Intellectual Sabotage and Integrated Deterrence

Submitted by:

ASI Research Fellows

Thomasville, GA

About the Armed Services Institute

Operating under the non-profit status of Thomas University, the Armed Services Institute is a non-partisan research and advocacy arm of the Center for Military Life. Our mission is to promote positive change in the lives of Department of Defense and related employees. To learn more about the Center for Military Life, visit www.tucml.org

Armed Services Institute publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the U.S. government, its offices or administrations, clients, sponsors, or Thomas University.

Published by the Armed Services Institute, Thomasville, GA.
© 2023 Armed Services Institute

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

*Introduction*_____

   This whitepaper presents the idea of intellectual sabotage and provides a brief exploration into two questions: A. Is intellectual sabotage an alternative to integrated deterrence? B. Can modern analytical techniques like artificial intelligence advance offensive and defensive intellectual sabotage? The context for these questions is set by the most recent National Defense Strategy (NDS) which identifies the concept of integrated deterrence as the means for dampening gray zone aggression by several states including, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. Intellectual sabotage, as will be seen below, is highly dependent on culture and works at or near the level of core beliefs. Since the space of a whitepaper precludes consideration of all of the listed countries, the examples are biased toward China, although some consideration is given to Russian reflexive control. That is so because the NDS clearly marks China as the 'pacing threat' and Russia has a well-defined body of relevant work. Nonetheless, the aim of the following is to highlight the gist of intellectual sabotage, as opposed to suggesting a plan for attacking in the cognitive domain. The latter, while analyzable and effective against individuals and small groups, would require significant input from an interdisciplinary team and would not only be inappropriate for public consumption, but would be limited relative to larger groups. To be clear, the aim of the following is only to describe intellectual sabotage in light of the above two questions.

Contrast or Counterpart?

   As just noted, 'integrated deterrence' is a concept that was introduced through the Biden administration's National Defense Strategy. What deterrence is, what its limits are, and how others view it, are well documented elsewhere.[1] To the extent that the term is used in a warlike context, it will suffice to echo Dr. Antulio Echevarria and treat deterrence as a coin with two sides: negative and positive. To deter negatively is to exercise power in a way that causes an adversary to refrain from taking a certain action. At the same time, deterrence is also positive because it causes the adversary to do something else.[2] One consequence of this duality is that deterrence must be specific. It requires an understanding of both what the adversary is to refrain from doing and is to do instead. So, for example, a fence is a negative deterrent that dissuades people from walking into a denied area. If the adversary is highly motivated and the positive aspect is not fully addressed then the fence will be ineffective relative to any number of other actions like climbing over, going around, digging under, cutting through, *etc*. to gain access to the denied area. Presumably then, the point of adding the term 'integrated' to the word deterrence' in the NDS is to ensure that the positive or, perhaps more generally, what the adversary is

---

[1] The *locus classicus* for deterrence theory is, Schelling, T. *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, 2008). See also, Rühle, M. "Deterrence: what it can (and cannot) do." *NATO Review*, (April 20, 2015). Mazarr, M., *Understanding Deterrence,* Rand Corp. (2018) Mauroni, A. "Deterrence: I Don't Think It Means What You Think It Means." *Modern War Institute,* (October 8, 2019). For Chinese views on integrated deterrence see, SAIC, "China's Use of Perception Management and Strategic Deception." U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, (November 2009). Chase, M. and Chan, A. "China's Evolving Approach to 'Integrated Strategic Deterrence." Rand Corp. (2016)

[2] As Dr. Echevarria noted about deterrence, "Typically, one party wants to compel its opponent to do something, but at the same time, it wants to deter that opponent from doing something else. Thus, it is best to think of coercion and deterrence as the proverbial two sides of the same coin for planning purposes." Echevarria, A., *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, (April 2016) p. xiii.

to do instead, is shaped through the combined exercise of multiple instruments of power. To illustrate with the fence analogy, the addition of concertina wire, electrification, and guards to a fence communicates that harm will come to individuals who attempt to enter the denied area, prompting them to turn away. Similarly, the synchronized efforts of law enforcement, military, intelligence, and diplomatic communities, communicates the potential for an adversary to lose something of value, swaying decisions away from warlike activities.[3] Or, as it is expressed in the NDS, 'integrated deterrence' relates to the coordination of operations across all government agencies and allies to build a combat credible force that alters the risk calculus for aggressive behavior.[4] In short, the term *integrated deterrence* is uncontroversial and is meant to underscore that unwanted action is prevented by properly planned and executed deterrence.

By contrast, intellectual sabotage is the act of damaging intellectual infrastructure and causing an adversary to abandon beliefs, either in part or in whole. It is similar to both the Russian notion of reflexive control and the Chinese understanding of 'mind superiority' (*zhinaoquan*).[5] Yet it differs from these two military arts in that the goal is not to control an adversary or lead a decision maker to a predetermined decision. Rather, the aim of intellectual sabotage is to subdue the adversary by severing the connection between group-level core beliefs and the concepts that inform the adversary's reasons for action. Effectively identifying group level core beliefs and how tightly they are held by a population requires large data sets that do exist but exceed the ability for experts to exhaustively analyze. Put another way, there is a trove of data to which artificial intelligence can be applied that can help experts to both develop insights into and tooling for intellectual sabotage in the modern era.

The historical use of intellectual sabotage in war is not well documented and it appears mostly in contexts where enemy behavior is guided by religious belief. During the years 772-785, for instance, Charlemagne used the threat of force in combination with religious fidelity to quell an insurgency. More concretely, he created a strict dilemma that forced the Saxon leadership to choose between death or participation in the rite of Christian baptism. By choosing the latter option, the Saxon's committed blasphemy against their own deity. Believing they had alienated themselves from a god upon which they could no longer depend, their reasons for acting lost purpose and the Saxons ended their insurgency.[6] Admittedly, the example glosses a complex historical event but the point is that sabotage in the cognitive domain can be decisive in warfare. Indeed, every adversary has an ideology which, by definition, is a systematic body of concepts that fit together to make up a sociopolitical program. As such, those concepts can be confused, reprioritized, or brought into direct contradiction. The concepts of legitimacy and authority, for example, can be confused to undermine belief in popular sovereignty.

---

[3] Calls to integrate instruments of national power in pursuit of national defense strategy are not new. See, for example, Rodrigues, C.A., Walton, T.C., Chu, H. "Putting the FIL into DIME. Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power." *Joint Forces Quarterly,* n. 97, 2nd quarter, (2020) pp. 121-128. Department of Defense, "Strategy." Joint Doctrine Note, 1-18, April 25, 2018.

[4] NDS, pp. 8-11.

[5] Thomas, T., "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* 17 (2004), pp. 237-256. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, N. "Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA's New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations." *China Brief,* V. 19 issue 16 (Sept. 6, 2019).

[6] See, J.A. Sheppard, "Charlemagne's Tactic: Using Theology as a Weapon in the Fight Against Al-Qa'ida" *American Intelligence Journal,* vol. 29 no. 1 pp. 102-110.

Similarly, and as will be explored below, a notion like *tianxia* may suggest points of vulnerability in the Chinese belief in national superiority.[7]

Intellectual sabotage does contrast sharply with deterrence. Most obviously, deterrence is related to physical domains, *i.e.* land, sea, air, space, cyber. Intellectual sabotage, however, takes place in the cognitive domain and relates to beliefs, reasons, and intentions. As such, the first question posed above has its answer: they are not mutually exclusive. Either integrated deterrence or intellectual sabotage can be chosen to stop an action or they both can be adopted at the same time and used in complementary fashion. In other words, intellectual sabotage can be, but is not necessarily, a strategic alternative to integrated deterrence. Neither is it something to be undertaken lightly. Disrupting the mental consistency that authors how an adversary interacts with the world is significantly harder to do than instilling fear of losing something valued and also may cause irreparable harm. To be sure, separating the reasons for acting from their purpose involves curating inputs, usually without the target's knowledge. The advantage in doing so, however, is that shifting a core belief permanently changes an adversary's outlook as opposed to changing the direction that an adversary takes through deterrence.

Reflexive Control

As just mentioned above, there is a sense in which intellectual sabotage shares some similarities with reflexive control, its Russian cousin that is rooted firmly in *maskirovka*. What is required in both cases is a carefully prepared set of information upon which action can be taken. Further, both reflexive control and intellectual sabotage recognize that an adversary's actions must be taken both knowingly and willingly to be intentional.[8] Where intellectual sabotage differs is that the maxim: *credo ut intelligam* (I believe so that I may understand) is the center of gravity. To illustrate, it has been widely reported that China's navy has surpassed the size of the U.S. Navy, which is projected to boast 400 ships by 2045. At the time of writing this whitepaper, China has 340 platforms, not including 85 patrol combatants and craft with anti-ship cruise missiles. That battle force is projected to grow to 400 within the next two years and to 440 ships by 2030.[9] Additionally, China's Coast Guard is the world's largest maritime enforcement fleet. Finally, China has a total of 13 ship yards and the one at Jiangnan has a capacity that is equal to all 7 ship yards in the U.S. That is what we know. The question is what are we going to do about it. And the answer to that depends on what we believe. If we *believe* that Beijing is challenging the U.S. as the dominate power, for instance, any number of rational theories follow. China is staging for combat; China is shifting the balance of forces in the Central Indo-Pacific region; China is creating an anti-access/area denial force in the regional waters; China wants the capability to slow U.S. intervention in and around the waters surrounding Taiwan; China wants to use its larger fleet to draw

---

[7]On the rejuvenation see, Economy, E.C., *The Third Revolution, Xi Jinping and the new Chinese State*, OUP (2019) p.3.

[8] On the difference between an intentional act and an act that is caused see, Anscombe, G.E.M., *Intention,* Harvard University Press, (Cambridge 1963). For a summary see, Jeff Speaks, "A Guide to Anscombe's Intention," September 8, 2004.

[9] The difference in force structure is well documented. See for example, O'Rourke, R. *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress,* Congressional Research Service, (December 1, 2022). Lendon, B. "Expert's Warning to U.S. Navy on China: Bigger Fleet almost always wins." *CNN,* (January 17, 2023). Roaten, M. "Analysis: Shipyard Capacity, China's Naval Buildup Worries U.S. Military Leaders." *National Defense*, (Jan. 26, 2023)

off key assets and undermine the strength of the U.S. forward presence, etc.[10] The belief in U.S. dominance leads to the understanding upon which actions can then be both planned and executed. Through the lens of reflexive control, U.S. leadership would need to choose a course of action relative to the naval build-up before acting so China would try to provide inputs that cause decision makers to select the thesis that best suits Beijing's interests. By contrast, the aim in intellectual sabotage would be for China to replace or damage the U.S. belief in its dominant position, rendering the understanding of the build-up and the potential courses of action that follow from it inapt. In this case, simply presenting a larger Chinese fleet would be the first step in forcing the U.S. to accept that its assumed belief in dominance does not coincide with reality.

Choosing the right idea

The cursory example of China's naval buildup is helpful because it suggests that equal consideration must be given to both the exploitation and defense of group-level core beliefs. To be sure, there is evidence that in an open society, foreign adversaries work to shape the opinions of general populations through the internet and that such activity eventually shifts the beliefs that a population holds.[11] Information operations, however, are not quite the same thing as intellectual sabotage. In addition to messaging, the latter can include activities to ensure that what an adversary believes about the world does not obtain or turns out to be false; the effect of which can be immediate. In this light, operational planning, whether for offense or defense, must contemplate both what is believed and the ways in which the belief is vulnerable. While detecting *what is believed* and *the ways in which the belief creates vulnerabilities* at the individual level is validating and possible through a range of anthropological and sociological tools, detection at groupings above the individual (political, religious, ideological, etc.) affords a greater understanding for offensive and defensive postures within integrated deterrence. Here is where artificial intelligence provides a comprehensive analytical tool set to address the scale and complexity of group-level data. Appropriate experimental design is still required – identifying representative data sets, representative examples, statistically sound inferencing, and judgements of subject matter experts to align results with reality – but artificial intelligence will provide a complete picture of beliefs, vulnerabilities, how these are shared across groups, and myriad of additional analytics and insights.

To explain, Roy Eidelson and Joy Eidelson have deftly identified five belief domains, or beliefs held by both individuals and groups, that play an important role in triggering interstate aggression. Those domains are: 1. Superiority 2. Injustice 3. Vulnerability 4. Distrust and 5. Helplessness. These beliefs, through which members of most any group interpret their experience, are inter-related, culturally organized, reinforced through socialization, and are uncritically assumed to be veridical, *i.e.*

---

[10] Torode, G and Baptista, E. "Analysis: China's intensifying nuclear-armed submarine patrols add complexity for U.S. allies" *Reuters,* (April 3, 2023).

[11] United States vs. Internet Research Agency. Case 1:18-cr-00032-DLF, Filed 02/16/2018. See also, DiResta, R., Shaffer, K., Ruppel B., Sullivan, D., Matney, R., Fox, R., Albright, J., Johnson, B, *The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,* New Knowledge, (New York 2018). On the use of AI relative to information operations see, Kertysova, K., "Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation. How AI changes the way disinformation is produced, disseminated, and can be countered." *Security and Human Rights,* 29 (2018) pp. 55-81.

they are assumed to coincide with reality.[12] Since more research by cognitive psychologists is required before these domains could be used to serve as a custom class for data analysis, the application of the beliefs to sets of data with better definition and control, *e.g.* political speeches, news media, professional journals, etc., is the better course. More concretely, and relative to China's naval build-up, one might infer that 'superiority' is a group-level core belief for the Chinese people and that having the biggest number of ships is consistent with that belief. If we can articulate and identify linguistic expressions of 'superiority', uptake to these linguistic expressions, and vulnerabilities expressed within the uptake, then artificial intelligence can, in collaboration with the subject matter expert, facilitate the finding of additional expressions, the distribution of these expressions across different genres (social media, political speeches, news media, etc.), and how these expressions change over time. The results of artificial intelligence techniques would help us robustly understand *if* building more ships than China or owning more technologically advanced platforms than China might deter Beijing's use of its fleet for unwanted purposes. It would not, however, diminish or change the Chinese belief in superiority that drives the naval build-up in the first place. Doing that would mean having to trap the Chinese people with their primary assumption about superiority in a way that their belief can no longer coincide with how they interpret reality.

There are a number of concepts that indicate that superiority is a Chinese core belief. References to things like *most populous country, oldest civilization, largest economy,* and *second most widely spoken language* all serve to reinforce belief in an impressive position. Since intellectual sabotage works at the level of core beliefs, however, the ideas used in intellectual sabotage need to be integrated into the Chinese socio-political program to be useful. To illustrate, China recently lost its status as the most populous country. It can, and has already started to, protect its core belief in superiority by disqualifying the change in status through the dismissal of global rankings while claiming to have more talented people[13]. By contrast, protecting a belief from a flawed concept that is more deeply rooted in Chinese identity is harder. For instance, one might point to the notion of *tianxia,* a concept denoting all lands under a divinely appointed sovereign. The term itself is found in the writings of Sun Tzu and relates to an offensive military strategy in which the aim is to, "take all under heaven intact."[14] Entailed in the strategy is the notion that China is <u>superior</u> and sits atop a hierarchy of tributary states. Such an arrangement also implies that there is an in group-out group dynamic, suggesting that others are <u>not to be trusted</u>. As an expression of how things are supposed to be, *tianxia* is further complicated by the <u>injustice</u> experienced at the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. Indeed, after that event, China perceived that it was <u>helpless</u> to assert its superiority as reflected in Deng Xiaoping's famous exhortation, "hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead". Finally, there are arguments to suggest that the CPC is <u>vulnerable</u> to past mistakes that undermine the norm of benevolent leadership that is expected in Chinese society.[15] In short, a deeply rooted idea like *tianxia* is

---

[12] Eidelson, R. and Eidelson, J. "Dangerous Ideas. Five Beliefs that Propel Groups toward Conflict." *American Psychologist,* vol. 58 n. 3 (March 2003). Pp. 182-192. In particular, pp. 182-183 offers an excellent overview that explains and contrasts individual core beliefs with group beliefs.

[13] See for example, Mitter, R. "No longer the most populous but China still wants to be number one." *The Guardian,* July 17, 2022. Zhang, J. and Smith A., "China is concerned about much more than India outgrowing its population." NBC News, April 21, 2023.

[14] Sun Tzu, *Art of War,* Griffith S. trans. (New York 1976) *p. 79.*

[15] Brown, K and Berzina-Cerenkova, U.A., "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jingping" *Journal of Chinese Political Science,* 23 (2018) pp. 323-339.

well-integrated into Chinese experience and maps well to group-level core beliefs better than the above-mentioned ideas that, although socially reaffirming, are easily set aside when the world no longer accords with the belief.

As suggested earlier, once a close alignment between an expression of a core belief, *e.g. tianxia,* and the core belief itself, *i.e.* superiority, is found, the application of that expression to a wide body of data may reveal patterns to suggest differences or weaknesses in the relation between it and the core belief. In other words, and in answer to the second question posed from the outset, AI may provide insights into where information and circumstances can be adjusted to diminish the strength of a group-level core belief. It can help to identify potential strike points for intellectual sabotage. Returning to the example of China's naval build-up, the application of a concept like *tianxia* to academic works, political speeches, military journals, social media, state media, etc., might show areas where contradictions in building warships to 'take all intact' creates group-level cognitive dissonance. More subtly, the artificial intelligence analysis also might guide cultural experts to where the application of Confucian ideals such as non-virtuous states imitating the virtuous one falls victim to the same objections that were originally raised by Chinese legalists.[16] Or, it might indicate where the Chinese people themselves understand how the replacement of one ethnocentric concept for another is an expression of imitation or parity as opposed to superiority.[17] These, or other such possibilities, might be leveraged in ways to create dilemmas that would force either the abandonment of the group-level core belief in superiority or redirect the way in which it is expressed to protect the belief.

Conclusion

A belief, as should be clear by now, is an attitude about something that is assumed to be true, whether it is or not. A core belief is one kind of belief. It is a deeply held tenet that significantly shapes how a group, or an individual, acts in the world. Those actions are further guided by ideologies or bodies of ideas that work like rules, guiding an individual or group with reference to political or social action. So, for example, a core belief in God is necessary for a religious ideology that includes the concept of *jihad* as a spiritual struggle. So too, as noted above, a core belief in superiority is commonly needed to sustain a national ideology. Intellectual sabotage aims at disrupting the mental consistency between a core belief and ideas that are central to the ideology. Moreover, the disruption is accomplished by creating a level of cognitive dissonance that forces either a change in how the core belief is expressed or the abandonment of it. Artificial intelligence may greatly aid in the identification of pivotal ideas within an ideology and in locating areas in which cognitive dissonance may take root and provide a much more expansive view on the group-level belief and vulnerability landscape to determine the effectiveness, and potentially new approaches to, intellectual sabotage. In short, intellectual sabotage holds promise for changing both what an adversary believes about the world and, by extension, how an adversary acts in the world. As such, it may offer a more satisfying solution to some problems than deterrence which only aims to redirect unwanted activity.

---

[16] For a consideration of Han Feizi's critique of Confucianism see, Hutton, E. "Han Feizi's Criticisms of Confucianism and its Implications for Virtue Ethics." *Journal of Moral Philosophy,* 5 (2008) pp. 423-453.

[17] A discussion on rival ethnocentric ideas may be found in Xiang, S. "Tianxia and its Decolonial Counterparts: "China" as civilization, not ethnicity." *China Review,* vol. 23, issue 2, (May 2023) pp. 165-187.