterrence. Nu-

clear weapons will continue to maintain their utility so long as America's opponents have them. However, more tools outside of nuclear weapons can be brought to bear to defend US interests if the US takes information power and its subsequent impacts on deterrence more seriously.

Conclusion

A new definition of information power is needed. This paper's definition led to the theory that coordinated and synchronized words and actions enable a state to achieve its defensive compellence or deterrence objectives more easily. The information campaigns reviewed during the 1995–1996 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the 2014 Sino-Vietnamese Oil Rig Crisis have supported this argument. These campaigns also provided evidence that coordinated words and actions, effective use of the three components of information power, and integration across the DIME are vital for a state to achieve success.

While some may view the US as disadvantaged when comparing its use of information power to other states such as China, Vietnam was the most effective user of information power in the two case studies. Although much changed between 1996 and 2014, China was no more effective at using information power during the oil rig crisis than during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Hope is not lost. The US has previously been able to conduct a coordinated, synchronized, and effective information campaign when it chooses to. It can again.

To become more effective at using information power, the US must learn from its mistakes and improve its ability to collect, protect, and transmit data. This data, integrated across the DIME, is an inherent requirement of deterrence and information power. America's sole reliance on the military to "conduct" deterrence weakens the credibility of the entire strategy. If the US can fundamentally alter the way it views information power and deterrence, then it finally might be able to subdue its enemies without battle.

Notes

(Notes appear primarily in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

1. Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 59.
2. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 72.
3. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 43.
4. Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*, 13–17.
5. Joint Publication 1, I-1.

6. Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 31.
7. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *The Emergence of Noopolitik*, ix–x.
8. Geller, “Biden’s Cyber Leaders Go to Silicon Valley.”
9. Bolsover, “Social Media, Computational Propaganda, and Control in China and Beyond,” 129.
10. Nye, “Soft Power,” 166.
11. Barnes, “US Exposes What It Says Is Russian Effort to Fabricate Pretext for Invasion.”
12. Fadel, “State Department Team Works to Deter a Russian Invasion of Ukraine.”
13. Garber, “Ghost Army.”
14. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power” 95.
15. George, *Forceful Persuasion*, 9.
16. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 99.
17. Wright, “What Does Putin’s Nuclear Sabre Rattling Mean?”
18. History.com, “Iraq Invades Kuwait.”
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20. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “synchronize,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
21. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “coordination,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
22. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “ambiguous,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
23. Copper, “The Origins of Conflict Across the Taiwan Strait,” 42.
24. Copper.
25. Tyler, “China Warns US to Keep Away from Taiwan Strait.”
26. Copper, “The Origins of Conflict Across the Taiwan Strait,” 43–44.
27. Gellman, “US and China Nearly Came to Blows in ’96.”
28. Copper, “The Origins of Conflict Across the Taiwan Strait,” 44.
29. Zhao, “Changing Leadership Perceptions,” 99.
30. Zhao, 100.
31. Copper, “The Origins of Conflict Across the Taiwan Strait,” 41.
32. “Taiwan Strait: 21 July 1995 to 23 March 1996.”
33. Zhao, “Changing Leadership Perceptions,” 102–3.
34. Zhao.
35. “Taiwan Strait: 21 July 1995 to 23 March 1996.”
36. Zhao, “Changing Leadership Perceptions,” 119.
37. Hickey, “The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996,” 278.
38. You Ji, “Changing Leadership Consensus,” 82.
39. Gellman, “US and China Nearly Came to Blows in ’96.”
40. Gellman.
41. Greenhouse, “Aides to Clinton Say He Will Defy Beijing.”
42. You Ji, “Changing Leadership Consensus,” 82.
43. Gellman, “US and China Nearly Came to Blows in ’96”; and Hickey, “The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996,” 279.
44. Bosco, “Two US Carriers through the Taiwan Strait in 48 Years.”
45. Gellman, “US and China Nearly Came to Blows in ’96.”

46. Priest and Havemann, "Second Group of U.S. Ships Sent to Taiwan."
47. Hickey, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996," 280.
48. You Ji, "Changing Leadership Consensus," 92.
49. You Ji.
50. Wang and Womack, "Jawing through Crises," 712.
51. Trung and Vu, "The 2014 Oil Rig Crisis," 73.
52. Wang and Womack, "Jawing through Crises," 712.
53. Trung and Vu, "The 2014 Oil Rig Crisis," 73.
54. Wang and Womack, "Jawing through Crises," 713.
55. Wang and Womack.
56. Trung and Vu, "The 2014 Oil Rig Crisis," 76.
57. Trung and Vu.
58. Trung and Vu, "The 2014 Oil Rig Crisis," 78.
59. Trung and Vu, 89.
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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DIME	diplomatic, informational, military, and economic
DOD	Department of Defense
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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