

MONOGRAPH SERIES

**PERCEIVING A COMPETITOR:
Culture and Cognitive Biases
of the Strong Enemy
and the Pacing Threat**

Allison Abbe



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Foreword

Strategic competition between the United States and China requires an understanding of each side's preferred patterns of judgment and decision making. These patterns reflect prevailing cultural norms, beliefs, and traditions. To avoid mirror imaging and misperceptions, US policymakers and security practitioners need a greater understanding of cultural cognition in China and East Asia.

In this monograph, Allison Abbe synthesizes behavioral science research on culture and cognitive bias, highlighting both differences and similarities in cognitive patterns between the United States and China. The monograph addresses two key areas of contrast: how individuals in each nation tend to perceive their environment and how they perceive the other side's point of view. Perspective taking and empathy are sometimes suggested as remedies for misperception, but this monograph identifies the risks of engaging in perspective taking in competition. According to Abbe, perspective taking is necessary but can suffer from its own biases—egocentric bias among US observers and asymmetric, adversarial perceptions among Chinese observers. Instead of resolving conflict, perspective taking can amplify it. Thus, competition with China requires a broad set of interventions to help US observers understand and anticipate Chinese decision making.

The monograph proposes a set of recommendations to help the national security enterprise develop a workforce with the cognitive flexibility needed in strategic competition. In previous conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War, the United States expanded its cultural capabilities but then shed them as priorities shifted. Sustained attention to culture will better prepare personnel for the human dimensions of conflict and competition.

C. Anthony Pfaff
Director, Strategic Research
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Executive Summary

The United States and China have designated each other as primary competitors, engaging in mirror imaging and interpreting each other's actions as expansionist, escalatory, and revisionist. To avoid misperceptions that increase the likelihood of conflict, policymakers and security practitioners need a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the cognitive patterns of their competitors. This understanding should include both the strategic culture of political elites and the broader patterns of cultural cognition, as Western cultures and Chinese and East Asian cultures have distinct cognitive preferences and biases. Dynamic constructivist theories from cross-cultural psychology provide insight into these patterns, highlighting the challenges of accurately understanding one's competitor. This monograph addresses two aspects of cultural cognition: perceiving the environment and perceiving the competitor's perspective.

Cultures have shared cognitive mindsets that reflect common assumptions, values, and cognitive processes, and these mindsets serve as a foundation for perceptions of environments and competitors. Chinese cultural tendencies toward holistic thinking and dialecticism may provide relative cognitive advantages in perceiving a dynamic strategic environment. In contrast, US observers tend to overlook holistic context in their pursuit of consistency, continuity, and formal logic. Nevertheless, US analytic thinking may confer relative advantages in operational planning and performance.

Patterns of social inference also show a potential advantage for East Asian observers, as these observers tend to consider a broader range of influences on behavior and decision making. In contrast, US observers show a preference for simple, dispositional explanations of behavior, neglecting more complex explanations. Cognitive differences likely do not directly translate into competitive advantage or disadvantage; instead, they contribute to a more or less accurate understanding of the competitive environment, which then shapes decisions and actions.

Both the United States and China have barriers to seeing the other side's point of view, and culture-specific knowledge is lacking for both. Few Americans speak a Chinese language, and few Chinese people speak the English language. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, travel between the two countries has become less frequent, resulting in fewer opportunities for direct observation. As with culture-specific cognitive mindsets, Western observers may be at a disadvantage in perceiving Chinese actors' beliefs and intentions because of biases in perspective taking. American observers are prone to projecting an egocentric point of view in understanding others' perspectives, whereas East Asians show more

flexibility in adopting others' points of view. The tendency of Western observers to see negotiations as a competition with distributive, fixed-pie solutions may also make conflict resolution more difficult. Across both cultures, shared biases in perspective taking and in stereotyping the other can contribute to blind spots in perceptions of an adversary.

Perspective taking can help uncover a competitor's view, sometimes helping negotiators achieve better outcomes. Compared with Western negotiators, East Asian negotiators tend to benefit more from taking a counterpart's perspective, but research has shown mixed effects. Competition often creates a perspective paradox: As the stakes for accurate perception increase, competition creates conditions that amplify bias rather than eliminate it. When threat perceptions are already high, taking the adversary's perspective can worsen security-dilemma thinking. Further, US and Chinese observers have asymmetric perceptions of each other's intentions. Chinese observers see the United States more negatively than vice versa, though US perceptions may be shifting toward China's more adversarial perceptions.

Cognitive mindsets and biases can intensify an adversarial relationship by causing counterparts to misread cues from their competitors, overinterpret ambiguous actions as threatening, and miss opportunities for crisis resolution. Because perspective taking can be beneficial but can also backfire in competitive contexts, active perspective seeking is critical. Security practitioners must systematically seek out relevant information to test their assumptions and update their beliefs accordingly.

To reduce distortions in perceiving the other, the US national security enterprise can take the following five actions.

1. The United States should educate security practitioners and policymakers in the cultural and historical aspects of conflict. Education and professional development in cultural self-awareness and the cultural cognition of adversaries, partners, and allies will improve security practitioners' ability to understand other actors in the security environment. To facilitate accurate perspective taking, this education should include instruction on cultural differences and similarities in interests, values, and cognitive biases. The United States made significant investments in such programs during the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War, and these programs can inform renewed efforts tailored to the current security environment. For example, the US Army's course in red teaming and the military services' culture and regional centers provided valuable education and training in understanding others' perspectives and cultures.

2. Workforce recruitment and retention should emphasize backgrounds and skill sets associated with greater cognitive flexibility. Individuals from bicultural backgrounds already have practice in cultural frame shifting, which helps them see alternative frames of reference more readily. In addition, individual differences in the need for closure are measurable, and organizations can identify individuals with more or less of this motivation for assignment or mitigation purposes.

3. Security practitioners should apply lessons from cultural-cognition research in planning and operations. The ability to think like one's competitor or opponent is important at every level: tactical, operational, and strategic. The cognitive checks of testing assumptions and updating beliefs are essential, and incorporating those checks into workflows will improve decision making. Debiasing techniques such as premortem analysis, analysis of alternatives, and the four ways of seeing can help uncover and correct errors in thinking before such errors undermine decision making.

4. Leaders should better structure the environment for systematic judgment and decision making. Automatic and systematic thinking (system one and system two, respectively) work together, but conditions in security contexts often push individuals toward overreliance on system one. Time pressure, fatigue, and threat increase the use of system one. To counter this tendency, leaders should slow down decision processes to create space for error correction. The monitoring of systems and work routines to support subordinate physical well-being is also important. Such measures may include ensuring adequate rest and recovery, managing cognitive load, and maintaining fitness support.

5. Foreign-language training and international education for US personnel provide another path to competitor perspective taking. Support for foreign-language programs in college and during officer precommissioning is a long-term investment in cognitive flexibility. Offering more opportunities for US personnel to study abroad or be embedded in other nations' armed forces may provide similar benefits.

The current US-China strategic competition is not the first instance in which the United States has needed to understand East Asian cultures that differ markedly from US culture. Long-term defense treaties with South Korea,

Japan, and the Philippines should also have generated US motivation to understand East Asian cultures. Yet, despite decades of American military presence on the Korean Peninsula, the US security enterprise has not maintained continuous education on culture and decision-making patterns in the region. Whereas the specific cultures of focus may change with shifts in the strategic environment, China will be a formidable competitor for the foreseeable future, and the Indo-Pacific will remain a strategic priority. The United States should prioritize its national security education and workforce strategies accordingly.

Perceiving a Competitor: Culture and Cognitive Biases of the Strong Enemy and the Pacing Threat

Allison Abbe

Great powers display an extreme inability to empathize with other powers. Most large states seem to find it challenging to understand a rival's perspective. In short, they tend to exhibit chronic empathy deficiency.¹

—Andrew Scobell

“Perception and Misperception in U.S.-China Relations”

In 1961, Urie Bronfenbrenner used the term “mirror image” to describe similarities in how US and Soviet observers perceived each other.² A social psychologist with conversational proficiency in the Russian language, Bronfenbrenner had visited the Soviet Union and noted the distortions in Soviet thinking about the United States. He observed, “the Russian’s distorted picture of us was curiously similar to our view of them—a mirror image.”³ Bronfenbrenner documented these reciprocal distortions and cautioned they could create self-fulfilling prophecies in US-Soviet relations, blinding each side to the true nature and intentions of the other. Each side interpreted the other’s actions as hostile and aggressive, sometimes failing to see mutual interests and opportunities for de-escalation.

After focusing on counterterrorism in the Middle East and Afghanistan for 20 years, the United States shifted its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific and a primary nation-state adversary. The United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) now view each other as both primary competitors and adversaries, with the US secretary of war referring to the People’s Republic of China as the “pacing threat” and the Chinese government referring to the United States

1. Andrew Scobell, “Perception and Misperception in U.S.-China Relations,” *Political Science Quarterly* 135, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 637–64.

2. Urie Bronfenbrenner, “The Mirror Image in Soviet-American Relations: A Social Psychologist’s Report,” *Journal of Social Issues* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1961): 45–56.

3. Bronfenbrenner, “Mirror Image.”

as the “strong enemy.”⁴ This shift in the United States’ strategic focus must be accompanied by efforts to improve understanding of patterns of perception in the region, both among adversaries and among partners and allies. Given the increasingly adversarial US-China relationship, each side must understand the other’s point of view more accurately, as misperceptions can magnify risk. Viewing the People’s Republic of China in one-dimensional terms—as an actor fixated on displacing the United States through both economic and military means—is problematic and, at best, reflects only a partial understanding. Misperceptions of the other’s motives and intentions can cause miscalculation that could lead to rapid escalation and armed conflict.

Evidence of mirror imaging has emerged again, with both the United States and the People’s Republic of China describing each other’s actions as expansionist, escalatory, revisionist, and exploitative of other countries.⁵ Occasionally, leaders of each nation talk about cooperation, but competitive rhetoric and accusatory exchanges reflect mutual mistrust and conflicting narratives. Whereas the most recent US national defense strategy uses less accusatory rhetoric, it retains the focus on China as the primary target of US deterrence.⁶

Competing on multiple fronts and with multiple instruments of national power increases opportunities for and risks of misperception, and US policymakers are falling prey to the illusion China aims to become more like the United States. In characterizing US views of China’s aims, some scholars dispute the claim that China seeks global dominance, asserting that “the vision of China that exists in Washington is dangerously wrong.”⁷

Causal analysis has found misperceptions played a prominent role in previous conflicts. Therefore, understanding the adversary is critical for security practitioners. Nonetheless, the effort to improve foresight in such understanding continues to receive limited attention in the United States.⁸ In this regard, the United States

4. Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “Dare to Face the ‘Strong Enemy’^{强敌}: How Xi Jinping Has Made the PLA Talk About the United States,” *Sinocism* (blog), March 4, 2021, <https://sinocism.com/p/dare-to-face-the-strong-enemy-how>; and *A Review of the President’s Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request for the Department of Defense, Before the Subcomm. on Defense of the S. Comm. on Appropriations*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Pete Hegseth, secretary of defense).

5. Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (September/October 2012): 32–47; Andrew Scobell, “China’s Real Strategic Culture: A Great Wall of the Imagination,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 2 (July 2014): 211–26; and Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on the U.S. National Security and National Defense Strategies,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 56 (2018): 1–15.

6. US Department of War (DoW), *2026 National Defense Strategy* (DoW, January 2026).

7. David C. Kang et al., “What Does China Want?,” *International Security* 50, no. 1 (Summer 2025): 46–81.

8. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

has a deficit to remedy, with some China scholars asserting China understands the West far better than the West understands China.⁹

By shaping the biases international actors bring to analysis and decision making, cultural cognition can be a source of misperceptions. As a multilevel construct, culture can improve perceptions in international relations. The literature on strategic culture can be helpful in examining cultural influence on elite perceptions.¹⁰ In addition to elites, individuals broadly show cultural cognitive patterns that shape perceptions of the security environment and complement the analysis of strategic culture. This monograph aims to identify cognitive patterns that differ between the United States and China—patterns that may fuel misperceptions. Since the initial 1976 publication of Robert Jervis’s influential book on perception and misperception in international relations, advances in social and cross-cultural psychology have further improved understanding of how the United States and China perceive each other.

Cross-cultural psychology has extensively documented judgment and decision-making patterns in China and other East Asian cultures relative to the United States and other Western cultures. The term “Western” refers to cultures dominated by the traditions, beliefs, and systems of western European societies. Because of imperial expansion into other regions, these cultures are no longer geographically limited to western Europe. Thus, the term “Western” now includes the cultures of western European nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Empirical research has identified shared cognitive patterns among these societies; therefore, they are grouped under a common cultural category.

In early research on social cognition, Western-based psychology assumed universal cognitive patterns. When cross-cultural psychologists tested these patterns across nations, they found limits to notions of universal cognition. Some biases and errors common in US samples did not materialize in East Asian samples.¹¹ Instead, the findings were mixed: Some studies revealed different thinking styles and preferences, whereas others found similar biases across cultures.

In particular, two cognitive patterns are central to social cognition in Western psychology but function differently in other cultures. First, cognitive dissonance reflects a consistency motivation to align one’s attitudes and behavior—a concept

9. Neil Munro, “China’s Identity Through a Historical Lens,” in *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture*, ed. Kerry M. Kartchner et al. (Routledge, 2024), 179–92.

10. Kartchner et al., *Routledge Handbook*.

11. Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (Free Press, 2003).

frequently applied to explain decision making in international relations.¹² Whereas people do have consistency motives across cultures, inconsistency that triggers dissonance reduction in the United States does not function the same way in other cultures. A second, well-documented Western bias, the correspondence bias, assumes that behavior reflects an actor's stable, underlying characteristics, such as personality traits or deeply held beliefs. When motives for behavior are ambiguous, US observers default to these simple, dispositional explanations. In contrast, East Asian observers do not explain behavior in the same way; rather, they rely on a broader range of explanations for others' behavior. Thus, security practitioners and leaders cannot assume their own biases and assumptions are shared by counterparts.

Cross-cultural psychology has advanced far beyond essentialist claims about national character made in the 1920s and 1930s—claims later rejected by the field.¹³ Instead, present-day cross-cultural psychologists examine the dynamics of human social groups and the patterns of differences and similarities that result from environmental demands, socialization processes, shared evolutionary pressures, and history.¹⁴ National culture does not solely determine cognitive patterns; rather, cultural cues (symbols, artifacts, language, and places) increase the accessibility of relevant knowledge and cognitive processes.¹⁵ This dynamic constructivist approach to culture is consistent with constructivist theories in international relations, though the two literatures seem to travel in parallel more than they cross paths.¹⁶

Rather than inherently leading to conflict, as Samuel P. Huntington has argued, cultural differences can result in misperceptions that make avoiding and resolving conflict more difficult. When Nancy Pelosi, former speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan in August 2022, she was the highest-ranking US official to do so since 1997. Viewing the visit as a provocation, China responded

12. Ryan Beasley, "Dissonance and Decision-Making Mistakes in the Age of Risk," in *Fiascos in Public Policy and Foreign Policy*, ed. Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer (Routledge, 2018), 141–58; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 135–36; and Kenneth Payne, *The Psychology of Strategy: Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

13. Alex Inkeles and Daniel J. Levinson, "National Character: The Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), 4:418.

14. Michael Morris, *Tribal: How the Cultural Instincts That Divide Us Can Help Bring Us Together* (Thesis, 2024).

15. Ying-yi Hong et al., "Multicultural Minds: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 7 (July 2000): 709–20; and Elke U. Weber and Michael W. Morris, "Culture and Judgment and Decision Making: The Constructivist Turn," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 4 (July 2010): 410–19.

16. Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates," in *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter Carlsnaes et al. (Sage, 2013), 112–44; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, xxix; Kartchner et al., *Routledge Handbook*; and Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture."

by escalating military maneuvers. Armed conflict could have easily resulted from operator error within PRC forces or from misreading intent, as missiles were launched both near Taiwan and into Japan's exclusive economic zone. Later, US leaders noted the tendency for each side to misread the other's behavior by overinterpreting actions and underinterpreting restraint.¹⁷

In this case, outcomes benefited from time, as Pelosi's visit had been delayed from its initial scheduling that spring. As a result, the additional preparation time prior to the visit, followed by strong PRC signaling in response to the visit, likely helped clarify the motives underlying each side's actions, averting a larger crisis. In other cases, competitor intent is often less clear, and preparation time is more limited.

Additionally, cognitive differences do not always imply institutional differences. In their analysis of the People's Liberation Army, Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui have identified key similarities with the US Armed Forces.¹⁸ Across the two militaries, views on the role of landpower, joint operations, war-fighting concepts, and live, realistic training share notable commonalities despite exhibiting other important differences. Thus, cultural traditions influence institutions, but they are not the sole source of influence. Observers should instead consider culture to be a force that shapes baseline mindsets for problem-solving, combining with other factors to inform decision making.

The United States and partner nations would benefit from a better foundational understanding of rivals and competitors—one that identifies potential blind spots in understanding of competitors' perceptions. Currently, the education of security practitioners aims to prevent cognitive biases and errors by teaching critical thinking, but it neglects the cultural dimensions of cognition. Understanding cultural similarities and differences in cognitive patterns is important to anticipating counterparts' reactions and decisions. To avoid mirror imaging, security practitioners must consider both differences and similarities in such patterns. A more accurate understanding of the security environment will enable more accurate interpretation and anticipation of other actors' behavior and decision making.

International relations scholars have helped advance understanding in the US national security establishment of how the Chinese Communist Party sees China's history and role in the world, and the US military services have established

17. Andrew Scobell et al., *The 2022 Pelosi Visit to Taiwan: Assessing US-China Signaling and Action-Reaction Dynamics* (United States Institute of Peace, July 2025).

18. Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui, *More Than a Numbers Game: Comparing US and Chinese Landpower in the Pacific Requires Context* (US Army War College Press, July 2025), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/982/>.

research centers to focus on China studies.¹⁹ The significance of China's "Century of Humiliation" for Beijing's present strategy and Taiwan policy is now routinely addressed in professional military education (PME) curricula.²⁰ Likewise, research on strategic culture has helped highlight patterns in elite decision making.²¹ Further advances would provide insight into how Chinese observers interpret events and how they might interpret US and partner actions. Do Chinese observers perceive the US perspective more accurately than US observers perceive theirs? To what extent will counterparts show the same perceptual biases and errors as US decisionmakers, or do counterparts exhibit culture-specific biases? What misperceptions might counterparts have in observing US decisions and actions? Whereas regions, subgroups, and individuals within cultures vary substantially, understanding average tendencies between cultures provides a starting point for interpreting specific scenarios or courses of action.

The cultures of the United States and East Asian societies differ in fundamental cognitive aspects that affect judgment and decision making in security contexts. The following sections examine the role of culture in shaping perceptions of the environment in general and perceptions of rivals' viewpoints in particular. Studies that have included ethnic Chinese participants (from mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan) are noted accordingly. Other research has compared Western, English-dominant cultures with East Asian cultures as cultural clusters, drawing a distinction based on philosophical traditions and shared history. Thus, this review also includes studies with Japanese, Singaporean, and Korean participants. Theoretical explanations group these cultures together while acknowledging variation among nations and their distinct cultures.

First, the monograph reviews a set of cognitive mindsets that inform common ways of seeing the world in China and other East Asian cultures, contrasting those mindsets with typical US patterns of thinking. Here, the term "mindsets" is a more expansive term than in the research literature and encompasses attentional processes, assumptions, societal values, and expectations about future events. The term is not synonymous with the concept of worldview, which tends to address how a state sees its relationships with other international actors.

19. US Department of Defense (DoD), *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (DoD, December 2024); Charles Q. Brown, memorandum, "Charter for the China Aerospace Studies Institute," June 15, 2021, Washington, DC; "China Landpower Studies Center," US Army War College, n.d., accessed June 12, 2026, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/CLSC/About-CLSC/>; and "China Maritime Studies Institute," U.S. Naval War College, n.d., accessed June 12, 2026, <https://usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Research-Centers/China-Maritime-Studies-Institute>.

20. *Hearing on China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy, Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 112th Cong. (2011) (statement of Alison A. Kaufman, China analyst).

21. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1995); and Andrew Scobell, "Strategic Culture and China: IR Theory Versus the Fortune Cookie?," *Strategic Insights* 4, no. 10 (October 2005): 1–8.

Second, the monograph addresses cultural patterns in how individuals see others. The research literature refers to these patterns as social inference, which includes an understanding of other actors' intentions or goals (prior to acting), as well as explanations and attributions for actions already taken. Third, the monograph examines how US and East Asian observers see *like* another. This section examines how observers take someone else's perspective and how competition affects those judgments.

Seeing the World: Cognitive Mindsets

Cognitive mindsets refer to preferred thinking styles characteristic of a culture or group. Cultural processes of observation and reinforcement develop these mindsets throughout a person's lifespan. Cognitive mindsets are not specific to perceptions about strategy and security, but their generality and prevalence have implications for how the United States and the People's Republic of China perceive the security environment. The concepts include both emic and etic approaches. Emic approaches focus on the insider's view of what is important within a culture, whereas etic approaches adopt an outsider's view that allows for comparison across cultures.²²

Using an emic view, indigenous social scientists in East Asia have offered important insights into cognitive differences. For example, all cultures include patterns of social networks, but the Chinese concept of *guanxi* is culture specific. The concept of a relationship with mutual obligations has partial parallels in other cultures, but China's approach to professional networks, favors, and the integration of personal and professional connections is unique.²³ Understanding *guanxi*'s importance in China requires a consideration of the specific cultural context through an emic perspective. In contrast, etic approaches identify a set of concepts for comparing cultures by taking an outsider's view and using culture-general concepts as a foundation for comparison. Using both emic and etic perspectives can surface key assumptions that fuel blind spots in cultural understanding.

This section identifies three interrelated mindsets characteristic of East Asian cultures: holism, dialecticism, and collectivism. These mindsets are evident both at the individual level (adopted in the studies reviewed in this monograph) and in elites' collective decision making. According to Andrew Scobell, "the PRC takes a holistic approach to security—looking at the overall situation

22. Michael W. Morris et al., "Views from Inside and Outside: Integrating Emic and Etic Insights About Culture and Justice Judgment," *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 4 (1999): 781–96.

23. Sujin Lee et al., "East Asians' Social Heterogeneity: Differences in Norms Among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Negotiators," *Negotiation Journal* 28, no. 4 (October 2012): 429–52.

or big picture instead of focusing solely on the military balance or operational environment.”²⁴ Chinese strategic culture has two threads that sometimes strike Western observers as contradictory, yet both operate simultaneously.²⁵ China’s strategic culture reflects dialecticism in its “Cult of Defense,” embracing notions of the offensive use of force for defensive purposes.²⁶ Whereas the United States often views its military as distinct from other instruments of national power, the People’s Republic of China sees security as more closely interwoven with its economy, technology sector, and informational influence.²⁷ Thus, these mindsets are evident across different levels of analysis.

Holistic Thinking

Among the most well-documented cognitive differences between cultures is a relative preference for holistic thinking in East Asian cultures compared with a preference for analytic thinking in the United States. Members of East Asian cultures consider broader contextual information relative to US observers. For example, in describing a scene, East Asian participants include more peripheral details and describe relationships among elements in the scene, whereas US participants tend to describe the focal elements in the scene (for example, larger figures) and omit other details.²⁸ In one study using animated video clips, Japanese participants reported 65 percent more details about the scenes than US participants did, including twice as many relations between central objects and the background field.²⁹

This tendency is known as field dependence. East Asian observers judge objects and people within their context, whereas US observers tend to focus on the characteristics of objects and people, such as their component features. This difference emerges in child development, around second grade, and results from socialization practices, including how mothers talk to their babies as young as six months old.³⁰ Mothers in different cultures point out different objects to their babies, with American mothers focusing more on specific objects and

24. Andrew Scobell, “China’s ‘Nested’ Worldview,” in *China’s Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine, and Systems*, ed. James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 23–44.

25. David Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 7–27.

26. Scobell, “China’s Real Strategic Culture,” 214.

27. Scobell, “China’s ‘Nested’ Worldview,” 33–34.

28. Ara Norenzayan and Richard E. Nisbett, “Culture and Causal Cognition,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9, no. 4 (August 2000): 132–35.

29. Richard E. Nisbett and Takahiko Masuda, “Culture and Point of View,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100, no. 19 (September 2003): 11163–70.

30. Qi Wang and Sawa Senzaki, “Culture and Cognition,” in *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. David Matsumoto and Hysung C. Hwang (Oxford University Press, 2019), 318–60.

characters and Japanese mothers including more background detail and interactions among characters.

The relative attentional preference for foreground objects in the United States and for context in East Asia extends to observing changes in the environment. Whereas US observers more readily notice changes in focal objects, Japanese observers more readily notice changes in the surrounding environment.³¹ In eye-tracking experiments, Chinese participants spent more time looking at the background and shifting attention between background and foreground objects than did US participants.³²

This difference in attention to context is similarly evident in cultural products. Portraits taken by East Asian photographers are more likely to include background elements than portraits taken by US participants, and personal stories of Taiwanese respondents are more likely to mention multiple actors than personal stories of US respondents, which focus more on one central character and on the respondents themselves.³³ Similarly, in making organizational or purchasing decisions, holistic Chinese thinkers consider a broader set of information relative to Americans, who rely on more limited information to make decisions.³⁴

Even the way people categorize objects reflects differences between holistic and analytic thinking. American children learn to categorize based on component features and shared abstract characteristics, whereas Chinese children learn to categorize based on relationships. A classic example of this difference comes from a task asking participants to choose which of two objects is more closely related to a third. Presented with words or pictures of a panda, a monkey, and a banana, US participants select the panda and the monkey (the animal category), whereas Chinese and Taiwanese participants select the monkey and the banana (reflecting the functional relation of a monkey eating a banana).³⁵ Differences in categorization are more pronounced when testing is conducted in each group's native language, showing language serves as a cultural cue. When Chinese students were given the same task in English, the categorization differences were smaller.

These basic cognitive differences have implications for thinking about security and strategic competition. Chinese observers may more readily see a broad field

31. Nisbett and Masuda, "Point of View," 11166.

32. Richard E. Nisbett, *Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Cultures Count* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 164.

33. Nisbett and Masuda, "Point of View," 11168–69; and Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*.

34. Li-Jun Ji and Suhui Yap, "Culture and Cognition," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 8 (2016): 105–11.

35. Li-Jun Ji et al., "Is It Culture or Is It Language? Examination of Language Effects in Cross-Cultural Research on Categorization," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, no. 1 (2004): 57–65.

of competition, whereas US observers may see competition in discrete instruments of power, separated across different institutions. Separation is also apparent within the military. Whereas Western scholars have largely seen nuclear capabilities as independent from conventional capabilities, Chinese strategy increasingly treats those capabilities as integrated—a difference resulting in nuclear-conventional entanglement and increased arms-race dynamics.³⁶ American observers may struggle to understand the connections among capabilities and functions that PRC actors take for granted. The analytic thinking and formal logic more common in US culture can provide advantages in operational planning and performance, as the focus on specific features and sequences helps reveal cause-and-effect relationships critical to successful intervention, whether military or scientific.

Dialecticism

Researchers identify dialecticism as a second mindset prevalent in East Asian cognition. Dialecticism includes holistic thinking and at least two additional principles: expectations of change and a higher tolerance for contradiction.³⁷ East Asian cultures show a relatively stronger belief in change, whereas in US culture, individuals tend to expect continuity. When researchers presented participants with scenarios and asked them to make predictions about the future, Chinese participants were more likely to predict changes in the direction or magnitude of events. In contrast, American and European participants were more likely to predict a linear continuation of the present trend.³⁸ This difference is present even in childhood, with Canadian children predicting trend continuity and Chinese children predicting change.³⁹

Anticipating change is associated with wisdom in Chinese culture.⁴⁰ In contrast, individuals in Western cultures expect greater continuity and assume personal ability shapes outcomes. As a result, when experiencing failure, East Asians tend to persist longer, whereas North Americans assume a continued trajectory of failure and invest less effort in succeeding.⁴¹ These responses to failure occur despite Americans

36. Henrik Stålhane Hiim et al., “The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China’s Changing Nuclear Posture,” *International Security* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2023): 147–87.

37. Wang and Senzaki, “Culture and Cognition,” 318–60.

38. Li-Jun Ji et al., “Culture, Change, and Prediction,” *Psychological Science* 12, no. 6 (November 2001): 451–52; and Marc O. Rieger et al., “Trend Following or Reversal: Does Culture Affect Predictions and Trading Behavior?,” *Global Finance Journal* 54 (November 2022): 100769.

39. Wang and Senzaki, “Culture and Cognition,” 338–39.

40. Ji et al., “Culture, Change, and Prediction,” 450.

41. Steven J. Heine et al., “Divergent Consequences of Success and Failure in Japan and North America: An Investigation of Self-Improving Motivations and Malleable Selves,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 4 (October 2001): 599–615.

showing similar or higher levels of optimism.⁴² According to previous research, when East Asians anticipate future negative events, they often engage in greater problem-solving—a form of defensive pessimism—whereas Americans tend to experience lower well-being when anticipating such events.

Bias toward consistency is another area of divergence between US and East Asian cultures. Western social psychology has built a robust theory of cognitive dissonance to explain self-justification tendencies, which enable actors to perceive themselves as acting consistently across time and situations. Cognitive dissonance theory is among the most influential theories in social psychology and has prompted hundreds of experiments and replications.⁴³

Applying the theory to international relations, Jervis's book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* includes multiple chapters on consistency, dissonance, and their implications for politics. Consistent with Western psychological evidence that was available when he wrote those chapters in 1976, Jervis argued decisionmakers ignore or twist evidence to preserve old ideas and ensure consistency with current policy. For example, during the Vietnam War, policymakers interpreted new, ambiguous information through the lens of prior beliefs and policy preferences. One such instance occurred during the 1967 truce, when the United States interpreted the presence of North Vietnamese forces in the south of Vietnam as evidence of continued aggressive intentions. At the same time, the United States was sending more troops and supplies while failing to acknowledge its own behavior could be interpreted similarly.⁴⁴ Initial judgment significantly hinders the updating of beliefs in response to new information that indicates a changing situation.

This tendency has some uniquely Western dimensions. Among North Americans, inducing a behavior with small rewards causes a subsequent attitudinal shift, with attitudes becoming more favorable than they were initially.⁴⁵ Inconsistency between behavior and attitudes or beliefs is unpleasant, and observers

42. Edward C. Chang and Kiyoshi Asakawa, "Cultural Variations on Optimistic and Pessimistic Bias for Self Versus a Sibling: Is There Evidence for Self-Enhancement in the West and for Self-Criticism in the East When the Referent Group Is Specified?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 3 (April 2003): 569–81; and Ronald Fischer and Anna Chalmers-Brown, "Is Optimism Universal? A Meta-Analytical Investigation of Optimism Levels Across 22 Nations," *Personality and Individual Differences* 45, no. 5 (October 2008): 378–82.

43. Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, "An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and an Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory," in *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. Eddie Harmon-Jones (American Psychological Association, 2019), 3–24.

44. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 186.

45. Bertram Gawronski et al., "Cross-Cultural Differences Versus Universality in Cognitive Dissonance: A Conceptual Reanalysis," in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition Across Cultures*, ed. Richard M. Sorrentino and Susumu Yamaguchi (Elsevier, 2008), 297–314; and Steven J. Heine and Darrin R. Lehman, "Culture, Dissonance, and Self-Affirmation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 4 (April 1997): 389–400.

reduce this unpleasant inconsistency after a decision by reassessing their choices, elevating the chosen alternative, and derogating the options rejected. The chosen option receives a boost even when one's predecisional preferences were close and even when external incentives were the proximate cause of the choice. For example, if an American shopper receives a small discount intended to encourage purchases at a specific retailer, the shopper will then see the retailer more favorably, overlooking the discount's role in shaping their choice.

As early as 1965, researchers testing dissonance reduction in China found a different pattern. A project funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency replicated a standard induced-compliance experiment in Hong Kong with Chinese refugees from the mainland.⁴⁶ The researchers gave participants either a small or a large reward to record a speech predicting rice rations would decrease within two years. When subsequently asked to provide their own predictions about rice rations, participants in the treatment group predicted greater reductions than did those in the control group. Unlike in US samples, it made no difference whether speakers received a small inducement (a Chinese lantern) or a larger inducement (a radio that was worth 10 times as much as the lantern).

In US samples, when participants received either a small or a large inducement for a speech inconsistent with their own beliefs, small inducements resulted in greater attitudinal shifts after the speech, as participants felt the need to justify their behavior by shifting their beliefs in the induced direction. When receiving a larger reward, speakers were able to justify their counterbelief speech by attributing it to the value of the reward. In other words, the larger compensation allowed speakers to justify their behavior and maintain their prespeech beliefs.

Thus, in Chinese culture, behavior that is inconsistent with one's own beliefs or attitudes does not appear to prompt self-justification to the same degree as it does in the United States. Other forms of consistency may be more important in Chinese culture, such as consistency within one's social network, but the conditions that prompt dissonance reduction appear to differ across cultures. The need to align one's own attitudes, beliefs, and behavior has greater importance for self-concept among Westerners.⁴⁷ East Asian cultures also place less emphasis on self-enhancement than Western cultures, which tend to reward confidence and high self-regard.⁴⁸ Instead, East Asian dialectical reasoning extends

46. Paul J. Hiniker, "Chinese Reactions to Forced Compliance: Dissonance Reduction or National Character," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 77 (1969): 157–76.

47. Etsuko Hoshino-Browne et al., "On the Cultural Guises of Cognitive Dissonance: The Case of Easterners and Westerners," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 3 (September 2005): 294–310; and Petia K. Petrova et al., "Consistency-Based Compliance Across Cultures," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (January 2007): 104–11.

48. Wang and Senzaki, "Culture and Cognition," 344.

to self-conceptions, with individuals acknowledging both positive and negative characteristics more readily. A dialectical self does not mean East Asians have low self-regard; rather, it reflects broader patterns in cultural cognition wherein a desire for self-improvement can coexist with a motive to present one's positive side. Relative to the United States, consistency in attitudes and behavior across time and situations is simply less valued.

Judgments about causation and covariation also reflect dialecticism. In experimental studies, Chinese participants more accurately predicted which object would appear next in a sequence based on previous observations, whereas American participants showed a bias toward the initial information presented—a pattern known as the primacy effect.⁴⁹ American participants also show greater neglect of base rates in their probability estimates than Chinese participants do.⁵⁰ Thus, Chinese observers may not be susceptible to some of the cognitive biases that are well-documented in Western populations.⁵¹ In reviewing these patterns, Li-Jun Ji and Suhui Yap have noted that Chinese respondents also show less reliance on other biases common in North American samples, including the representativeness heuristic and failure to recognize regression to the mean.⁵²

Turning from etic comparisons to an emic lens on Chinese popular culture, writer Yu Hua proposed 10 words to describe modern China.⁵³ Three of these words address themes of dialecticism in terms of tolerance for contradiction. The author used the term “disparity” to describe contradictions within Chinese society that have resulted from its rapid but uneven development, including rural-versus-urban and rich-versus-poor disparities.⁵⁴ The other two terms, “copycat” and “bamboozle,” reflect the widespread imitation of objects, people, and events presented as authentic.⁵⁵ Aware that things are not what they purport to be, the public has accepted duplicity as a fact of life. According to Yu Hua:

49. Li-Jun Ji et al., “Culture, Control, and Perception of Relationships in the Environment,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 5 (May 2000): 943–55; and Kaiping Peng et al., “Culture and Human Inference: Perspectives from Three Traditions,” in *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, ed. David Matsumoto (Oxford University Press, 2001), 245–55.

50. Shali Wu and Clifton Emery, “American Base-Rate Neglect: It Is Not the Math, but the Context,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 34, no. 1 (January 2021): 116–30.

51. Joseph Henrich et al., “The Weirdest People in the World?,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2–3 (June 2010): 61–83.

52. Ji and Yap, “Culture and Cognition,” 106.

53. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, trans. Allan H. Barr (Anchor Books, 2012).

54. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*.

55. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, 221.

The rapid rise in popularity of the word “bamboozle,” like that of “copycat,” demonstrates to me a breakdown of social morality and a confusion in the value system in China today; it is an aftereffect of our uneven development these past thirty years. If anything, bamboozling . . . goes to show that we live in a frivolous society, one that doesn’t set much store by matters of principle.⁵⁶

If accurate, these observations may reflect a tolerance for contradiction taken to the extreme: an unquestioning adherence to dialecticism in daily life.

Collectivist Values and Social Stability

The social science literature on cultural values has been largely etic, identifying a small set of cultural dimensions for comparison. Rather than measuring behavior or cognition, values surveys capture societal preferences or claims about desired behavior.⁵⁷ Some researchers refer to these values as prescriptive norms—preferences about what should be rather than what is typical. Geert Hofstede, Michael Harris Bond, and Shalom H. Schwartz are among the most influential scholars in this tradition.

The United States and East Asian nations consistently differ in collectivism and power distance.⁵⁸ Whereas US culture values individual independence and autonomy, East Asian cultures place relatively greater value on harmony and loyalty to one’s group and family. In terms of power distance, East Asian cultures exhibit greater tolerance for status differences in relationships and a hierarchical distribution of power, whereas the United States has more egalitarian expectations about the distribution of power.

Applying an emic perspective, Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong captured these contrasting values by describing relationship structures in China as following the principle of *chaxugeju*, or “differential mode of association,” in contrast to Western relationships, which follow an “organizational mode of association.”⁵⁹ In China, relationships are traditionally ordered by differential, complementary rank—for example, parent and child or older brother and younger brother—with each relationship carrying reciprocal obligations. Traditional Confucian society centered on five relationships: emperor and subject, father and son,

56. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, 221.

57. Steve J. Kulich and Rui Zhang, “The Multiple Frames of ‘Chinese’ Values: From Tradition to Modernity and Beyond,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, ed. Michael Harris Bond (Oxford University Press, 2010), 243–44.

58. Geert Hofstede and Michael Harris Bond, “The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth,” *Organizational Dynamics* 16, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 5–21.

59. Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (University of California Press, 1992), 60–62.

husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friends. This system places high priority on loyalty and filial piety, asserting that the prerogatives and obligations of the superior actor in each pairing depend on that actor's morality and benevolence toward the subordinate.⁶⁰

In contrast, relationships in the United States are formed by choice and by joining organizations with clear boundaries and defined membership. According to Fei Xiaotong, in the West, even the family follows this model: The term "family" generally implies a husband, wife, and their minor children rather than extended family or adult children, whereas in China the corresponding term is more ambiguous and context dependent.⁶¹

These differences in social structure result in differing beliefs about relational mobility.⁶² Low relational mobility means relationships are relatively permanent and fixed, whereas high relational mobility means individuals are free to form new relationships and terminate them. Relational mobility is traditionally low in East Asian nations and high in North America.⁶³ Researchers attribute these differences to historical economic factors, as interdependent subsistence styles such as rice farming reduce mobility compared with more mobile subsistence practices such as herding.⁶⁴ In the United States, relational mobility is associated with higher generalized trust and social support, as well as proactive behaviors that help establish and maintain new relationships.

Traditional social structures inform expectations about future relationships.⁶⁵ High social stability in East Asian cultures anchors people on loyalty and hierarchy. High mobility in Western cultures anchors people on autonomy and permeability of social boundaries.⁶⁶ These beliefs are not simply drivers of interpersonal relationships; they are related to a group or nation's historical experience of threats,

60. Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "The Deep Structure of Confucianism: A Social Psychological Approach," *Asian Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (November 2001): 179–204; and Min-Hua Huang and Shu-Hsien Chang, "Similarities and Differences in East Asian Confucian Culture: A Comparative Analysis," *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society* 7, no. 2 (January 2017): 1–40.

61. Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil*.

62. Alvaro San Martin et al., "Relational Mobility and Cultural Differences in Analytic and Holistic Thinking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 116, no. 4 (2019): 495–518.

63. Robert Thomson et al., "Relational Mobility Predicts Social Behaviors in 39 Countries and Is Tied to Historical Farming and Threat," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 29 (June 2018): 7521–26.

64. Thomson et al., "Relational Mobility."

65. Jörg Gross et al., "Free Mobility Across Group Boundaries Promotes Intergroup Cooperation," *Communications Psychology* 3, no. 10 (January 2025): 1–9; and Jinli Wu et al., "Relational Compartmentalization: How Culture Keeps Our Social Worlds Apart," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (January 2026).

66. Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020), 253.

including disease and armed conflict, and thus have important implications for threat perceptions.⁶⁷

Similarities

Despite some fundamental differences in social structure and associated values, value hierarchies across cultures rank values very similarly, though average endorsement may still differ among nations.⁶⁸ Cross-cultural consensus exists on the high relative importance of benevolence, self-direction, and universalism.⁶⁹ Cultures value responsibility and care toward people within individuals' circles of direct contact (benevolence) and beyond (universalism), as well as individuals' ability to choose their own goals and actions (self-direction). Thus, similarities may occur simultaneously with differences.

Evolutionary pressures may produce other similarities across cultures.⁷⁰ For example, biases against out-groups are common across cultures due to the risks associated with underestimating threat. Mistaking a hostile out-group for a friendly one can be far more costly than assuming a friendly out-group is hostile. Overconfidence bias and memory illusions also tend to emerge cross-culturally.⁷¹ Comparing US and Chinese performance, one study tested participants on 12 cognitive tasks and found very few differences.⁷² Under standardized-testing conditions, tasks that had previously shown differences—such as the US preference for standing out versus the East Asian preference for fitting in—did not show differences. These findings may reflect real cultural similarities or may simply indicate that testing context has similar effects across cultures.

More directly relevant to competition, loss aversion also occurs cross-culturally. A potential loss has a greater impact on judgment than an equivalent potential gain. One scholar has observed this bias at the state level, suggesting it as one explanation for China's increasingly hard-line stances on sovereignty claims in the South China Sea—stances framed as defensive measures appropriate for a more

67. Michal Bauer et al., "War's Enduring Effects on the Development of Egalitarian Motivations and In-Group Biases," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 1 (January 2014): 47–57.

68. Shalom H. Schwartz and Anat Bardi, "Value Hierarchies Across Cultures: Taking a Similarities Perspective," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32, no. 3 (May 2001): 268–90.

69. Schwartz and Bardi, "Value Hierarchies," 272.

70. Martie G. Haselton et al., "The Evolution of Cognitive Bias," in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2005), 724–46.

71. Christine Ma-Kellams, "Cultural Variation and Similarities in Cognitive Thinking Styles Versus Judgment Biases: A Review of Environmental Factors and Evolutionary Forces," *Review of General Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2020): 238–53.

72. Anjie Cao et al., "United States–China Differences in Cognition and Perception Across 12 Tasks: Replicability, Robustness, and Within-Culture Variation," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 153, no. 11 (June 2024): 2657–85.

powerful global actor.⁷³ Loss aversion is another example of the simultaneity of cultural similarities and differences, as the degree of loss aversion varies culturally. Higher societal values on individualism and power distance are associated with greater loss aversion.⁷⁴

Seeing Others: Complex Social Inference

Collectivist values and a holistic cognitive style result in different processes of social inference. As mentioned earlier, Western cultures show correspondence bias, assuming behavior corresponds with an individual's personality traits. In US-based studies of social cognition, participants habitually attributed others' behavior to individuals' stable, internal, and general characteristics—their traits. This tendency was so prevalent that researchers labeled it the “fundamental attribution error,” sparking much debate over the tendency's centrality in social perception and the extent to which it truly is an error.⁷⁵ Somewhat less pejoratively, the tendency is also referred to as the overattribution effect or, simply, trait inference.⁷⁶ For example, Western observers tend to attribute achievement to intelligence or innate talent. In contrast, external or situational explanations might attribute achievement to good social connections or persistent effort.⁷⁷

East Asian observers do not show the same preference for trait explanations. In news coverage of murder cases, Michael W. Morris and Kaiping Peng found Chinese reporting tended to focus on situation and context in explaining a homicide, whereas US coverage focused on the offender's personality and attitudes.⁷⁸ This difference similarly emerges for positive behavior. News coverage of sports events and entrepreneurial leadership also demonstrates the American tendency

73. Wu Chengqiu, “Ideational Differences, Perception Gaps, and the Emerging Sino-US Rivalry,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 27–68.

74. Mei Wang et al., “The Impact of Culture on Loss Aversion,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 30, no. 2 (April 2017): 270–81.

75. Lee Ross, “From the Fundamental Attribution Error to the Truly Fundamental Attribution Error and Beyond: My Research Journey,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (November 2018): 750–69.

76. Bertram Gawronski, “Theory-Based Bias Correction in Dispositional Inference: The Fundamental Attribution Error Is Dead, Long Live the Correspondence Bias,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2004): 183–217; Ross, “Fundamental Attribution Error”; and Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (McGraw-Hill, 1991).

77. Nisbett, *Intelligence*, 164.

78. Michael W. Morris and Kaiping Peng, “Culture and Cause: American and Chinese Attributions for Social and Physical Events,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 6 (December 1994): 949–71.

to attribute success to traits, whereas East Asian news coverage shows a greater tendency to include both traits and external, situational factors.⁷⁹

Controlled experiments also demonstrate this difference in social inference. In comparing US and Korean observers, Ara Norenzayan and colleagues found US observers relied on individual traits to predict an actor's subsequent behavior, whereas Korean observers relied on both traits and situational factors to do so.⁸⁰ For example, if someone was helpful in the past, how likely would an observer be to expect that individual to help in a new, unrelated situation, even if helping would require missing another commitment? In responding to this question, Korean respondents used information on both past behavior and the present situation to make predictions, whereas Americans tended to disregard situational information. Some Korean respondents also endorsed more general beliefs about personality being changeable rather than static. Other countries, including Japan, Thailand, and Hong Kong, show similar patterns of inference, consistent with the holism of East Asian cultures, with observers attending to and drawing on a broader range of explanations in understanding others' behavior.⁸¹

In some cases, the US preference for trait inference may not be an error. In a nation in which standards of living are relatively high and individualism is prevalent, behavior often does reflect free choice and an individual's underlying preferences. Nevertheless, research findings suggest that this difference reflects a clear advantage for East Asian observers in understanding others' behavior. Western observers discount the role of situational context, even when the role of context is clear. For example, when a speaker receives compensation to argue for a particular position, such as in a debate on a political issue, US respondents still assume the content of the argument reflects the speaker's own attitudes and beliefs.⁸² American culture has generated a blind spot in understanding human behavior, with Americans often overlooking the influence of situations, incentives, and other people in shaping behavior and decisions.

79. Mark Hallahan et al., "It's Not Just Whether You Win or Lose, It's Also Where You Play the Game: A Naturalistic, Cross-Cultural Examination of the Positivity Bias," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 28, no. 6 (November 1997): 768–78; Fiona Lee et al., "Explaining Real-Life Events: How Culture and Domain Shape Attributions," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 22, no. 7 (July 1996): 732–41; and Lee W. Lee and Robert A. Fiore, "Measuring Levels of Fundamental Attribution Error Ascribed to Leadership of Entrepreneurial Organizations Across National Cultures," *Journal of Business Strategies* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 82–109.

80. Ara Norenzayan et al., "Cultural Similarities and Differences in Social Inference: Evidence from Behavioral Predictions and Lay Theories of Behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 1 (January 2002): 109–20.

81. Hajin Lee et al., "Cultural Differences in Spontaneous Trait and Situation Inferences," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 48, no. 5 (March 2017): 627–43.

82. Takahiko Masuda and Shinobu Kitayama, "Perceiver-Induced Constraint and Attitude Attribution in Japan and the US: A Case for the Cultural Dependence of the Correspondence Bias," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, no. 3 (May 2004): 409–16.

Such bias is evident in the enduring popularity of dispositional, or “great man,” theories of leadership popular in the West.⁸³ A Western emphasis on the characteristics of great leaders led to extended neglect of the relationship between leaders and followers.⁸⁴ Despite early researchers identifying the importance of dynamic interactions between leaders and followers, Western researchers and leadership consultants largely neglected those dynamics for many years, instead favoring the inherent qualities of leaders at the executive or national level. In contrast, East Asian theories of leadership have focused more on the relationship between leaders and followers, identifying a paternalistic leadership style characterized by benevolence, morality, and authoritarian control.⁸⁵

Although Western culture tends to favor simple, dispositional explanations, individuals within cultures also vary in their preference for explanatory complexity. As observers make sense of others’ behavior, their need for cognitive closure shapes their perceptions and social inferences. The need for cognitive closure refers to a desire for clarity, or the tendency to “seize” and “freeze” on judgments, such that an individual commits to a conclusion quickly and avoids revisiting it.⁸⁶ Individuals can have a chronically high need for closure, or they can experience a temporarily high need for closure due to fatigue or time pressure.

The need for closure drives individuals to rely more heavily on cultural norms in social interactions. A set of experiments by Chi-yue Chiu and colleagues showed that higher need for closure resulted in explaining others’ behavior in terms of prevailing cultural preferences: group dispositions among Chinese participants and individual dispositions among US participants.⁸⁷ The need for closure influences not only the type of inference, but also the way counterparts interact with each other. In a conflict-management task, the need for closure correlated with a competitive style of conflict resolution among US participants but not among Chinese

83. Dean Keith Simonton, “Dispositional Attributions of (Presidential) Leadership: An Experimental Simulation of Historiometric Results,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 22, no. 5 (September 1986): 389–418; and David V. Day and Stephen J. Zaccaro, “Leadership: A Critical Historical Analysis of the Influence of Leader Traits,” in *Historical Perspectives in Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Laura L. Koppes (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 387–88.

84. Day and Zaccaro, “Leadership.”

85. Harry G. Barkema et al., “West Meets East: New Concepts and Theories,” *Academy of Management Journal* 58, no. 2 (April 2015): 460–79; and Nathan J. Hiller et al., “Benevolence and Authority as WEIRDly Unfamiliar: A Multi-Language Meta-Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership Behaviors from 152 Studies,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (February 2019): 165–84.

86. Chi-yue Chiu et al., “Motivated Cultural Cognition: The Impact of Implicit Cultural Theories on Dispositional Attribution Varies as a Function of Need for Closure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 2 (2000): 247–59.

87. Chiu et al., “Motivated Cultural Cognition.”

participants.⁸⁸ High need for closure also polarized preferences for third-party intervention in the conflict: US participants wanted a neutral third party, whereas Chinese participants wanted a familiar acquaintance.

Neither of these cultural defaults is helpful for resolving national disputes, as both defaults would tend to drive US and East Asian counterparts further apart. Consequently, researchers have suggested interlocutors with a low need for closure will be more effective at finding solutions, assuming organizations can selectively assign personnel based on traits.⁸⁹ In both cultures, a lower need for closure can help practitioners remain open to considering alternative frames of reference, rather than imposing a single frame.

In security thinking, the US preference for dispositional explanations can blind observers to the range of motives underlying adversaries' decision making. At the individual level, dispositional inference can lead to a single-motive fallacy—often prompting individuals to assume members of a regime or enemy military are “true believers.”⁹⁰ This fallacy was one reason for the de-Ba'athification policy of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq in 2003.⁹¹ The belief that senior Ba'ath Party members must be true believers loyal to Saddam Hussein led to a purge that made the transition to a post-Saddam, stable Iraq much more difficult. This fallacy could similarly affect US thinking about soldiers in the People's Liberation Army, who may not be members of the Chinese Communist Party or may pursue membership primarily as a means of advancement, not necessarily because of deep ideological commitment.

Seeing Like the Other: Perspective Taking

The US Army previously offered a course in red teaming at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, purposefully teaching personnel to think like an adversary. Until 2020, the Army's University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies provided instruction in groupthink mitigation, critical thinking, and cultural empathy. This red-teaming course introduced a mental-rotation technique called the “four ways of seeing” (see table 1).⁹² This technique inculcates greater self-awareness and helps observers

88. Jeanne Ho-ying Fu et al., “Epistemic Motives and Cultural Conformity: Need for Closure, Culture, and Context as Determinants of Conflict Judgments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 2 (February 2007): 191–207.

89. Fu et al., “Epistemic Motives,” 204.

90. James P. Pfiffner, “US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army,” *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 1 (February 2010): 76–85.

91. Pfiffner, “US Blunders in Iraq.”

92. US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The Red Team Handbook: The Army's Guide to Making Better Decisions* (US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2019), 78.

think more systematically about what a competitor or opponent sees. The technique involves asking US observers to consider explicitly how their view of the other differs from the other's view of them, and vice versa—how US self-perceptions differ from the other's view of the United States.

Table 1. Four ways of seeing

How we see ourselves	How we see them
How they see us	How they see themselves

The risk of mirror imaging lies in the diagonals of table 1, appearing as a distortion of the other. How a competitor sees us and how we see them are often the same and overwhelmingly negative. How we see ourselves and how they see themselves can also be quite similar and blindly positive. Each side sees itself as benevolent, transparent, and rational. Each side assumes its self-view should be shared by others and its good intentions will be self-evident. This mirror-image bias is a common dimension of *us/them* dynamics.⁹³ *We* are virtuous; *they* are untrustworthy.⁹⁴

Moving beyond the mirror image to see the other's point of view more accurately is a necessity in resolving conflict. The ability to try on alternate perspectives allows counterparts to identify gaps and sources of misperceptions. The cultural mindsets discussed in the previous section described differences in cognitive patterns that shape perceptions. How do these Western–East Asian differences affect judgments about counterparts and adversaries? Do Chinese or US observers have an advantage over the other's practitioners in understanding each other? Is one culture better at seeing the other's perspective?

The United States and China have multiple historical and cultural barriers to seeing each other's point of view. Language is among these barriers. Few Americans speak a Chinese language, and few Chinese people speak the English language, though English-language proficiency is becoming more common among students in higher education.⁹⁵ Because of language barriers, direct access to each other's viewpoints through hearing from a native speaker is limited. In addition, since the COVID-19 pandemic, travel between the two nations has

93. Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (Penguin Press, 2017).

94. Sapolsky, *Behave*, 398–99.

95. David Goldberg et al., *Enrollments in Languages Other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013* (Modern Language Association of America, 2015); Na Liu et al., "Learner Views on English and English Language Teaching in China," *International Multilingual Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (February 2016): 137–57; and Rining Wei and Jinzhi Su, "The Statistics of English in China," *English Today* 28, no. 3 (September 2012): 10–14.

declined.⁹⁶ Thus, geographic and linguistic distances hinder one's ability to take the other's perspective without intentional effort.

Here, perspective taking is distinguished from empathy, though the concepts overlap. Empathy involves three components: perspective taking (seeing from another's view), compassion and concern (caring about another), and experience sharing (feeling another's emotional state).⁹⁷ These three components, though related, can also be experienced independently. In everyday life, empathic concern tends to involve perspective taking, but engaging in perspective taking does not necessarily involve empathic concern.⁹⁸ In other words, caring about another provides motivation to see the other's point of view, but seeing the other's point of view may involve only cognitive understanding rather than caring or emotion. Distinguishing perspective taking from empathic concern is particularly important in competition, a topic detailed in a subsequent section.

National comparisons have shown collectivist nations report higher levels of empathic concern.⁹⁹ But the instrument used in these comparisons did not distinguish between concern for in-group and out-group members. As a result, inferring with whom respondents are likely to empathize is not possible. Cultures tend to differ in whom they see as appropriate targets for empathy. Looking at behavior rather than self-report, measures of charitable giving are one way to assess empathic concern in action. Charitable donations are associated with individualism, suggesting that individualism is related to empathic concern for strangers.¹⁰⁰ Collectivism likely evokes empathy for in-group members, and individualism may encourage more generalized empathy, consistent with the greater relational mobility of Western individualistic cultures described earlier.¹⁰¹

Other cross-cultural comparisons have shown that empathy measured by self-report questionnaires is higher in Western samples than in Asian samples, but that culture and gender interact. In empathy assessments of Australian and Chinese

96. Lin Nai-Chuan, "China Sees More Foreign Visitors, but Far Fewer than Before COVID," Voice of America, July 13, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-sees-more-foreign-visitors-but-far-fewer-than-before-covid/7696561.html>.

97. Allison Abbe, "Understanding the Adversary: Strategic Empathy and Perspective Taking in National Security," *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 19–38, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol53/iss2/9/>.

98. Gregory John Depow et al., "The Experience of Empathy in Everyday Life," *Psychological Science* 32, no. 8 (August 2021): 1198–213.

99. William J. Chopik et al., "Differences in Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking Across 63 Countries," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 48, no. 1 (October 2017): 23–38.

100. Markus Kemmelmeier et al., "Individualism and Good Works: Cultural Variation in Giving and Volunteering Across the United States," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37, no. 3 (May 2006): 327–44.

101. Yan Cui et al., "Individualism/Collectivism and Charitable Donations: An Empirical Analysis at the National, Regional, and Personal Levels," *Journal of Management Science and Engineering* 10, no. 2 (June 2025): 175–92.

samples, Australian women reported higher levels of both perspective taking and empathic concern than did Australian men.¹⁰² In contrast, Chinese women and men reported similar levels of dispositional empathy. A meta-analysis including more nations within Western and Asian cultural clusters similarly identified this interaction.¹⁰³ Researchers have proposed that the Western gender difference is largely due to social-role expectations for women in Western cultures.¹⁰⁴

In other research on accuracy in emotional perspective taking, women in both Western and Asian cultures showed an advantage over men. Women more accurately decoded emotions from situational cues than did men, and gender differences occurred in both Western and Asian samples.¹⁰⁵ One US research team demonstrated women's advantage could be eliminated by incentivizing accuracy; men were capable of more accurate judgment when motivated.¹⁰⁶ Taken together, previous studies do not offer much clarity on cultural differences in empathy, and further research may be necessary to reconcile conflicting findings.

Considered as a broad skill or trait, empathy is strategically relevant for facilitating conflict resolution, improving strategic communications, and preventing strategic narcissism.¹⁰⁷ Because an accurate understanding of others relies more on perspective taking than on empathic concern, the following sections examine perspective-taking processes in more detail.

Egocentric Versus Altercentric Bias

Experimental studies have examined two forms of perspective taking: visual and social. Visual perspective taking refers to understanding what another person is seeing from that person's point of view. This form of perspective taking requires the observer to make mental adjustments from the observer's own point of view to understand what another person can or cannot see from that person's

102. Qing Zhao et al., "Culture, Sex, and Group-Bias in Trait and State Empathy," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (April 2021): 561930.

103. Qing Zhao et al., "Culture–Sex Interaction in Self-Report Empathy: The Theory and Meta-Analyses," *PsyCh Journal* 12, no. 1 (February 2023): 5–16.

104. Williams Ickes et al., "Gender Differences in Empathic Accuracy: Differential Ability or Differential Motivation?," *Personal Relationships* 7, no. 1 (March 2000): 95–109.

105. Judith A. Hall et al., "Gender and Accuracy in Decoding Affect Cues: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Intelligence* 13, no. 3 (March 2025): 38.

106. Kristi J. K. Klein and Sara D. Hodges, "Gender Differences, Motivation, and Empathic Accuracy: When It Pays to Understand," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 6 (June 2001): 720–30.

107. Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2014); H. R. McMaster, "Developing Strategic Empathy: History as the Foundation of Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy," *Journal of Military History* 84, no. 3 (July 2020): 689–97; and Claire Yorke, "Is Empathy a Strategic Imperative? A Review Essay," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 5 (2023): 1082–102.

position. In contrast, social perspective taking is the attempt to understand more complex mental states: emotions, beliefs, goals, or intentions. Visual perspective taking is most similar to simulating “walking in another’s shoes” as a perceptual experience, whereas social perspective taking is necessary for interpreting sarcasm, humor, and deception.¹⁰⁸

Overall, studies of visual perspective taking have shown that both Western and East Asian participants demonstrate egocentric bias in how they perceive others’ perspectives, but East Asians adjust to an altercentric (other-centered) view more quickly. Klaus Kessler and colleagues compared Scottish and monolingual Chinese participants in a task requiring judgments of what an avatar could see and judgments of relative position.¹⁰⁹ The researchers also varied each participant’s posture to increase or decrease the difference between the participant’s view and the avatar’s view. Chinese participants were faster and more accurate than Western participants in completing the task, and Chinese women showed the fastest reaction times. The Scottish participants showed greater egocentric bias by responding more quickly when the avatar’s view was closer to their own.

The director task is another common way to test cultural differences in visual perspective taking.¹¹⁰ In this task, a director instructs the participant to move objects in a three-dimensional grid between the two individuals. The challenge is that some cubes in the grid are visible to both the participant and the director, whereas others are visible only to one partner. Success requires adapting to differences between the director’s view and the participant’s own view.

One study compared non-Asian American students and Chinese students, with each group participating in its native language.¹¹¹ Tracking participants’ eye movements showed Chinese students were better able to inhibit gazing at objects the director could not see. In responding to the director’s instructions, 65 percent of American participants asked for clarification or moved the wrong object in the grid, whereas only one Chinese participant did (only on one trial). Overall, American participants failed to consider the director’s perspective fully in 24 percent of trials. Reaction times and errors showed that American participants

108. Nicholas Epley and Eugene M. Caruso, “Perspective Taking: Misstepping into Others’ Shoes,” in *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, ed. Keith D. Markman et al. (Psychology Press, 2009), 295–309; and Louise McHugh et al., “A Relational Frame Account of the Development of Complex Cognitive Phenomena: Perspective-Taking, False Belief Understanding, and Deception,” *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 4, no. 2 (July 2004): 303–24.

109. Klaus Kessler et al., “A Cross-Culture, Cross-Gender Comparison of Perspective Taking Mechanisms,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 281, no. 1785 (June 2014): 20140388.

110. Boaz Keysar et al., “Taking Perspective in Conversation: The Role of Mutual Knowledge in Comprehension,” *Psychological Science* 11, no. 1 (January 2000): 32–38.

111. Shali Wu and Boaz Keysar, “The Effect of Culture on Perspective Taking,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 7 (July 2007): 600–606.

made many egocentric errors, whereas Chinese participants almost never did. In contrast, using a similar director task, another study found evidence of similar biases in both British and Taiwanese participants. Both egocentric and altercentric biases were evident, suggesting that perspective-taking biases may depend on task context.¹¹²

Reinforcing findings on cultural differences, the relative egocentrism of Westerners and the altercentrism of East Asians have occurred in more complex tasks. In a series of experiments, Angela K.-y. Leung and Dov Cohen compared how European Americans and Asian Americans generated narratives of social scenarios involving space and time. The researchers found that European Americans generally adopted a first-person narrative view from their own perspective, whereas Asian Americans were more likely to adopt the perspective of a friend or a stranger in the scenario.¹¹³

In sum, the comparisons in visual perspective taking suggest both Western and East Asian participants show initial egocentric bias in attention. Some studies find that East Asian participants exhibit a subsequent altercentric bias, more readily adopting another's point of view than their Western counterparts.

Projection

Visual perspective taking relies on the processes of anchoring on and then adjusting from an egocentric view. Social perspective taking, which involves understanding more complex mental states, relies on more varied processes and allows for additional potential biases. Social perspective taking sometimes relies on stereotyping—understanding another's perspective through generalizations about the individual's group—and sometimes involves projection, or understanding another's perspective by projecting one's own mental states onto that individual.¹¹⁴ In popular expression, the idea of putting oneself in another's shoes conveys projection by imagining oneself experiencing another's circumstances.

Consistent with the egocentric bias described earlier, Western observers tend to project their own perspective. Studies using communication tasks with western European samples have found participants project their own knowledge onto others and insufficiently adjust for another's perspective, even when they have knowledge

112. J. Jessica Wang et al., "Perspective-Taking Across Cultures: Shared Biases in Taiwanese and British Adults," *Royal Society Open Science* 6, no. 11 (2019): 190540; and Shali Wu et al., "How Culture Influences Perspective Taking: Differences in Correction, Not Integration," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (December 2013): 822.

113. Angela K.-y. Leung and Dov Cohen, "The Soft Embodiment of Culture: Camera Angles and Motion Through Time and Space," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 9 (September 2007): 824–30.

114. Daniel R. Ames, "Inside the Mind Reader's Tool Kit: Projection and Stereotyping in Mental State Inference," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, no. 3 (September 2004): 340–53.

that their counterpart lacks.¹¹⁵ Western observers are particularly prone to projection with familiar others. For example, when working with a friend or a romantic partner, US participants made more egocentric errors than when working with a stranger.¹¹⁶

Cultural differences in self-concept may underlie these perspective-taking processes. An interdependent, more relationally oriented self-concept is prevalent in collectivist cultures, whereas a more independent self-concept is prevalent in highly individualist cultures.¹¹⁷ Basing self-concept in relationships encourages other-centered (altercentric) observation rather than a focus on one's own preferences, motives, and perspectives. In a study of reading emotions, East Asian participants living in the United States more accurately judged the emotions of a friend than did European Americans, but they were comparatively less accurate in judging the emotions of a stranger. If self-concept is the reason for this difference, then accuracy in perspective taking might depend more on motivation and attention than on ability.¹¹⁸

Studies summarized here indicated that egocentric bias among Western observers leads to more projection and less perspective-taking accuracy with familiar counterparts. In contrast, greater altercentrism among East Asian observers gives them an advantage in judging friends' perspectives relative to those of strangers. Both cultural groups show perspective-taking biases that can inhibit accuracy in judgment.

In-Group Projection, Out-Group Stereotyping

In addition to the observer's self-concept, group membership influences perspective taking. Observers respond differently to members of their own group (the in-group) than to members of other groups (out-groups).¹¹⁹ In a social-perspective task, German participants projected more of their own knowledge onto in-group actors (identified by common German names) than onto out-group actors (identified by Turkish names), assuming more shared

115. Benjamin G. Farrar and Ljerka Ostojić, "Does Social Distance Modulate Adults' Egocentric Biases When Reasoning About False Beliefs?," *PLoS One* 13, no. 6 (2018); and Boaz Keysar, "Communication and Miscommunication: The Role of Egocentric Processes," *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4, no. 1 (March 2007): 71–84.

116. Kenneth Savitsky et al., "The Closeness-Communication Bias: Increased Egocentrism Among Friends Versus Strangers," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 1 (January 2011): 269–73.

117. Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1991): 224–53; and Christine Ma-Kellams and Jim Blascovich, "Inferring the Emotions of Friends Versus Strangers: The Role of Culture and Self-Construal," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 7 (July 2012): 934.

118. Ma-Kellams and Blascovich, "Inferring the Emotions."

119. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (Psychology Press, 2004), 276–93.

knowledge with in-group members.¹²⁰ In another experiment, the same researchers first prompted participants to think about either similarities or differences in comparing pairs of illustrations. Participants then completed a separate visual-perspective task, identifying the location of an object relative to a person in a photograph (right versus left). Participants primed to think about differences provided more spatial descriptions from the depicted person's perspective than from their own. Thus, they showed less egocentric projection as a result of focusing on differences.

Consequently, egocentric bias and projection may be less likely to occur when taking the perspective of a foreign counterpart, when differences between cultures or groups are relevant. Less egocentrism with out-group members could result in more accurate perspective taking, though not necessarily. The experiments described earlier involve tasks in which the actor's perspectives were easily accessible, presenting an artificial situation in which all information needed for accurate perspective taking is available.¹²¹ But judgment in real-world situations comes with two complicating conditions. First, real-world situations often do not provide enough information to detect a counterpart's perspective. Second, observers are likely to have prior knowledge of and expectations about their counterpart. In these cases, stereotypes will shape perspective taking, particularly when the counterpart is seen as dissimilar.¹²²

Some experimental studies have reversed the variables and examined the effects of perspective-taking instructions on social judgment rather than looking at perspective taking as an outcome. One such study found that asking participants to engage in perspective taking has different effects on US and East Asian participants.¹²³ Singaporean participants more readily adopted another person's perspective when instructed to do so. When asked to write a narrative from the perspective of a man in a photo—"walking through the world in his shoes"—these participants used more first-person pronouns than Americans did.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the American participants were subsequently less likely to endorse group stereotypes (age- and race-related stereotypes) than Singaporean participants were.

120. Andrew R. Todd et al., "When Focusing on Differences Leads to Similar Perspectives," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 1 (January 2011): 134–41.

121. Todd et al., "Focusing on Differences."

122. Daniel R. Ames, "Everyday Solutions to the Problem of Other Minds: Which Tools Are Used When?" in *Other Minds: How Humans Bridge the Divide Between Self and Others*, ed. Bertram F. Malle and Sara D. Hodges (Guilford Press, 2005), 158–73.

123. Cynthia S. Wang et al., "The Cultural Boundaries of Perspective-Taking: When and Why Perspective-Taking Reduces Stereotyping," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 6 (June 2018): 928–43.

124. Wang et al., "Cultural Boundaries."

Researchers propose that lower relational mobility explains this difference. In the aforementioned study, taking another person's perspective reduced stereotyping of the "other" only among participants with high relational mobility (that is, those interested in starting new relationships and interacting with new people).¹²⁵ For high-mobility Americans, perspective taking increases projection of positive traits, extending positive in-group traits to others.¹²⁶ Given the stability of social networks in East Asian cultures, perspective taking in those cultures may serve primarily to support in-group relationships and, thus, may not reduce reliance on out-group stereotypes.

But, findings are mixed, as other studies suggest that perspective taking has similar effects across cultures. In one study looking at the relationship between trait perspective taking and stereotyping of professions (doctors and construction workers), higher perspective taking among Singaporean participants was associated with lower endorsement of stereotypes.¹²⁷

Other research reinforces this inverse relationship between stereotyping and accurate perspective taking in how observers perceive national groups. In asking US and British students to rate Chinese cultural values, Shira Mor and colleagues found Western observers overestimated differences and were often inaccurate in their perceptions of Chinese students.¹²⁸ In particular, Western participants overestimated the degree to which Chinese students endorsed collectivist values. Cultural values of individualism and collectivism were actually quite similar in this study, as Chinese students have become more individualistic over time.

But in situations in which us-versus-them distinctions are relevant, observers may implicitly assume group differences. Indeed, after being primed to think about similarities with a Chinese student, American adults were more accurate in estimating Chinese cultural values.¹²⁹ At least among Western observers, greater projection can lead to greater accuracy in perceiving the out-group. Projection may serve as a corrective to stereotyping, and the two processes could work together to improve the accuracy of out-group perspective taking.

125. Wang et al., "Cultural Boundaries," 934.

126. Adam D. Galinsky and Gordon B. Moskowitz, "Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and In-Group Favoritism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 4 (April 2000): 708–24.

127. Cynthia S. Wang et al., "Stupid Doctors and Smart Construction Workers: Perspective-Taking Reduces Stereotyping of Both Negative and Positive Targets," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5, no. 4 (May 2014): 430–36.

128. Shira Mor et al., "Pathways to Intercultural Accuracy: Social Projection Processes and Core Cultural Values," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 1 (February 2019): 47–62.

129. Mor et al., "Pathways to Intercultural Accuracy," 57–58.

Presently, research findings indicate that the processes of out-group perspective taking differ between Western and East Asian samples. Instructing Western observers to engage in perspective taking reduces their reliance on stereotyping, resulting in greater projection and greater perceived similarity between the self and the other. The relationship between stereotyping and perspective taking is less clear in East Asian cultures.

These differences suggest diverging means to overcome bias in counterpart perception. Methods that increase perspective-taking accuracy among US observers may not have the same effect among counterparts. Whereas projection often inhibits accuracy in close relationships, it could help Westerners bridge differences in some intergroup contexts, as discussed in more detail later. Much of the perspective-taking research has presented participants with a relatively neutral motivational context. Cooperative and competitive motives greatly influence the process and accuracy of perspective taking.

Perspective Taking in Competition

Competitive contexts yield a perspective paradox: As competition increases the stakes for accurate perception, it also triggers biases that inhibit accurate understanding of a counterpart or a competitor. Competitive biases blind counterparts to similarities and shared interests. In some respects, negotiation is inherently competitive, but counterparts often also have overlapping interests they can uncover through communication and achieve through cooperation. Unfortunately, Western cultural beliefs about competition tend to create barriers to finding opportunities for cooperation. For example, competition often evokes a fixed-pie bias among Americans, whereby they assume a competitor has opposing interests on most or all dimensions of negotiation.¹³⁰ Researchers found this bias caused US negotiators to judge their counterparts' interests less accurately, to seek less information about their counterparts' interests, and to overestimate their understanding of the issues.

In addition, cultural lenses inform the mindsets counterparts bring to a negotiation. In studies comparing the use of metaphors for negotiation, Chinese negotiators were more likely to use a marathon metaphor, whereas US negotiators were more likely to draw on war and sports metaphors.¹³¹

130. Michele J. Gelfand and Sophia Christakopoulou, "Culture and Negotiator Cognition: Judgment Accuracy and Negotiation Processes in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 79, no. 3 (September 1999): 248–69.

131. Michał Chmielecki, "Conceptual Negotiation Metaphors Across Cultures – Research Findings from Poland, China, the United States and Great Britain," *Journal of Intercultural Management* 5, no. 3 (September 2013): 103–18; and Michele J. Gelfand and Christopher McCusker, "Metaphor and the Cultural Construction of Negotiation: A Paradigm for Research and Practice," in *The Blackwell Handbook of Cross-Cultural Management*, ed. Martin J. Gannon and Karen L. Newman (Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), 292–314.

Further, as in US culture more broadly, US negotiators often attribute counterparts' behavior to underlying negative traits (for example, greed and rigidity), which discourages them from finding pathways to joint problem-solving.¹³²

Some attempts to overcome competitive biases have been unsuccessful in competitive and mixed-motive contexts. Asking negotiators to empathize with their counterpart can be costly to their own interests, as it directs focus to the counterpart's concerns.¹³³ In contrast, perspective taking tends to split negotiators' focus between their own interests and others' interests.¹³⁴ A meta-analysis showed perspective taking benefits the perspective taker across a wide range of mixed-motive settings, but yields joint benefits only when counterparts see the task as collaborative.¹³⁵ Perspective taking advanced the perspective taker's position without generating more joint gain. Though advantageous to one's own side, this tactic may discourage a counterpart from seeking future cooperation or building a relationship.

In fact, perspective taking can backfire and lead to more self-interested behavior, leading the negotiator to focus on disparate interests between parties.¹³⁶ Notably, this meta-analysis did not distinguish the perspective takers' cultural backgrounds, but most participants in the selected studies were Western (North American and European) college students and working adults. Social-category differences (in-group–out-group distinctions) showed no effects in this study.

To illustrate, the meta-analysis included one study in which Canadian participants participated in a multiple-round simulation of an arms race with an “enemy.”¹³⁷ The participants' goal was to maximize their own gains (not joint gains). In face-to-face negotiations, individual perspective taking was related to higher distributive gains. At the dyad level, perspective taking by both parties was related to greater joint gains and more peaceful outcomes. In contrast,

132. Michael W. Morris and Michele J. Gelfand, “Cultural Differences and Cognitive Dynamics: Expanding the Cognitive Perspective on Negotiation,” in *The Handbook of Negotiation and Culture*, ed. Michele J. Gelfand and Jeanne M. Brett (Stanford University Press, 2004), 45–70.

133. Natalie H. Longmire and David A. Harrison, “Seeing Their Side Versus Feeling Their Pain: Differential Consequences of Perspective-Taking and Empathy at Work,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 103, no. 8 (August 2018): 894–915.

134. Adam D. Galinsky et al., “Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 4 (April 2008): 378–84.

135. Longmire and Harrison, “Seeing Their Side,” 906–8.

136. Longmire and Harrison, “Seeing Their Side,” 906.

137. Debra Gilin et al., “When to Use Your Head and When to Use Your Heart: The Differential Value of Perspective-Taking Versus Empathy in Competitive Interactions,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 39, no. 1 (January 2013): 3–16.

individual empathy was related to competitive losses, and greater dyad-level empathy produced fewer peaceful outcomes.

Researchers have concluded that perspective taking and empathic concern exhibit distinct biases for competitive interaction and should not be treated as interchangeable. Perspective taking has advantages for achieving tangible gains for one's own side. In contrast, empathic concern can entail costs to one's own interests but likely benefits relationship maintenance in ways perspective taking does not.¹³⁸

Studies with Chinese participants have revealed similar tendencies, with perspective taking encouraging self-interest in competition. In one study, students in China's Zhejiang province participated in a test of social perspective taking in a resource-allocation game.¹³⁹ Perspective taking increased the amount of money participants sent to a partner under cooperative conditions, but it decreased the amount sent under competitive conditions. Among Chinese samples, engaging in perspective taking in competition decreases interpersonal trust because of the belief one's opponent is low in benevolence. These findings highlight the biases that counterparts bring to judgment and decision making in intracultural competitive interactions.

According to Jason R. Pierce and colleagues, "perspective taking acts as a relational amplifier."¹⁴⁰ In cooperative contexts, perspective taking helps counterparts identify shared interests and build trust. In competition, perspective taking draws attention to differences and threats, prompting greater defensive behavior. In the latter case, perspective taking provides justification for engaging in unethical behavior, as counterparts feel the need to protect themselves from a self-interested opponent.¹⁴¹ In the authors' study, distrust spilled over, leading participants to be more willing to lie to their counterpart and to engage in unrelated deceptive behavior.

Fewer studies have specifically examined perceptions in intercultural negotiations, though some researchers have suggested such negotiations often evoke stereotypes, with each side attempting to anticipate the other's actions based on limited or incomplete information. Consistent with intracultural studies of negotiation, one study of intercultural negotiation found that cultural perspective

138. Galinsky et al., "Why It Pays," 383; and Longmire and Harrison, "Seeing Their Side," 908.

139. Binghai Sun et al., "The Effect of Social Perspective-Taking on Interpersonal Trust Under the Cooperative and Competitive Contexts: The Mediating Role of Benevolence," *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* 14 (June 2021): 817–26.

140. Jason R. Pierce et al., "From Glue to Gasoline: How Competition Turns Perspective Takers Unethical," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (October 2013): 1986–94.

141. Pierce et al., "From Glue to Gasoline," 1991–92.

takers claimed more value for themselves but did not create more joint value.¹⁴² This experiment asked East Asian (Chinese and Korean) and North American (US and Canadian) participants to negotiate in intercultural dyads. When both counterparts engaged in cultural perspective taking, East Asian negotiators benefited more than North American negotiators did. These findings are consistent with the view that perspective taking biases negotiators toward protecting self-interest rather than improving joint solutions. Paradoxically, preparing for intercultural negotiation could highlight a difference mindset, which will exaggerate stereotypes.

Another study of US adults demonstrated attribution asymmetries typical of security-dilemma thinking.¹⁴³ Participants indicated their own preference for de-escalation of military activity in the South China Sea, but generally viewed Chinese citizens as preferring unilateral escalation. Participants who reported greater similarity with Chinese people tended to assume Chinese citizens would have preferences similar to their own. Low perceived similarity was associated with greater stereotyping of Chinese people as competitive and dominance seeking. Related experiments using other group contexts provided further support for the conclusion that perceived similarity encourages projection of one's own beliefs and preferences, whereas perceived differences lead to greater stereotyping, at least under conditions of limited information about one's counterpart(s).

A recent study by Joshua D. Kertzer and colleagues provides more reason for pessimism about perspective taking in strategic competition.¹⁴⁴ The authors argue that international relations often involve threats to identity and threats to goals, with both threat types activating conflict-related knowledge structures. A set of survey experiments found attribution asymmetries whereby both American and Chinese respondents attributed their own side's actions to defensive motives, while attributing the other side's actions to offensive motives.

In two conflict scenarios (set in the South China Sea and Hawaii), each side viewed the other's intentions very differently. Chinese respondents viewed US intentions far more negatively than the reverse. Inducing perspective taking by first asking respondents to consider the other side's perceptions did not help. Whereas taking the other's perspective increased preferences for reciprocating de-escalation among US respondents, it had the opposite effect among Chinese respondents. Seeing de-escalation as signaling weakness, Chinese respondents

142. Sujin Lee et al., "Cultural Perspective Taking in Cross-Cultural Negotiation," *Group Decision and Negotiation* 22, no. 3 (May 2013): 389–405.

143. Daniel R. Ames et al., "Mind-Reading in Strategic Interaction: The Impact of Perceived Similarity on Projection and Stereotyping," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 117, no. 1 (January 2012): 96–110.

144. Joshua D. Kertzer et al., "Perspective-Taking and Security Dilemma Thinking: Experimental Evidence from China and the United States," *World Politics* 76, no. 2 (April 2024): 334–78.

showed a greater preference to escalate in response to de-escalatory actions. Perspective taking simply increased Chinese respondents' a priori tendency to see US actions as signals of resolve rather than signals of trust.

These findings demonstrate that Chinese perceptions of the United States as a threat tend to bias Chinese perspective taking toward even greater threat perceptions. The study by Kertzer and colleagues collected data in 2016; US perceptions of China subsequently took a negative turn, with the percentage of Americans who viewed China as an enemy peaking at 42 percent in 2024.¹⁴⁵ Questions about China's role in the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic caused US public perceptions of China to deteriorate.¹⁴⁶ Since 2024, a greater percentage of Americans have come to view China favorably (27 percent in 2026, compared with 14 percent in 2023), but most Americans still view China unfavorably (71 percent) and as a competitor (60 percent).¹⁴⁷

Thus, US observers may now show escalation preferences more similar to Chinese observers, with both populations exhibiting adversarial views. These perceptions converge with other findings indicating the importance of context for perspective taking. Competitive contexts evoke their own set of biases. Perspective taking can further polarize competitors rather than foster cooperation between them. When trust is already low, perspective taking may be more harmful than helpful.

Cultural Cognition Can Bias Competitor Perceptions

The preceding discussion compared cultural cognition in the United States and other Western cultures with cultural cognition in China and other East Asian cultures, aiming to identify potential biases and blind spots in mutual understanding. The contrasts are summarized in table 2. In East Asian cultures, cognition shows patterns of holism, dialecticism, and collectivism. In contrast, in Western cultures, cognition shows preferences for focalism, consistency, formal logic, and individualism. East Asian observers tend to explain actions through more complex social inference, using a range of motivations and situational factors, whereas US observers prefer simpler, dispositional explanations of behavior.

145. Laura Silver and Laura Clancy, "Americans' Views of China Have Grown Somewhat More Positive in Recent Years," Pew Research Center, April 14, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/14/americans-views-of-china-have-grown-somewhat-more-positive-in-recent-years/>.

146. Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky and Runya Qiaoan, "The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle Between China and the US over COVID-19," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2021): 295–315.

147. Silver and Clancy, "Americans' Views of China"; and Pew Research Center, *Spring 2026 Global Attitudes Survey* (Pew Research Center, April 2026).

Differences in cultural cognition may provide a slight advantage to Chinese observers relative to Americans. East Asian cognition related to attention, reasoning, and perspective taking enables seeing change in complex environments and understanding varied reasons for other actors' behavior. East Asian observers may also more accurately judge covariation (relationships between events), as they are less influenced by initial information and by consistency motives.

Table 2. Cultural contrasts in cognition

Cognitive Domain	East Asian Cultures	Western Cultures
Attention and perception	Holism	Focalism
	Inductive observation	Primacy effects
	Relationships	Categories
Reasoning	Dialecticism	Formal logic, consistency
Future orientation	Contradiction, change	Continuity
Judgment bias	Retrospective: hindsight bias	Prospective: overconfidence
Social inference	Complex reasons	Dispositions, single-motive fallacy
Self-concept	Interdependent	Independent
Values	Collectivism	Individualism
Relationships	Low mobility	High mobility
Empathy	In-group	Diffuse
Perspective taking	Altercentric	Egocentric
Negotiations	Cooperative	Fixed-pie bias

During the tenure of President Xi Jinping, China has modernized its armed forces rapidly. Western observers often attribute these advances to China's civil-military fusion and centralized decision making.¹⁴⁸ Whereas these factors are certainly important, a further assessment of how culture enables China's military advances is worthwhile. Chinese patterns of holistic thinking likely support the integration goals Beijing aims to achieve across domains, technologies, and echelons. Culture also likely inhibits some advances, as it contributes to patterns of corruption deeply embedded in institutions. Considerations of informal, cultural mindsets can add to and enrich understanding of elites and formal structures.

148. Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch, eds., *The PLA's Long March Toward a World-Class Military: Progress, Obstacles, and Ambitions* (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025).

In explicitly thinking about the perspectives of others, North Americans and East Asians initially rely on similar processes of egocentric projection and adjustment. In experimental studies, US participants make more mistakes when adjusting for others' points of view, but the relationship between observer and actor matters. East Asians are more altercentric than Westerners, adjusting more readily for friends but not necessarily for strangers. Western observers show a greater tendency to project their own view onto in-group members.

Several shared biases present barriers to achieving more accurate perceptions and greater cooperation (see table 3). For both Western and East Asian cultures, stereotyping hinders accurate perception. Highlighting group memberships draws attention to differences, and these differences lead to predictable distortions in perceptions. In particular, national labels can motivate perceptions of contrast, causing observers to expect differences and overlook similarities. Competition exacerbates this tendency. For example, in competitive contexts, US and Chinese observers favor escalation under different conditions—a divergence that increases risk if each side engages in mirror imaging of the opponent. Negotiators from the United States also show greater fixed-pie bias and use more competitive metaphors in negotiation. Furthermore, at the individual level, a higher need for closure exacerbates cultural differences and drives counterparts apart in their understanding and interactions.

Although loss aversion is a shared bias—one noted as somewhat weaker among East Asian populations than in the United States—China's status concerns can fuel this bias at the elite level. In particular, efforts to seek and maintain power can contribute to bias in at least two ways. First, China's pursuit of status can induce loss aversion and motivate defensive framing of events. Perceived threats to China's status and reputation may contribute to distorted perceptions of the security environment, as China's leaders are motivated to shape others' perceptions in line with their own interpretations. Second, power inhibits the ability to see the perspectives of those with less power.¹⁴⁹ As a result, an East Asian cultural tendency toward altercentrism may not apply to national out-groups China perceives as having less power. Indeed, as one analyst has observed, increased Chinese assertiveness toward Japan and the Philippines results from “increasingly favorable leadership assessments of the nation's relative power and of the threats and opportunities that it confronts.”¹⁵⁰

Asking negotiators to take the perspective of their counterpart has similar effects on both East Asian and Western populations. Rather than leading to greater

149. Steven L. Blader et al., “Looking Out from the Top: Differential Effects of Status and Power on Perspective Taking,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 42, no. 6 (June 2016): 723–37; and Adam D. Galinsky et al., “Power and Perspectives Not Taken,” *Psychological Science* 17, no. 12 (December 2006): 1068–74.

150. Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 133–50.

cooperation, such instruction draws focus to competing interests, reduces trust, and makes counterparts even more self-interested.¹⁵¹ Competitive mindsets then become self-fulfilling prophecies: By trusting their counterpart less, perspective takers believe they have license to behave deceptively, thereby confirming their counterpart’s negative expectations and further undermining trust.

Table 3. Shared biases across cultures

Cognitive Domain	East Asian Cultures	Western Cultures
Values	Benevolence, self-direction	
Group perceptions	Mirror imaging, stereotyping	
Loss aversion	Relatively weak	Strong
Attribution asymmetries	Strong	Relatively weak
Need for closure	Varies individually, strengthens cultural biases	

The studies reviewed here demonstrate how fundamental security-dilemma thinking is to competitor cognition across cultures, a pattern that emerges even in laboratory tasks that lack real-world stakes. In competitive contexts, each culture exhibits similar cognitive responses that result in cognitive distortions and intensify self-interest. These tendencies point to the need for more systematic and deliberate consideration of the opponent’s point of view, which would correct the distorting effects of competition on perception.

Limitations and Future Research

Several points of caution are important when drawing conclusions from this body of research. First, research designs and publication biases are likely to promote findings of differences over null findings of similarities, potentially overestimating differences. Nevertheless, meta-analyses have documented many effects of differences and bias, providing assurance that these findings reflect actual differences. In addition, much of the research reviewed here has carefully employed multimethod designs, both measuring and experimentally manipulating variables of interest. As a result, theories of cultural cognition have solid foundations. But cultural differences are not necessarily determinative. Research on bicultural individuals

151. Pierce et al., “From Glue to Gasoline,” 7–8.

shows cultural influence is not static; rather, such influence is shaped by situation and context, offering promising prospects for increasing understanding across cultures.¹⁵²

Adding to the influences of cultural cognition, the social structures and institutions in which individuals are embedded shape the impact of cultural biases. Incentives, relationships, and institutions are largely unaddressed in the present literature and represent a key seam between cross-cultural psychology and other disciplines. In future research, identifying contextual means to increase perspective-taking accuracy will help reduce Western biases and disadvantages in perceiving competitors. Research on bicultural individuals shows that individuals can switch between different cultural modes of response. Even among individuals with a monocultural upbringing, exposure to different cultural cues can have temporary cognitive effects, such as greater creativity and the use of alternate cultural schemas.¹⁵³ Further research should explore how actors from one cultural tradition can engage the thinking patterns of actors from another tradition without fully internalizing both traditions.

Experimental research can test conditions that improve accuracy in perceiving adversaries and competitors. Perspective-taking instructions have been shown to reduce some biases (stereotyping) while strengthening others (egocentric projection). Future research should explore other situational or contextual cues (including visual cues) that may focus observers on both similarities and differences with a competitor. In addition, situational cues may attenuate the need for closure that drives decisionmakers toward cultural extremes. Survey experiments may provide the means to test and compare frames that enhance understanding between counterparts.

Another limitation of research on cross-cultural comparisons involves ignoring variation within cultures while focusing on national differences. Like other large nations, the United States and China show significant within-culture variability in key aspects of mindsets, cognition, and inference processes. The present review has omitted the literature on within-nation differences in favor of focusing on national and Western–East Asian contrasts, as this level of analysis is most broadly applicable to security practitioners. Regional differences within nations are nonetheless important. The United States shows substantial regional variation in individualism and collectivism, with Southern states exhibiting greater collectivism and states

152. Hong et al., “Multicultural Minds,” 714–16; and Verónica Benet-Martínez et al., “Biculturalism and Cognitive Complexity: Expertise in Cultural Representations,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37, no. 4 (July 2006): 386–407.

153. Michael W. Morris and Aurelia Mok, “Isolating Effects of Cultural Schemas: Cultural Priming Shifts Asian-Americans’ Biases in Social Description and Memory,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 1 (January 2011): 117–26; and Liu Tan et al., “Does Exposure to Foreign Culture Influence Creativity? Maybe It’s Not Only Due to Concept Expansion,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (April 2019): 537.

in the West exhibiting greater individualism.¹⁵⁴ China is similarly internally heterogeneous. Researchers Xin-Dong Wei and Feng-Yan Wang have shown regional differences within China based on wheat- and rice-farming traditions.¹⁵⁵ People from rice-farming areas of southern China approached conflict differently from those in wheat-farming areas, showing more humility, perspective taking, and willingness to compromise.

Although this monograph has compared cognition between US and Chinese observers, it has not addressed all human aspects of competition. Demographics are an important dimension and may suggest fewer areas of advantage for China. China's competition with the United States faces constraints in the human dimension for several reasons. China's one-child policy (1979–2015) has resulted in an aging population and an imbalance in sex ratios, both of which may contribute to conflict.¹⁵⁶ China also faces challenges in having a large rural population with low educational achievement.¹⁵⁷ The research reviewed here presents findings from a more educated segment of China's population. Whereas many cultural cognitive patterns are shared across China's rural and urban populations, the findings may not reflect the nation as a whole.

Similarly, the United States faces demographic shifts that may affect the human dimension of competition. The country continues to experience negative consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of educational achievement.¹⁵⁸ In addition, declining birth rates and immigration restrictions under the second Donald Trump administration may limit population growth and future workforce forecasts.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, historical US military advantages continue, including a strong noncommissioned officer corps, strong tactical innovation, and a network of alliances and partnerships.

154. Joseph A. Vandello and Dov Cohen, "Patterns of Individualism and Collectivism Across the United States," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 2 (August 1999): 279–92.

155. Xin-Dong Wei and Feng-Yan Wang, "Southerners Are Wiser than Northerners Regarding Interpersonal Conflicts in China," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (February 2020): 225.

156. Wan He et al., *Asia Aging: Demographic, Economic, and Health Transitions* (US Census Bureau, June 2022); and Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population* (MIT Press, 2004).

157. Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell, *Invisible China: How the Urban–Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

158. Daniel C. Dewey et al., *Pivoting from Pandemic Recovery to Long-Term Reform: A District-Level Analysis* (Education Recovery Scorecard, February 2025); and Douglas N. Harris et al., "The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Attainment," *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (January 2024): 152–80.

159. US Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Projected to Begin Declining in Second Half of Century," news release no. CB23-189, November 9, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/population-projections.html>; and US Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Growth Slows due to Historic Decline in Net International Migration," news release no. CB26-20, January 27, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2026/population-growth-slows.html>.

As a final cautionary note, reporting cultural differences risks oversimplifying or fueling cultural stereotypes. Nonetheless, generalizations offer a better starting point for understanding the perspectives of adversaries and counterparts than mere projection or mirror imaging. Research suggests that understanding someone else's point of view is almost always a matter of adjusting from one's own egocentric perspective. Understanding others' cognitive patterns, values, and social inferences can make the process of adjustment and correction faster and more accurate.

Implications for Reading a Competitor

By understanding how adversaries perceive themselves and others, counterparts can more accurately identify conflict drivers and shared interests that point to avenues for conflict prevention and resolution. Comparisons of cultural mindsets and biases suggest cognitive differences across multiple areas in which US actors may be at a disadvantage, relative to East Asian actors, in perceiving their competitors. These cognitive differences create a perceptual disadvantage, not necessarily an overall disadvantage. The United States might overcome shortfalls in some cognitive areas with advantages in others; thus, this monograph highlights areas for improvement rather than making predictions about US operational performance. Achieving US and alliance goals of intellectual overmatch, cognitive superiority, and information advantage depends on sharpening the understanding of actors in the security environment.¹⁶⁰

Neglecting an understanding of the competitor's culture can lead observers to overlook areas of strategic advantage and disadvantage. For example, as discussed earlier, the East Asian cultural mindset of holism contrasts with the Western mindset of focalism. Consistent with a holistic understanding of strategy and security, China is aggressively pursuing integration in its military modernization efforts.¹⁶¹ Similarly, over the past decade, the United States has worked to break down silos of specialization, increase integration of domains and capabilities, and deepen interoperability with partners.¹⁶² Nevertheless, the *2026 National Defense Strategy* drops all references to US integration, addressing integration only in the context of Middle Eastern partners working with each other.¹⁶³ If this

160. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (JCS, May 2020); NATO, *NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept* (NATO, 2021); and JCS, *Information in Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-04 (JCS, September 2022).

161. Frohman and Rausch, *PLA's Long March*.

162. DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (DoD, 2018); DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (DoD, October 2022); JCS, *Description of the National Military Strategy 2018* (JCS, 2018); and JCS, *National Military Strategy* (JCS, 2022).

163. DoW, *2026 National Defense Strategy*.

shift extends into resourcing and implementation, it may reflect a relapse into focalism that could hinder military competition with an increasingly integrated People's Liberation Army.

In understanding their competitor, Western observers should resist the cultural tendency to adopt a single, oversimplified narrative of China as either friend or foe. As Jervis has observed, Western preferences for cognitive consistency lead security practitioners to interpret a competitor's actions in a way consistent with prior information and impressions, causing them potentially to disregard information that may be contradictory and miss opportunities to resolve conflict. This cognitive bias creates a risk of misreading the competitor or overlooking how the competitor might misread one's own side.

Studies of perspective taking in competition suggest ambiguous communication by either side will almost certainly be interpreted as threatening by the other. According to General Mark A. Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, such misinterpretations by China were the reason for his call to Chinese General Li Zuocheng in 2020.¹⁶⁴ The call aimed to dispel concerns within the PRC government that an attack by the United States was imminent, correcting a misunderstanding that could have led to a dangerous escalation. In this case, actively offering the US perspective may have helped avert a crisis. Misperceptions similarly occurred during the administration of President Barack Obama, with Beijing seeing aggressive, escalatory intentions in Obama hosting the Dalai Lama in 2010 and in the president's remarks on the Diaoyu Islands during a 2014 visit to Japan—both occurring despite no change in policy.¹⁶⁵

Unfortunately, in many cases, perspective taking may be beneficial but is unlikely to be a solution on its own. As described earlier, perspective taking amplifies self-interest. Perspective-taking efforts may be inaccurate because of egocentric projection or the distorted stereotyping of one's opponent. Therefore, perspective seeking must accompany perspective taking. This effort should include seeking out information to clarify interests, motives, and intentions, as well as pausing to consider emerging contradictory information rather than simply absorbing it into a tidy, coherent bundle of self-reinforcing facts.¹⁶⁶

164. *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Conclusion of Military Operations in Afghanistan and Plans for Future Counterterrorism Operations, Before the S. Comm. on Armed Services*, 117th Cong. (2021) (statement of Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff).

165. Mark E. Manyin, *The Senkakus (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Dispute: U.S. Treaty Obligations*, Congressional Research Service Report R42761 (Congressional Research Service, updated March 2021); and Dan Martin, "China Angered by Obama-Dalai Lama Talks," *Mail & Guardian*, February 19, 2010, <https://mg.co.za/news/international/2010-02-19-china-angered-by-obama-dalai-lama-talks/>.

166. Tal Eyal et al., "Perspective Mistaking: Accurately Understanding the Mind of Another Requires Getting Perspective, Not Taking Perspective," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 4 (April 2018): 547–71.

Bicultural individuals, who have more than one cultural tradition in their family backgrounds, may more easily shift among these differing points of view. Consistent with dynamic constructivist accounts, these individuals show flexibility in applying different cultural frames in response to different cues. For example, bicultural Asian Americans display East Asian holistic thinking when primed with East Asian cultural cues, but the same individuals exhibit American individualism and dispositional thinking when primed with US symbols.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, the national security workforce may benefit from employing more bicultural personnel. Bicultural individuals' broader repertoire of cognitive frames provides more mental agility in navigating different perspectives, offering a promising prospect for increasing understanding in conflicts in which cultural differences are salient. Recruitment strategies and security-clearance procedures for the national security workforce should therefore include individuals with bicultural backgrounds and other multicultural experiences.

In professional development, security practitioners and policymakers must build analytical and decision-making habits for navigating differences in perspectives and considering similarities with competitors. New metaphors and new mindsets for strategic competition may be necessary, such as seeing the negotiation of interests as a dance rather than a war, or as interactive problem solving.¹⁶⁸

The United States and partner nations would benefit from a better foundational understanding of rivals and competitors, reducing potential blind spots in understanding competitor perceptions and intentions. Currently, the education of security practitioners aims to prevent cognitive biases and errors by teaching critical thinking, but it neglects the cultural dimensions of cognition. Understanding cultural similarities and differences in cognitive patterns is important to anticipating counterparts' reactions and decisions. Developing cultural self-awareness is an important enabler of such understanding.¹⁶⁹ Recognizing cultural influences on one's own perceptions and assumptions provides reference points for recognizing similar influences in others. To avoid mirror imaging, security practitioners must consider both differences and similarities between themselves and their counterparts, thereby gaining a more accurate understanding of actors in the security environment and improving the anticipation of those actors' behavior and decision making.

167. Hong et al., "Multicultural Minds," 714–16.

168. Jonathan R. Cohen, "Adversaries? Partners? How About Counterparts? On Metaphors in the Practice and Teaching of Negotiation and Dispute Resolution," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 433–40; and Herbert C. Kelman, "Evaluating the Contributions of Interactive Problem Solving to the Resolution of Ethnonational Conflicts," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 14, no. 1 (February 2008): 29–60.

169. Paula Caligiuri et al., *Training, Developing, and Assessing Cross-Cultural Competence in Military Personnel*, Technical Report 1284 (US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, April 2011), 8–10; and Tara Wernsing and Rachel Clapp-Smith, "Developing Global Leaders Through Building Cultural Self-Awareness," *European Journal of International Management* 7, no. 5 (January 2013): 535–49.

In competitive contexts, perspective-taking biases observed in both Western and East Asian cultures suggest that the pathways to avoid the escalation of competition into conflict are narrow. Given the stakes involved, strategic competition requires that counterparts find those narrow pathways, expand their understanding of each other, and create space for cooperative problem-solving.

Recommendations for Better Understanding Adversary and Competitor Perspectives

The shift in US strategy from counterinsurgency and stability operations to great-power competition led to the demise of programs for cultural understanding. But a belief that great-power competition reduces the relevance of cultural cognition and perspective taking is an unfortunate error. The full range of competition and conflict involves shaping and constraining the choices of one's competitor or adversary. Therefore, competitor cognition is always relevant, though a shift from tactical cultural skills (for example, interacting with host nationals) to operational and strategic cultural cognition (for example, interpreting signals and anticipating responses to US actions) is appropriate.

The United States has many advantages over competitors and adversaries, including a highly professional officer and noncommissioned officer corps, a military culture that promotes initiative and mission command, and a national culture of innovation. Whereas these advantages provide an edge in competition and conflict, the United States has repeatedly misunderstood adversaries and the security environment, making costly errors, such as those seen in Vietnam and Afghanistan. This monograph has attempted to highlight some of the cultural blind spots the United States faces in confronting a rising China.

The national security enterprise can improve and better integrate its understanding of competitor perspectives in multiple ways. As noted earlier, education is central to these efforts, and PME has notably added courses and positions to fill curriculum gaps on China.¹⁷⁰ During conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Army had to rely on cultural knowledge from civilian sources, though with limited success. Whereas many teams provided valuable input into operations, the Human Terrain System suffered from management challenges, and the Army closed the program in 2014.¹⁷¹ Likewise, US Army Training and Doctrine Command's efforts

170. Government Accountability Office, *Military Officers: DoD Can Enhance Promotion and Education Guidance for Addressing Indo-Pacific Region Needs*, GAO-23-106070 (Government Accountability Office, June 2023); and Richard D. Butler, "Introduction to the China Landpower Studies Center," *Parameters* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 123–25, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol53/iss4/16/>.

171. Christopher J. Lamb et al., *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (The Institute of World Politics Press, 2013).

to embed civilian-culture and foreign-language advisers in branch schools failed to demonstrate enough utility to sustain funding.¹⁷² In contrast, programs designed to train and educate the uniformed workforce in cultural understanding proved both impactful and more sustainable, though many of them have since been eliminated.¹⁷³ The following changes to education and decision-making processes will improve national security practitioners' ability to think like a competitor.

1. The military services should revive and expand education in culture and cognitive flexibility.

Reviving the services' culture centers and reinstating the red-teaming course would provide the organizational structures needed to cultivate more flexible mindsets. Today, even basic cultural information is less easily accessible, with the CIA terminating its *World Factbook* in February 2026—a reference manual on which many security practitioners relied.¹⁷⁴ Though the archive is available, the CIA no longer updates it.

Embedding cultural programs within PME institutions has many advantages, such as attracting and retaining relevant academic expertise, but organizations also need to reach personnel outside formal PME programs. The cultural content such programs should include is broader than behavioral norms (that is, dos and don'ts) and has been detailed in other publications.¹⁷⁵ Beyond culture-focused content, education on judgment and decision making would ideally accompany cultural and regional studies to help students overcome tendencies to absorb new information into existing stereotypes.

Educational programs should include the structure necessary both to design and deliver instruction and to evaluate outcomes. Evaluation is critical to connect education to performance outcomes, but it did not occur widely or soon enough in previous efforts. If programs had any evaluation component at all, they tended to assess measures of performance (such as the number of personnel in attendance) rather than measures of effectiveness (such as increases in cognitive flexibility,

172. Jim Schnell, "The U.S. Army Initiates a Proactive Approach to Leverage Cross-Cultural Understanding: The Case for the Culture & Foreign Language Enterprise," *KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2014): 14–27.

173. Jeffery Bearor and George Dallas, "Alternative Perspectives: Launching and Running the Marine Corps' Culture Center," in *The Rise and Decline of U.S. Military Culture Programs, 2004–20*, ed. Kerry B. Fosher and Lauren Mackenzie (Marine Corps University Press, 2021), 162–202.

174. "Spotlighting the World Factbook as We Bid a Fond Farewell," CIA, February 4, 2026, <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/spotlighting-the-world-factbook-as-we-bid-a-fond-farewell/>.

175. Kerry Fosher and Lauren Mackenzie, *Culture General Guidebook: Globally Applicable Concepts and Skills for Military Professionals* (Marine Corps University Press, 2023); Daniel W. Henk and Allison Abbe, "Restoring Priority on Cultural Skill Sets for Modern Military Professionals," *Parameters* 54, no. 3 (Autumn 2024): 69–86, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss3/8/>; and Joseph J. Thomas and Clementine K. Fujimura, *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence for Leaders: A Guide* (Routledge, 2022).

cultural empathy, critical thinking, or job performance). Showing positive impact makes for better arguments in defending personnel requests and budgets.

Many of the shifts in cultural understanding and perspective taking described throughout this monograph must occur through education and professional development. In this context, the behavioral and social sciences and the humanities provide critical insights. Therefore, the faculty of military education institutions should include representation from those disciplines. Positions for social and behavioral sciences should not be neglected or sacrificed in the pursuit of technological solutions alone. Recruiting and retaining social scientists, especially those who can bridge the divide between the military and academic worlds, should be a high priority. Recent reductions in social science funding will hinder the defense enterprise's understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of conflict, increasing the risk to forces blind to their adversaries' motivations and perceptions. The military services should coordinate their initiatives to minimize duplication of effort while carrying out their distinct Title 10 obligations to man, train, and equip forces. For example, competing for the same small pool of China experts may be counterproductive; instead, joint programs for faculty exchange and development should be among the solutions.

2. The national security enterprise should consider a broader range of cognitive abilities in recruiting, vetting, and retaining personnel.

In addition to general cognitive ability, cognitive flexibility and complexity are important aspects of individual cognition in strategic thinking. Instruments are available to measure individual differences in these cognitive skills, some of which are included in the Army Talent Attribute Framework.¹⁷⁶ For example, as discussed previously, the need for cognitive closure works against mental agility, making individuals resistant to updating their beliefs about an opponent in the face of new information. Organizations would benefit from identifying individuals with a chronically high need for closure and mitigating their limitations.

Because bicultural individuals often already have greater cognitive flexibility than individuals from monocultural backgrounds, they may help raise alternative perspectives. Obtaining security clearances can be challenging for workforce members from immigrant backgrounds, but this aspect of personnel security should be a priority for improving understanding of different populations. Such individual differences are not a source of division to be assimilated away; they are instead a source of strength. The past contributions of bicultural individuals

176. Ryan P. Royston et al., *Army Talent Attribute Framework – FY24 Annual Update Using a Mixed Methods Research Design*, Technical Report 1436 (US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, September 2023).

to the US Armed Forces and the US Intelligence Community are important to recognize in historical context, including the examples of the Navajo code talkers and the Nisei servicemembers in World War II. Once bicultural individuals are cleared, retention of the cognitive flexibility associated with biculturalism will depend on recognition and advancement commensurate with these members' contributions.

3. Security practitioners should apply lessons from cultural-cognition research to planning and operations.

The ability to think like one's competitor or opponent is important at every level: tactical, operational, and strategic. The cognitive checks of testing assumptions and updating beliefs are essential, and incorporating those checks into workflows will improve decision making. The premortem technique—imagining a project or operation failure and then unpacking the factors that might lead to it—provides one such check.¹⁷⁷ This process should examine assumptions and inferences to uncover and correct errors in thinking before such errors undermine decision making.

Other debiasing techniques can help remedy narrow thinking and prevent one from anchoring on a simplistic or outdated view of one's competitor. Generating alternative attributions for China's past behavior and formulating multiple hypotheses for likely future Chinese actions will not only improve the likelihood of accurate judgment, it will also better calibrate confidence levels in judgment, highlighting uncertainty.¹⁷⁸ Analysis of alternatives is already a common technique for debiasing judgment in intelligence analysis. In other contexts, judgment is similarly important but can still suffer from automatic processing, premature consensus, or overconfidence. For example, building confidence and morale in a military unit can lead unit members to converge with overconfidence on a belief about how the adversary will interpret and respond to a specific course of action.

Similarly, a shared belief in an adversary's hostile intent can blind both sides to alternative interpretations even in the case of accidental actions. For example, during a NATO operation in 1999, the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and China's response to the incident illustrates the problem of assuming hostile intent.¹⁷⁹ Despite US assertions and evidence of accidental targeting due to outdated maps, China's leaders and population found benign explanations

177. Gary Klein, "Performing a Project Premortem," *Harvard Business Review* (September 2007): 18–19.

178. Jack B. Soll et al., "A User's Guide to Debiasing," in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*, ed. Gideon Keren and George Wu (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 924–51.

179. Kevin Ponniah and Lazara Marinkovic, "The Night the US Bombed a Chinese Embassy," *BBC News*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48134881>.

implausible. The assumption of hostile intent has had a long-standing impact on US credibility with China.

More recently, in another example, US leaders and some portions of the population have found China's denials about the COVID-19 lab-leak hypothesis implausible, believing the virus emerged from a bioweapons program. Settling on a single, hostile explanation may be satisfying, but it limits one's willingness to consider other viable explanations, closing off further information seeking. To avoid the premature adoption of a single interpretation, planners should apply what-if logic in analyzing alternative interpretations: What if no hostile intent was present? What are the implications for appropriate courses of action in response? A bias toward hostile interpretation may ultimately best fit the facts, but leaders should systematically consider and reject alternatives rather than assume them away.

4. Leaders should better structure the environment for debiasing judgment and decision making.

Even highly intelligent people are susceptible to certain forms of bias.¹⁸⁰ Automatic and controlled thinking (system one and system two, respectively) work together, but conditions in security contexts often push individuals toward overreliance on system one. Time pressure, fatigue, and threats increase the use of system one.¹⁸¹ Under such conditions, automatic thinking drives individuals toward their own cultural schemas and biases. Even after training to avoid bias and errors, individuals may still fail to recognize when to override system-one thinking.

To counter these tendencies, leaders should slow down decision processes to create space for error correction. Monitoring systems and work routines to support subordinate physical well-being is also important, such as by ensuring adequate rest and recovery, managing cognitive load, and maintaining fitness support. These activities help prevent fatigue in high-stress settings. When stakes are high but time allows for advance planning, leaders can disrupt automatic thinking by drawing on system two. Examples of techniques that encourage systematic thinking include considering the opposite, analyzing alternatives, and conducting a premortem analysis. In exercises that involve taking an adversary's perspective, assigning individuals specific responsibility for shifting lenses on what interpretations or responses a task or plan will elicit can help. Using the four-ways-of-seeing framework can be another tool for checking assumptions about adversaries' mindsets. In addition, partitioning decision making into discrete steps may help disrupt the automatic thinking of projection and mirror imaging.

180. Keith E. Stanovich and Richard F. West, "On the Relative Independence of Thinking Biases and Cognitive Ability," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 4 (April 2008): 672–95.

181. Soll et al., "User's Guide to Debiasing."

To avoid inadvertently (or intentionally) ostracizing alternative perspectives, leaders should not always assign these techniques to the same person or function (for example, the intelligence function). The airing of alternate perspectives is not just an opportunity to refute all counterarguments against the prevailing view or preferred course of action. This practice should instead be a valued step in the planning process. Leaders should not underestimate the pressure subordinates feel to avoid diverging views. Instead, leaders must deliberately set conditions that encourage alternative views at the appropriate stage in the decision-making process. Timing is important, and empowering subordinate initiative while slowing decision processes enough to check assumptions can be a challenging balance.

5. Foreign-language training and international education for US personnel provide another path to greater cognitive flexibility and cultural perspective taking.

Learning a foreign language can benefit national security practitioners by helping them hone the cognitive skills necessary to understand others' perspectives. Defense policy on foreign-language education has focused on requirements to use a foreign language in a specific billet.¹⁸² Whereas learning a foreign language has obvious utility in communication, its more diffuse impact on cognitive skills has received less attention. But research strongly supports the general cognitive benefits of foreign-language learning. Bilingualism from an early age is associated with greater creativity, cognitive flexibility, and cross-cultural competence.¹⁸³ Learning a foreign language later, as an adolescent or an adult, has similar, though weaker, effects.¹⁸⁴

The United States brings foreign military officers to the Defense Language Institute English Language Center to gain English-language proficiency, enabling them to participate in subsequent technical training and PME with their US peers. Whereas this instruction helps increase interoperability with foreign forces, it may result in missed opportunities for US officers. Partners and allies improve their understanding of US perspectives, but their English-language proficiency removes some of the perspective-taking responsibility from US personnel. For US personnel with adequate aptitude, learning a foreign language can help them practice cultural frame shifting.

182. DoD, *Management of the Defense Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) Program*, DoD Instruction 5160.70 (DoD, December 2016).

183. Rebecca Fox et al., "Benefits of Foreign Language Learning and Bilingualism: An Analysis of Published Empirical Research 2012–2019," *Foreign Language Annals* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 699–726.

184. Sara Shoghi Javan and Behzad Ghonsooly, "Learning a Foreign Language: A New Path to Enhancement of Cognitive Functions," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 47, no. 1 (February 2018): 125–38; and Bo Yang, "Foreign Language Learning Enhances Cognitive Flexibility, Which Facilitates Reported Perspective-Taking: Evidence from PISA 2018," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation* 6, no. 12 (December 2023): 96–107.

The national security enterprise should regard any cuts to foreign-language programs as potentially detracting from opportunities to build cognitive advantage. Further research should help clarify effects on midlife language learners, as previous studies have focused more on childhood bilinguals and older adults. Available findings on adult learners are promising. At a minimum, they provide support for maintaining foreign-language programs during officer precommissioning. Offering more opportunities for US personnel to study abroad or embed with other nations' armed forces may provide similar benefits. Because language and international education can be costly, future analyses should project and compare the costs of different methods for building cognitive flexibility.

The current US-China strategic competition is not the first time the United States has needed to understand East Asian cultures that differ markedly from US culture. Long-term defense treaties with South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines should also have generated US motivation to understand East Asian cultures. Yet, despite decades of American military presence on the Korean Peninsula, the US security enterprise has not maintained continuous education on culture and decision-making patterns in the region.¹⁸⁵ Whereas the US military services increased training and education at culture centers in response to the prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have since divested from those centers.¹⁸⁶ Documentation of those efforts remains, providing instructional insights and management lessons for teaching culture in PME and training, but much of the organizational structure is no longer in place.¹⁸⁷

Although PME continues to provide courses in regional studies, these courses do not consistently address culture. Some courses explicitly address culture, with variation in the aspects and levels of culture they include, whereas others may not address culture's role in strategy, politics, military affairs, or society at all. Jeannie L. Johnson has aptly identified several aspects of US strategic culture that contribute to this neglect.¹⁸⁸ Confidence in technological superiority and a focus on the present over the historical and cultural context of conflict are two aspects of US culture that pose obstacles to seeing culture's relevance in the education of security practitioners. The rise of artificial intelligence has further increased demand for technological emphasis in education, pushing sociocultural dynamics further to the margins. The United States has many strategic advantages, but its understanding

185. Fosher and Mackenzie, *Rise and Decline*.

186. Fosher and Mackenzie, *Rise and Decline*; and Lauren Mackenzie and Dan Henk, "Protecting, Preserving, and Maturing the Culture Component of Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture," in *Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture in the Military: State of the Science*, ed. Jeff R. Watson et al. (West Point Press, 2025): 37–60.

187. Fosher and Mackenzie, *Culture General Guidebook*.

188. Jeannie L. Johnson, "Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in the Context of Great Power Competition," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 185–208.

of competitors and adversaries has often been a weak spot. The United States must revive efforts to educate military personnel and other security practitioners in the cultural, identity, and historical dimensions of conflict. Even if the United States deems these factors unrelated to its own motives, they are extremely relevant to other actors in the security environment.

About the Author

Allison Abbe is professor of organizational studies and the Matthew B. Ridgway Chair of Leadership Studies at the US Army War College. Her research focuses on the development of leadership and intercultural skills in national security leaders. Abbe previously worked as a research psychologist and program manager in defense and intelligence organizations and holds a PhD in social and personality psychology from the University of California at Riverside. Abbe speaks and teaches about strategic leadership, cross-cultural competence, and organizational climate. Her work has appeared in *Parameters*, *Military Review*, the *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, and *Government Executive*.



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