

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME: WHY THE PENTAGON MUST EMBRACE SOFT POWER TO COMPETE WITH CHINA

Kyle J. Wolfley | 03.30.21



Last March, the same week that the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, three thousand Chinese and Cambodian troops began Exercise Golden Dragon, a series of military drills focused on “**counterterrorism and humanitarianism**.” The exercises marked an expansion over those in 2019, and they came three years after Cambodia abruptly **canceled its annual**

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exercises with the United States. “What we are doing here is all about our cooperation and relationship,” declared Cambodia’s defense minister. “I can tell you that the Chinese military is helping our troops to build up their capacity.” As the pandemic forced the United States to **scale down** its massive Defender exercise in Europe, the Chinese military continued its multinational exercise programs with **Russia** and **Pakistan** as well, despite China’s strict domestic lockdowns.

These examples highlight how China is wielding a form of military power commonly overlooked in assessments of its rise. Today, states leverage their armed forces not only for warfighting or coercion, but also to manage international relationships. Military power includes not only the capacity to conquer and compel, but also the ability to create advantage through attraction and persuasion—a concept I call “**shaping**.” Unlike military strategies of warfighting or coercion, shaping relies less on force and more on the use of persuasion to change the characteristics of other militaries, build closer ties with other states, and influence the behavior of allies.

Thinking of military power in terms of the number of soldiers, airplanes, and missiles is understandable given the conventional wisdom that a military’s utility lies in its potential to wage or deter wars. But a broader conception of power may shed light on aspects of military statecraft that operate below the threshold of crises and violent conflict. Assessments of military power that focus narrowly on warfighting capacity will miss important developments. China’s leaders increasingly understand the value of using their military to shape the international system in their favor. American policymakers, if they wish to compete effectively, ought to take shaping more seriously as well.

Rethinking Military Power

Power, according to the political scientist **Robert Dahl**, is the ability to get another actor to do something that it wouldn’t otherwise have done. Most theories of military

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power focus on material properties—the size of **land forces**, **aggregates** or **net** indicators of material resources, the balance of **offensive** to defensive weapons, or **systems** of tactical force employment—and they generally assume that the actor with the most material resources will prevail. There is an obvious benefit to these approaches: by focusing on material resources, they make it easy to measure and compare power. And hard power does indeed underpin many aspects of foreign policy, including America’s ability to deter its adversaries, **command the commons**, and provide a **calming presence** for oil markets.

But a singular focus on hard power misses something important: states with **massive resources** often fail to achieve their goals. Material comparisons are often poor predictors of who “wins” during a crisis. A state’s influence rests not only on aggregate material resources, but on *soft power*: the ability to persuade and attract through co-option rather than coercion or inducements. “Soft power,” according to **the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye**, “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” by influencing their cultural and political values and by building legitimacy in foreign policy. Instead of forcing others to do what you want, soft power involves getting others to *want* what you want.

Most analysts don’t associate soft power with the military. But this oversight is a mistake. Shaping, a concept that emerged in US national security **documents** in the 1990s, relies on the skillful use of both military hard and soft power and is fundamental to understanding international competition today. As I describe in my forthcoming **book**, major powers leverage shaping in four distinct ways. They gain allies through *attraction*, influence the values and roles of other militaries through *socialization*, train other armies to take on the burden of providing security through *delegation*, and manage the behavior of allies through *assurance*. Major powers view shaping as a way to exert control over an ambiguous international environment: it helps states build geographic and ideological **buffers** against the influence of other major

Tunnels?

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powers; collect intelligence for future operations; ensure operational **access** to help them project power; and prevent allies and partners from succumbing to an adversary's demands while holding them back from **behaving too aggressively**.

One of the challenges in applying the concept of soft power to military operations is the difficulty in measuring effectiveness: it's hard to determine with confidence whether shaping efforts are "successful" or not. Soft power rests on nonmaterial assets such as legitimacy, values, and culture—attributes that are not only difficult to quantify, but often impossible for governments to directly manipulate. Just because it is difficult to measure, however, doesn't mean that military soft power won't play an important role in today's emerging geopolitical competition.

Indeed, in recent years **every major power** has increased its use of shaping exercises. As **my research** on the changing character of multinational exercises shows, China and Russia now use military exercises to foster new relationships and train smaller states to manage their own security just as often as they perform large maneuvers to intimidate the United States and its allies. (**Counterterrorism** exercises are often the scenario for these training events, offering an opportunity for China and Russia to cooperate.) China, in particular, has **ramped up** its reliance on shaping since the end of the Cold War, especially since its **first multinational exercise** in 2002. After a Thai military coup in September 2006, for example, Chinese and Thai officials signed an agreement to boost military cooperation, including a new special forces exercise known as **"Strike" in July 2007**. In 2016, after another military takeover **limited the scope of US-Thai exercises**, Chinese and Thai soldiers participated in the third iteration of their marine-based **"Blue Strike" program**.

In 2017, meanwhile, the Chinese-led regional security bloc, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, **expanded** its membership to include both Pakistan and India.

Although it still falls far short of a traditional alliance, the organization is playing a growing role in the competition for regional influence and operational access. At a summit in 2005, for example, the organization called on the United States to set a deadline to close its **bases in Central Asia** after suspicions grew over the West's purported role in the "color revolutions" and an uprising in Andijon, Uzbekistan. Chinese leaders understand that America's **military bases** play a key role in allowing the United States to project hard power abroad—one reason why China has sought to expand its **own presence** in other continents.

Taking Shaping Seriously

To prevent America's rivals from gaining an advantage without anyone noticing, US policymakers need to think harder about military soft power—and they need to explicitly incorporate it into US strategy.

They should begin by adopting the language of shaping to better describe military activities below the threshold of open violence. American policymakers currently rely on concepts such as "hybrid warfare" or "**gray zone** competition" to explain these types of interactions, but these descriptions fail to identify the *logic* by which each military attempts to achieve its goals. In similar fashion, a recent US **joint military doctrine note** describes how "campaigning through cooperation" and "campaigning through competition below armed conflict" are just as essential for militaries as armed conflict, but fails to explain why and how units can effectively compete this way.

By contrast, the four methods of shaping provide a framework for understanding *how* militaries expect their efforts to achieve their goals. For instance, *attraction* helps explain why Russia's search for an African **naval port** in Somaliland involves promises of future military training. *Socialization*, meanwhile, explains why the Russian army believes that exercises with Central Asian states will provide a buffer **against Western expansion**

and ward off the threat of future “color revolutions.” The language of shaping provides analytical clarity, and shaping should take a central place in the administration’s new **security and defense strategies**, expected next year.

Second, policymakers and theorists of military statecraft should broaden the ways in which they conceptualize power. It may be difficult to quantify “softer” assets, but it is not impossible. Nye originally offered several metrics for soft power, such as levels of immigration, enrollment in foreign universities, and public opinion polls that asked respondents to describe their views of the United States. The public consultancy firm Portland has developed a **soft power index** that combines polling with over seventy-five metrics of various categories of influence—digital, culture, enterprise, education, engagement, and government—to determine the top thirty soft power-wielding states. Applied to military power, only a **few scholars** have attempted to observe the effects of shaping, primarily by examining military officer exchange programs. Studies of military soft power should assess how well they achieve the goals of shaping—increased intelligence, operational access, basing, foreign policy alignment—to better understand which approaches are most effective.

Third, despite a budgetary focus on building a massive **naval fleet**, often at the expense of **low-tech priorities** (especially land forces), US defense officials should continue to invest in multinational military exercise programs. They should consider personal interactions essential to the military’s long-term capabilities. In terms of costs, some aspects of shaping may require changing the *means* through force structure adjustments, such as the development of the US Army’s **security force assistance brigades**, which help improve weaker militaries’ capacity. But the goals of shaping can largely be accomplished by altering the *ways* in which current forces are employed. Multinational military exercises to test allied or partner readiness, for example, should include more opportunities for interactions with other soldiers and even the public. During the Cold War, for example,

the American-led “Cobra Gold” biannual military exercises in Thailand primarily served as a deterrent; today, they also involve civic action projects, such as medical visits to local families and even the construction of schools, which help place America’s values on full display. Of course, US policymakers need to be aware that forward presence may result in blowback, especially when American soldiers are viewed as **occupiers**. Yet positive impressions of American military power can improve America’s international image and enhance its influence. Successful examples of this approach include NATO’s **Partnership for Peace** exercise program in the 1990s and Operation **Dragoon Ride**, a 1,100-mile US Army convoy through Eastern Europe in 2015 designed to reassure allies nervous about Russian influence.

If policymakers harbor any doubts about the importance of military soft power, they should study the decades leading up to World War I—a period with **some parallels** to today. During this period, shaping played a central role in the formation of what George Kennan labelled the “**Fateful Alliance**”: the 1894 defense pact between France and Russia that transformed the European balance of power. The Franco-Russian alliance would not have been possible, Kennan argued, without the personal friendship of French General Raoul le Mouton de Boisdeffre and Russian General Nikolai Obruchev—a friendship forged during military exercises between the two countries. The new alliance posed its biggest threat to Germany, which had **long considered** a Franco-Russian alliance a serious obstacle to its safety. But the Germans failed to stop the alliance from forming, a failure that would help spell Germany’s ultimate defeat in World War I.

American policymakers would be wise to heed the lessons of the past. In 2018, Russia invited three thousand Chinese soldiers to participate in one of its **largest military exercises**, one indicator of a warming relationship between the two major powers. If American policymakers hope to succeed in an era of great power competition, hard power will not be sufficient. The US military should not forget to wield soft power too.

*Kyle J. Wolfley is an assistant professor of international affairs at West Point and an Army strategist. He holds a PhD in government from Cornell University and is the author of the forthcoming book **Military Statecraft and the Rise of Shaping in World Politics**.*

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