

HUMAN RIGHTS AS AN ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES TOOL
TO COMPETE WITH CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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by

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ABSTRACT

HUMAN RIGHTS AS AN ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES TOOL TO COMPETE WITH CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC, by Leeann J Whittson, 114 pages.

This study explored the human rights dynamics of strategic competition between the US and China to identify opportunities for Army Special Operation Forces (ARSOF) and their partners to contribute to US efforts that exploit an asymmetric advantage over China in human rights to compete in Indo-Pacific states. Using a qualitative case study method and a critical factor analysis model to identify ARSOF opportunities, the researcher analyzed the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) strategy to employ compelling narratives, influence socio-political dynamics, and use exploitive economic practices to increase its influence in Bangladesh and Thailand. The researcher found opportunities to expose disinformation and emphasize partner nation independence in the face of CCP encroachment on its sovereignty in the information environment; to address grievances that are the result of CCP human rights violations, and to facilitate working groups aimed at strengthening societal resilience to detrimental Chinese business practices in the economic environment. ARSOF can use human rights as a strategic competition tool to reduce Chinese influence and strengthen integrated deterrence by building relationships, setting conditions (deterrence by denial), and observing and mitigating threats (deterrence by punishment).

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ACRONYMS

ARSOF	United States Army Special Operations Forces
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFA	Critical Factor Analysis
DIME	Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economics
DoD	United States Department of Defense
INDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
ODP	Office of Degree Programs
PRC	People's Republic of China
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
USG	United States Government

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

One contributing factor to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the internal and external pressure on the Soviet Union to fulfill human rights commitments made in the 1975 Helsinki Accords.¹ Thirty years later in what some academics have labeled the “New Cold War,” the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has demonstrated patterns of human rights violations in both its domestic and foreign policies.² Although it is a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the PRC vocalizes its promotion of economic rights at the expense of civil and political rights.³ Despite its human rights record, the PRC has gained influence across the world, leveraging strategies like One Belt, One Road (OBOR).⁴ Governments and business leaders in third-party

¹ Oliver Bange, “Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe,” (Webcast, Wilson Center, Washington, DC, September 23, 2008), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/helsinki-1975-and-the-transformation-europe>.

² Elliott Abrams, “The New Cold War,” *Pressure Points* (blog), *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/new-cold-war-0>. The term “New Cold War” is disputed in foreign policy circles, drawing distinctions between the bipolar world order and containment policy toward the Soviet Union in the original Cold War and today’s global interdependence in a unipolar world order. The researcher uses the term in this context to draw a more specific comparison of human rights in the Soviet Union and the PRC.

³ Commission on Unalienable Rights, *Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2020), 35, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Draft-Report-of-the-Commission-on-Unalienable-Rights.pdf>.

⁴ This paper uses the original term, One Belt, One Road (2013), rather than the revised term, Belt and Road Initiative (2016) because the former frames the strategy as

countries choose the PRC out of pragmatism, instead of choosing the US, which promotes and abides by international laws and norms.

The promotion of human rights has been a US national security interest since the Declaration of Independence. Although democracy and human rights policies have always been a priority for the US, President Joseph Biden has given greater vocal support to and explicitly named human rights as one of the administration's foreign policy priorities.⁵ The US Department of State has publicly condemned the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for its actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.⁶ The administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy envisions "competing with the People's Republic of China to defend the interests and vision for the future that we share" with allies and partners over the next decade.⁷ The Department of Defense (DoD) Indo-Pacific Strategy is "centered on the idea that free societies respect individual rights and liberties."⁸ Despite this stance, the DoD does not generally view human rights as within its purview, apart from abiding

one focused on power projection. In contrast, the latter is a more inclusive term that minimizes the PRC's self-interests.

⁵ US President, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 20, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷ The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022), 5, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

⁸ Phil Davidson, "The United States' Interests in the Indo-Pacific," (Speech by Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command, Lowy Institute, Sydney, Australia, February 13, 2020), <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/2085461/the-united-states-interests-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

by the Law of Armed Conflict.⁹ There is an opportunity to tie human rights to security by using US Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF), who are designed to “shape the operational environment” on behalf of national objectives.¹⁰ The three ARSOF branches are well suited to contribute to US human rights efforts: Civil Affairs engages with local populations with a focus on governance, Psychological Operations are experts in influence, and Special Forces are experts in the indigenous approach.¹¹

Problem Statement

Although the US arguably has a better human rights record than the PRC, the US Government (USG) does not appear to have successfully exploited this advantage to reduce Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region.¹² This may be due to a less compelling narrative, the rise of authoritarian tactics in the social and political environments, and the high economic benefit of working with the PRC. Currently, the US military does not incorporate human rights when supporting national security

⁹ US Southern Command, “Human Rights,” accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.southcom.mil/Commanders-Priorities/Strengthen-Partnerships/Human-Rights>. The US Southern Command is the only command with a dedicated Human Rights Office. This office, however, appears focused on training of and compliance with the Law of Armed Conflict.

¹⁰ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-05, *Army Special Operations* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2019), 1-15.

¹¹ 1st Special Forces Command-Airborne 1 SFC (A), *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond* (Fort Bragg, NC: 1 SFC (A), August 2021, 5, <https://www.soc.mil/USASFC/Documents/1sfc-vision-2021-beyond.pdf>.

¹² Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022: Events of 2021* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 1, 2, 7-8, 10, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/01/World%20Report%202022%20web%20pdf_0.pdf.

interests. What actions can ARSOF employ to contribute to USG efforts that exploit an asymmetric advantage over the PRC in human rights to influence and compete in Indo-Pacific states?

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to understand human rights dynamics through a strategic competition lens and identify opportunities for the US to compete in third-party Asian countries. This approach allows the researcher to propose recommended actions for ARSOF to use human rights as a strategic competition tool in the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Ideally, other Combatant Commands can apply these recommendations by adapting them to specific cultural contexts to compete with the PRC in other theaters or areas of responsibility.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is as follows: How can ARSOF contribute to USG efforts that exploit America's asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM?

The researcher answers the secondary research questions during the analysis of this study's two case studies: Bangladesh and Thailand. These questions are as follows:

1. How can ARSOF and their partners highlight Chinese human rights violations through the information environment in Bangladesh and Thailand?
2. How can ARSOF and their partners promote democracy and human rights over authoritarian practices in the socio-political environment in Bangladesh and Thailand?

3. How can ARSOF and their partners promote good governance and undercut Chinese exploitive economic practices in Bangladesh and Thailand?

Assumptions

One fundamental assumption is that the INDOPACOM states analyzed in the case studies are open to ARSOF activities. This may not be true for segments of the populations of these countries, but their governments invited ARSOF elements to operate within their borders. Additionally, the researcher assumes that human rights concerns can influence INDOPACOM states. This body of research acknowledges that policies that tie USG assistance to human rights may result in a reduction of the USG's ability to influence governments. However, the recommendations in this study shift this spotlight away from domestic records within these states to a third-party: the PRC. Additionally, the UDHR is criticized for its western approach.¹³ However, international human rights law is universal despite differing cultural perspectives,

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study design include the time available for the study because the degree program only allotted nine months to complete the thesis. Another limitation is that the qualitative study results cannot be formally applied to other cases because they lack statistical methods of analysis. Lastly, the researcher only had access to unclassified material and relied on English translations of some data; therefore, the analysis and recommendations could lack analysis of relevant USG operations or Chinese

¹³ Adamantia Pollis, and Peter Schwab, eds., *Human Rights: Cultural and Ideological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1979), 8-9.

activity. ARSOF, another element within the DoD, or the USG could be currently conducting activities involving human rights as a tool; however, access to limited information could preclude the researcher from accounting for these activities.

The primary delimitation of this study is that the researcher geographically confined the study to third-party states. The researcher recommends ARSOF activities that aim to influence these third-party countries rather than the PRC itself due to lack of access, risk to force, and potential lack of effectiveness within Chinese borders. Likewise, this thesis does not cover the US human rights record or decisions made by US government and business leaders, despite domestic affairs influencing the operational environment. ARSOF do not have authorities or permissions to conduct operations internally. Lastly, this study does not cover international human rights law, nor does it discuss the legal aspects of human rights violations and allegations due to the limited expertise of the researcher in this field and the lack of direct relevance for ARSOF activities.

Definition of Terms

The researcher provides the following definitions to ensure uniformity and understanding of the terms throughout the study.

Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF): “Army Forces designated by the Secretary of Defense that are specifically organized, trained, and equipped conduct special operations.”¹⁴ ARSOF consist of three core branches: Civil Affairs, Psychological

¹⁴ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), GL-6.

Operations, and Special Forces under the 1st Special Forces Command. The researcher focuses on these three core branches; however, ARSOF also includes the US Army Special Operations Aviation Command and the 75th Ranger Regiment.¹⁵

Chinese Communist Party (CCP): The ruling party of the PRC and the only organization that “exercises political power.”¹⁶ The CCP “retains ultimate authority to control the economy” and oversees all organizations and institutions in the economic, political, environmental, and religious spheres.¹⁷

Human Rights: Rights a person has simply by existing as a human being.¹⁸ The UDHR outlines thirty articles of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are universally protected under international human rights law.¹⁹

¹⁵ CJCS, JP 3-05, I-3 - I-4.

¹⁶ Dean Cheng, Walter Lohman, James Jay Carafano, and Riley Walters, *Assessing Beijing’s Power: A Blueprint for the U.S. Response to China over the Next Decade*, Special Report No. 221 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, February 10, 2020), 7, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/SR221.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ United Nations, “What are Human Rights?” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights>.

¹⁹ United Nations (UN), UN General Assembly Resolution 217 A, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” (Paris, France, December 10, 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. The 30 Articles of the UDHR are: (1) Right to equality; (2) Freedom from discrimination; (3) Right to life, liberty, personal security; (4) Freedom from slavery; (5) Freedom from torture; (6) Right to recognition before the law; (7) Right to equality before the law; (8) Access to justice; (9) Freedom from arbitrary detention; (10) Right to a fair trial; (11) Presumption of innocence; (12) Right to privacy; (13) Freedom of movement; (14) Right to asylum; (15) Right to nationality; (16) Right to marriage & family; (17) Right to own property; (18) Freedom of religion or belief; (19) Freedom of expression; (20) Freedom of assembly; (21) Right to participate in government & free elections; (22) Right to social security; (23) Right to work; (24) Right to rest & leisure; (25) Right to adequate living

Integrated Deterrence: A principal component of the 2022 US National Defense Strategy that “entails developing and combining our strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of US national power, and our unmatched network of Alliances and partnerships,” specifically prioritizing the deterrence of the PRC, DoD’s number one “pacing challenge.”²⁰

One Belt, One Road (OBOR): In 2013, President Xi Jinping launched the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a global collection of transportation, energy, and infrastructure projects, known together as One Belt, One Road or Belt and Road Initiative.²¹ OBOR is “aimed at boosting economic connectivity” for both the PRC and the more than 100 member countries.²²

Special Operations: “Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive,

standard; (26) Right to education; (27) Right to participate in the cultural life of community; (28) Right to social order; (29) Duty to community; (30) Freedom from the State or personal interference in the above rights.

²⁰ US Department of Defense (DOD), “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy,” (DOD, Washington, DC, March 2022), 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

²¹ Susan V. Lawrence, Caitlin Campbell, Rachel F. Fefer, Jane A. Leggett, Thomas Lum, Michael F. Martin, and Andres B. Schwarzenberg, *U.S.-China Relations*, Congressional Research Service Report R45898 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, updated September 3, 2019), 26, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45898/5>.

²² Ibid.

clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk.”²³

Strategic Competition: The “geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions”²⁴ This includes activities below armed conflict to “achieve political objectives and to deny adversaries the ability to achieve their objectives” by competing for leverage (direct competition), advantage (indirect competition), and reputation (narrative competition).²⁵

US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM): A Department of Defense combatant command with geographic responsibility for all US military activity in support of US national security objectives in the Indo-Pacific region that spans West to include India and East to the US west coast.²⁶

Significance of the Study

By recommending ARSOF activities that nest within a broader USG framework, this study explores an opportunity for greater unified action to compete with the PRC in

²³ JCJCS, JP 3-05, GL-11.

²⁴ US Department of Defense (DOD), *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: DOD, June 1, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

²⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army in Military Competition: Chief of Staff Paper #2* (Washington, DC: HQDA, March 1, 2021), v, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/29/bf6c30e6/csa-paper-2-the-army-in-military-competition.pdf>.

²⁶ DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 1.

the Indo-Pacific. This study is not the first to address the competition between the US and the PRC with a focus on human rights, nor is it the first study to approach the US-PRC rivalry from a security angle with recommendations for DoD. In a December 2021 op-ed, Katie Crombe et al. outlined a human-focused deterrence approach for how ARSOF can execute the national defense concept of integrated deterrence in the Gray Zone.²⁷

Building on this foundation, this study is the first to combine all three approaches: it views the US-PRC competition through a human-rights lens, proposes DoD contributions to unified action, and centers ARSOF as the military tool of choice in INDOPACOM to compete with the PRC beyond the military environment and below the level of armed conflict. This study could serve as a model to illustrate how the human rights tool could compete with the PRC in other regions or Russia in a similar yet culturally tailored manner. If ARSOF implemented the recommendations in this study, Indo-Pacific partners would view the PRC less favorably, thus influencing their decisions to choose the PRC as a preferred partner.

Summary

This chapter presents the opportunity to exploit an asymmetric advantage over the PRC in human rights to influence and compete in Indo-Pacific states. The chapter asks how ARSOF can contribute to USG efforts that exploit this advantage as the primary

²⁷ Katie Crombe, Steve Ferenzi, and Robert Jones, “Integrating Deterrence across the Gray—Making It More than Words,” *Military Times*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2021/12/08/integrating/.-deterrence-across-the-gray-making-it-more-than-words>

research question to make recommendations for ARSOF to use the human rights tool in support of national security objectives in strategic competition.

The researcher used a qualitative case study method, described in Chapter 3, that employs the non-military instruments of national power, from the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic (DIME) construct, as a theoretical lens. This study used these theoretical lenses to conduct critical factor analyses (CFAs) of the CCP's influence in the Indo-Pacific states of Bangladesh and Thailand, presented in Chapter 4. The CFAs identify critical vulnerabilities that drive recommendations for ARSOF actions, synthesized in Chapter 5. The next chapter reviews relevant literature and research related to the international human rights regime, cultural perspectives, narrative competition, diplomacy, and economic competition, and concludes by providing an overview of ARSOF in INDOPACOM and the theoretical framework used in the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the human rights literature related to the US and the PRC. Specifically, it covers the international human rights regime, differing cultural perspectives on human rights, and sections relating to four instruments of national power: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME).²⁸ The first three of these sections correspond to the study's secondary research questions and discuss how the US and the CCP deploy non-military instruments of power and their relevance to human rights: narrative competition in the information environment (Secondary Question #1); diplomacy, which affects the socio-political environment within Indo-Pacific countries (Secondary Question #2); and economic statecraft (Secondary Question #3). As the problem statement identified, the military component of DIME does not have an associated secondary research question because the focus of this study was to develop recommendations for how the military instrument of national power can address non-military efforts by the PRC. The next section of this chapter depicts how ARSOF efforts supporting human rights would nest with US national strategy. The literature review provides foundational knowledge for the researcher to answer the primary research question: How can ARSOF contribute to USG efforts that exploit America's asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM? The concluding

²⁸ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I-12 - I-13.

section of this chapter discusses the theoretical framework that the researcher used to conduct this analysis.

The researcher identified sources for this literature review based on their relevancy to international, US, or Chinese human rights policies per the DIME framework. The researcher compiled a pool of literature using a spiral process: the researcher began with international and national policy documents and spiraled the search spiraled outwards, using Google Scholar and the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library databases, as the researcher discovered topics related to the secondary research questions and involved the US, the PRC, or both.

For the first topic, international human rights intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, like the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Amnesty International, were instrumental in building a foundational understanding of the human rights sector. For the background on USG activities, this chapter draws from government documents and historical accounts of US human rights policies. For the background of CCP activities, this review uses academic articles on cultural relativism and think tank reports and analyses of CCP policies.

International Human Rights Regime

After the atrocities of the Second World War, an international human rights movement prompted global action.²⁹ In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the

²⁹ R. J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 38.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which detailed inherent and inalienable basic rights and fundamental freedoms that apply to all human beings.³⁰ International human rights law dictates government obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill fundamental human rights. Human rights fall under two broad categories: negative rights and positive rights. Negative rights encompass civil and political rights and are restraints on State power or freedom from the State (e.g., freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion).³¹ Positive rights encompass economic, social, and cultural rights and enable one to change one's socioeconomic condition or freedom through the State (e.g., food, housing, education, and healthcare).³² This distinction is discussed further in the next section.

With the UDHR as the foundation, nine core international human rights instruments, or binding treaties, were established with corresponding UN Treaty Bodies, which serve as monitoring committees to ensure implementation.³³ The PRC and the US have both signed seven of the nine treaties.³⁴ As human rights law is difficult to enforce,

³⁰ UN, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

³¹ James R. Mensch, "A Theory of Human Rights," openDemocracy, February 2010, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/theory-of-human-rights/>.

³² Ibid.

³³ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Treaty Body Database," United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/SitePages/Home.aspx>.

³⁴ Ibid. The US and PRC have signed the: (1) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; (2) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; (3) Convention Against Torture; (4) Convention on the Rights of Children; (5) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; (6) International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; (7) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Neither country has signed the: (8) Convention

it matters less who is a signatory to these treaties and more about who abides by the critical components of these treaties.

The Genocide Convention was the first human rights treaty adopted after the UDHR, yet it focuses on prevention and lacks a UN Treaty Body. The crime of *Genocide* falls under the criminal jurisdiction of the UN International Court of Justice for states or the independent International Criminal Court for individuals. Another inter-governmental body, the UN chartered Human Rights Council (HRC), is mandated to promote and protect human rights.³⁵ The council consists of forty-seven members elected by the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The US had been a member since the HRC's inception in 2006 until the Trump Administration withdrew the US from the HRC in June 2018, but the UNGA reelected the US in October 2021.³⁶ The UNGA has also elected the PRC to the HRC every three years; however, in 2020, the PRC lost the votes of 41 member states from its 2016 bid.³⁷

Lastly, a significant aspect of the international human rights regime is the regional human rights treaties in Europe, Africa, and the Americas, but notably not in Asia. The

on the Protection of all Migrant Workers; (9) Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

³⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "United Nations Human Rights Council," United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/pages/home.aspx>.

³⁶ Secretary of State, "Election of the United States to the UN Human Rights Council," (Press Release, US Department of State, Washington, DC, October 14, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/election-of-the-united-states-to-the-un-human-rights-council-hrc/>.

³⁷ Mary Hui, "China's Election to the UN Human Rights Council Revealed its Shaky Global Status," *Quartz*, October 14, 2020, <https://qz.com/1917295/china-elected-to-un-rights-council-but-with-lowest-support-ever/>.

exception to this is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) human rights declaration in 2009, which mandated the creation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to promote and protect human rights in Southeast Asia.³⁸ Although this the human rights community viewed this as primarily a step forward for human rights in Asia, the report's language caused some controversy. Specifically, international human rights organizations and other critics point to the phrase that indicated that the treaty would consider rights in "regional and national contexts," which created a loophole for human rights abuses.³⁹ The US can claim its asymmetric advantage over the PRC by highlighting how it exploits these loopholes and violates human rights treaties.

Cultural Perspectives on Human Rights

UN member states globally accept the universality of human rights; however, many still believe in *cultural relativism*, where morality varies from culture to culture.⁴⁰ The Western concept of *natural rights* developed during the European Enlightenment from philosophers such as John Locke, which influenced the language and politics of the American and French Revolutions.⁴¹ However, developing countries broadly value

³⁸ Irwin Loy, "ASEAN Approves Controversial Human Rights Declaration," *Voice of Asia*, November 18, 2012, <https://www.voanews.com/a/asean-summit-opens-in-phnom-penh/1548305.html>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations*, 37.

⁴¹ Donald P. Kommers and Gil Loescher, eds., *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 36.

economic and social rights above civil and political rights; they view basic needs as a precursor to enjoying the luxury of civil liberties and democracy.⁴² During the 1990s, this argument was labeled “Asian Values” and was used to push back against the universalism argument for human rights and justify authoritarian regimes in the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ In this light, the developing world views the West as not caring or insensitive to economic and social grievances, like poverty and hunger.⁴⁴ This perspective makes the Western conception of human rights less morally compelling. Although the 1997 Asian financial crisis largely discredited the “Asian Values” discourse, the sentiment has not disappeared from the region.⁴⁵

The Chinese perspective blends Confucianism with communism in its human rights approach. These ideologies “recognize private interests but view them as belonging to the collective group.”⁴⁶ Exercising individual rights would “be self-defeating as it would harm the collective interest” and thus harm one’s own interests.⁴⁷ The UDHR emphasizes individual rights, yet Chinese cultural values contradict this stance.⁴⁸ Chinese

⁴² Kommers and Loescher, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*, 81-83.

⁴³ Mark R. Thompson, “Pacific Asia after ‘Asian Values’: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and ‘Good Governance’,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004): 1085-1086.

⁴⁴ Kommers and Loescher, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*, 81-83.

⁴⁵ Thompson, “Pacific Asia after ‘Asian Values’,” 1079.

⁴⁶ R. Randle Edwards, Louis Henkin, and Andrew J. Nathan, *Human Rights in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 138.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 144.

⁴⁸ Pollis and Schwab, *Human Rights*, 153.

rulers have had Confucian obligations to their citizens but never developed limitations on their power that reflected international human rights norms.⁴⁹

Apart from ideological viewpoints, Clifford Bob's *Rights as Weapons* outlines a *Legal Realist* perspective on human rights. This perspective views rights as reflecting the unique political balance in a specific time and place.⁵⁰ He outlines ways in which states, and those opposed to them, use rights claims as weapons to counter threats, mask motives, overturn laws, suppress subordinates, and break coalitions.⁵¹ Chinese Marxists viewed human rights as a policy and ideological weapon of the West, as evidenced by the Chinese word for *right* as a combination of the words *power* and *interest*.⁵²

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the CCP used these realist tactics to co-opt human rights as a means to consolidate power.⁵³ The CCP used human rights language in legislation reform to create a “new social contract of growth in return for political acquiescence.” In other words, the CCP justified the denial of civil and political rights in exchange for economic and social rights. In the latest Freedom House annual

⁴⁹ Cheng et al., *Assessing Beijing's Power*, 5.

⁵⁰ Clifford Bob, *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13-15.

⁵² Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations*, 41.

⁵³ Ronald C. Keith, *China from the Inside Out: Fitting the People's Republic into the World* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 68-69.

report, the PRC scored second-worst for political rights and civil liberties.⁵⁴ The role of national law in the PRC is to maintain social harmony instead of arbitrate between individual claims.⁵⁵ According to Amnesty International, maintaining this harmony leads to the harsh repression of human rights defenders, journalists, political opposition, and ethnic minorities.⁵⁶ The CCP exerts social control through internet censorship, a combination of a lack of state transparency and a lack of freedom of individual expression.⁵⁷ The Chinese public generally believes this tradeoff protects them from the social divisions and political chaos caused by political pluralism and liberal democracy.⁵⁸

Narrative Competition

Grounded in Sun Tzu's concept that the goal of warfare should be to win without fighting, the CCP wages three warfares in the information environment: psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare.⁵⁹ To wage this information warfare,

⁵⁴ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), 27, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

⁵⁵ Vincent, *Human Rights in International Relations*, 41.

⁵⁶ Amnesty International (AI), *Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The State of the World's Human Rights* (London: AI, 2021), 119, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Berthold Kuhn, *China's Rise and Chinese Values: China's Growing Influence and Its Critics* (Berlin: Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, 2019), 5, https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Chinese-values_Download-file.pdf.

⁵⁹ Dean Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge," (Backgrounder No. 2821, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC, 2013), <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/winning-without-fighting-the-chinese-psychological-warfare-challenge>.

xinxi zhanzheng, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has created its fifth branch of service, the Strategic Support Force, consisting of information-related capabilities.⁶⁰ The PLA’s psychological warfare consists of five broad tasks: (1) present its own side as just, (2) emphasize its advantages, (3) undermine the opposition’s will to resist, (4) encourage dissension in the enemy’s camp, and (5) implement psychological defenses.⁶¹ The first two tasks are most relevant to this study, as the researcher does not assess US or Chinese domestic affairs. A 2018 RAND study found that the CCP “excels” in nearly every information-related capability assessed, partially due to high prioritization and lack of restrictions for information operations.⁶² One salient example is the spread of disinformation about the origins of COVID-19.⁶³ The CCP is largely unconstrained from conducting psychological warfare abroad, and it oversees “civil affairs-like projects” alongside Chinese investments to maximize influence with government leaders and domestic audiences.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Michael Schwille, Jakub P. Hlavka, Michael A. Brown, Steven Davenport, Isaac R. Porche III, and Joel Harding, *Lessons from Others for Future U.S. Army Operations in and through the Information Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 13, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1925z1.html.

⁶¹ Cheng, “Winning Without Fighting,” 4.

⁶² Paul, *Lessons from Others*, xi.

⁶³ Orville Schell and Susan L. Shirk, eds., *China’s New Direction: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy* (San Diego, CA: Asia Society’s Center on U.S.-China Relations and UC San Diego, 2021), 4, <https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2021-china-new-direction-report.pdf>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

The CCP has built a global network of media outlets to “disseminate narratives that promote Chinese successes and defend the CCP.”⁶⁵ CCP-owned media outlets like the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN), formally the Chinese Central Television (CCTV)-International, operate in six languages.⁶⁶ Due to State ownership, CGTN recently lost its license to operate in the United Kingdom and received further restrictions in the US under the Foreign Missions Act.⁶⁷ To sidestep skepticism, the CCP has outsourced narrative dissemination by signing content-sharing memoranda of understanding with local news outlets to provide free content “in exchange for more positive or less critical coverage” of the PRC.⁶⁸

Since the advent of broadcast media, the US has its own version of government-funded international media.⁶⁹ The US Information Agency held the mission of peacetime international communication until the 1994 International Broadcasting Act consolidated supervision of US-funded civilian networks, like *Voices of America* and *Radio Free*

⁶⁵ Schell and Shirk, *China’s New Direction*, 22.

⁶⁶ Safeguard Defenders, “Ownership and Control of Chinese Media,” *News* (blog), June 14, 2021, <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/ownership-and-control-chinese-media>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Sarah Cook, *China’s Global Media Footprint: Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, DC, National Endowment for Democracy: February 2021), 3, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-and-democratic-resilience-series-chinas-global-media-footprint/>.

⁶⁹ “History,” U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/history/>.

Europe, under the independent US Agency for Global Media.⁷⁰ This act also created *Radio Free Asia*, reaching audiences in 10 Indo-Pacific languages.⁷¹ Despite the reach of these nonprofit organizations, the US has “limited authorities to operate in the information environment short of declared hostilities,” in contrast to the CCP’s ongoing information warfare.⁷²

Aside from direct information warfare efforts, indirect narratives can influence global audiences. Joseph Nye, who coined the term *Soft Power* near the end of the Cold War, observed that “the openness of the American culture to various ethnicities and the American values of democracy and human rights exert international influence.”⁷³ The 2019 Soft Power 30 ranks the US as 5th and the PRC as 27th most globally influential state.⁷⁴ Notably, the US-PRC trade war and Hong-Kong protests negatively affected these rankings.⁷⁵ Increasingly, third-party countries view the PRC unfavorably due to its use of economic coercion and assertive diplomacy.⁷⁶ Ultimately, soft power is interconnected with the DIME instruments of national power.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ “History,” USAGM.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Paul, *Lessons from Others*, 44.

⁷³ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 170.

⁷⁴ Jonathan McClory, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2019* (Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019), 36-38, <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 21-22.

⁷⁶ Schell and Shirk, *China’s New Direction*, 23.

⁷⁷ McClory, *The Soft Power 30*, 104.

Diplomacy

The CCP's diplomacy is a continuation of the three warfares strategy. Historically, Chinese foreign policy embraced the Confucian concept of harmony and Zhou Enlai's principles of peaceful coexistence.⁷⁸ This translated to risk-averse and non-confrontational diplomacy. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, however, the CCP has employed more forceful and assertive tactics known as Wolf Warrior diplomacy, which draws lessons of how to "exhaust a greater force" from the Tao-te Ching to conduct strategic competition with the US.⁷⁹ The CCP employs Taoist tactics by peacefully "neutralizing potential rivals... and encouraging political deference" toward Chinese positions to control its perceived sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific – its foreign policy priority.⁸⁰

Wolf Warrior diplomats seek to actively influence public perception in favor of Chinese interests. For example, the CCP seeks to counter American human rights accusations by publishing a human rights report on one country: the United States. The 2020 report cites "incompetent pandemic containment," racial discrimination, "American democracy disorder," social unrest, social inequality, and disrespect for international

⁷⁸ Keith, *China from the Inside Out*, 130.

⁷⁹ Zhanna Malekos Smith, "New Tail for China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomats," Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 13, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-tail-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats>. The Tao-te Ching is a sixth century B.C. Chinese spiritual text outlines the philosophical concept of Tao (or *The Way*), which influenced the development of Confucianism and Buddhism.

⁸⁰ Schell and Shirk, *China's New Direction*, 21.

rules.⁸¹ Additionally, Chinese diplomats are helping to export anti-democratic tactics to autocratic leaders, spread disinformation, and promote its undemocratic agenda in international organizations, like the United Nations, in its efforts to alter the global norms and the rules-based international order.⁸²

The Carter Administration elevated the issue of human rights in American Foreign Policy. During the mid-1970s, Congress mandated the publication of annual Human Rights country reports, and the Department of State assigned human rights officers to embassies.⁸³ The State Department also expanded its definition of human rights to include the “right to such vital needs as food, shelter, health care, and education” in hopes of bridging the gap with developing countries.⁸⁴

Although these policies persist, the Biden Administration is attempting to reinvigorate the topic of human rights. Human rights are a central feature of Biden’s foreign and national security policies and a primary pillar of the Summit for Democracy in December 2021.⁸⁵ Washington vocally criticizes the PRC for its human rights abuses. It counters PRC narratives about the US human rights record with arguments like: “There can be no moral equivalence between rights-respecting countries that fall short in

⁸¹ Huaxia, ed., “The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020,” *XinhuaNet*, March 24, 2021, 2-18, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/24/c_139832301.htm.

⁸² Repucci and Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 5.

⁸³ Kommers and Loescher, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*, 232.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸⁵ US President, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, 20.

progress toward their ideals, and countries that regularly and massively trample on their citizens' human rights.”⁸⁶ The Trump administration's final statement from the State Department formally accused the PRC of crimes against humanity and genocide against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang Province.⁸⁷ The Biden administration maintained this stance, and for this reason, the US and its allies imposed a diplomatic boycott on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.⁸⁸ In March 2022, the Biden administration also accused Myanmar, a military government that the PRC supports and supplies with weapons, of crimes against humanity and genocide against the Rohingya population.⁸⁹

The Department of State's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy champions good governance while condemning the PRC's actions that undermine this goal.⁹⁰ The 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act facilitated a whole of government approach by providing five years of funding for diplomatic, development, and defense programs that compete

⁸⁶ Commission on Unalienable Rights, *Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights*, 7.

⁸⁷ Secretary of State, “Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang,” (Press Statement, US Department of State, Washington, DC, January 19, 2021), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/>.

⁸⁸ US Department of State (DOS) Spokesperson, “Department Press Briefing—December 6, 2021,” (DOS, Washington, DC, December 6, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-december-6-2021/>.

⁸⁹ Secretary of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken on the Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity in Burma” (Remarks, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, March 21, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum/>.

⁹⁰ US Department of State (DOS), *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC: DOS, November 4, 2019), 4, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

with the PRC in the Indo-Pacific.⁹¹ The US has also increased partner engagements in the region as a strategic competition tool. Commitments, for example, to quadrilateral cooperation between Australia, India, Japan, and the US, known as the Quad, reaffirm support for the rule of law with a basis in universal values.⁹²

Economic Statecraft

Economic statecraft has increasingly become the instrument of choice as globalization has strengthened commercial ties throughout the global economy. The PRC, specifically, prefers the use of economic statecraft because it “allows Beijing to shape the choices of others without resorting to military threats or the use of force.”⁹³ The CCP uses a combination of positive and negative inducements. It uses OBOR to create favorable political leverage through foreign direct investment and trade agreements. Conversely, they use negative means or coercion, such as threatening to restrict access to the large Chinese consumer market.⁹⁴

The CCP outlines regulations and guidelines for business practices abroad in its National Human Rights Action Plan; however, the conduct of Chinese businesses has

⁹¹ Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, Public Law 115-209, 115th Cong. (December 31, 2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736>.

⁹² The White House Briefing Room, “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’,” (The White House, Washington, DC, March 12, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

⁹³ Schell and Shrink, *China’s New Direction*, 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

often resulted in negative consequences for local communities.⁹⁵ A recent study totaled 1,670 human rights abuses connected with Chinese businesses under the OBOR framework, where the Asia-Pacific region filed the highest number of allegations.⁹⁶ This publication is a part of a growing body of research that has developed a case for why supporting civil society and human rights benefits businesses in accordance with UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁹⁷

The US has refined its economic statecraft tools in the strategic competition era. Focusing on Chinese conduct domestically, the US has sanctioned the PRC over its human rights abuses against Uyghur minorities.⁹⁸ Despite this hardline stance, western supply chains are inextricably linked to Chinese manufacturing and thus forced labor in Xinjiang.⁹⁹ This dilemma highlights the difficulties of creating unified action with the US

⁹⁵ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, *Going Out Responsibly: The Human Rights Impact of China's Global Investments* (New York: Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, August 2021), 10, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/2021_BHRRC_China_Briefing.pdf.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁹⁷ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “New Body of Research Clarifies Why & How Businesses Should Support Civic Freedoms & Human Rights Defenders,” accessed November 24, 2021, <https://old.business-humanrights.org/en/new-body-of-research-clarifies-why-how-businesses-should-support-civic-freedoms-human-rights-defenders>.

⁹⁸ US Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Chinese Government Officials in Connection with Serious Human Rights Abuse in Xinjiang,” (Press Release, Department of Treasury, Washington, DC, March 22, 2021), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0070>.

⁹⁹ Amy K. Lehr and Mariefaye Bechrakis, *Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang: Forced Labor, Forced Assimilation, and Western Supply Chains* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 4, <https://www.csis.org/>

private-sector-based economy compared to the PRC's ability to achieve unity of effort through state-owned enterprises.

The rising concern over human rights during the 1970s drove the development of the 1974 Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibited military assistance and economic aid to governments grossly violating human rights.¹⁰⁰ The US still implements this policy today, which contrasts with the PRC's more-enticing offer of contingency-free loans. Despite aid contingencies, the US uses targeted positive economic tools. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) runs programs to increase access to markets in Indo-Pacific countries.¹⁰¹ The Department of Commerce is complementing this effort by helping these partners connect with American firms.¹⁰² There are also whole-of-government efforts aimed at infrastructure and energy security goals in Indo-Pacific partner nations.¹⁰³

ARSOF in INDOPACOM

DoD's vision for the Indo-Pacific is nested with the whole-of-government approach toward a free and open Pacific. The INDOPACOM strategy "recognizes the

analysis/connecting-dots-xinjiang-forced-labor-forced-assimilation-and-western-supply-chains.

¹⁰⁰ A. Glenn Mower, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy: The Carter and Reagan Experiences*, Studies in Human Rights no. 7 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 129.

¹⁰¹ DOS, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15, 17.

linkages between economics, governance, and security” and seeks to enhance governance, the rule of law, and resilient civil societies to strengthen the international system.¹⁰⁴ The primary way INDOPACOM envisions achieving this is through Indo-Pacific partnerships.¹⁰⁵

Below the level of armed conflict, “ARSOF serves as the Army force of choice for dominating in competition, ... primarily through a partnered approach, to proactively advance US interests, defeat adversary attempts to expand the competitive space, and deter an escalation of violence.”¹⁰⁶ Outlining “What We Do,” the April 2022 US Special Operations Command Vision Statement explains that SOF units “shape the environment to reduce risk, prevent crises, and set conditions for success in competition and conflict... cultivate strong relationships with our global network... and illuminate irregular threats, foster partners’ resilience, and create dilemmas for our adversaries.”¹⁰⁷ Put simply, ARSOF set conditions, build relationships, and observe and mitigate threats. To support integrated deterrence, ARSOF offer outsized effects at lower political risk, enduring

¹⁰⁴ DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁶ US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), *Army Special Operations Strategy* (Fort Bragg, NC: USASOC, 2019), 3, https://www.soc.mil/AssortedPages/ARSOF_Strategy.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), *Special Operations Forces Vision & Strategy* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, April 2022), 1, <https://www.socom.mil/sof-vision-and-strategy>.

relationships with both local and interagency partners, presence and understanding, and information and influence campaigns.¹⁰⁸

The ARSOF core activities relevant to this study include Civil Affairs Operations, Counterterrorism, Foreign Internal Defense, Military Information Support Operations, Preparation of the Environment, and Security Force Assistance.¹⁰⁹ The three ARSOF branches have regionally aligned and trained forces with language and cultural expertise to support the Theater Special Operations Command-Pacific (SOCPAC).

Cross-Functional Teams, named Pacific Augmentation Teams within SOCPAC, are comprised of small elements from each of these three branches and are the ARSOF elements persistently engaged in several Indo-Pacific countries. Operational Detachments-Alpha from the 1st Special Forces Group continue to conduct training with partners like the Royal Thai Army and Thai Counter-Terrorism Operations Center.¹¹⁰ Civil-Military Support Elements from the 97th Civil Affairs Battalion have recently provided medical supplies and care to those affected by Typhoon Odette in the Philippines and conducted medical first responder training to Bangladeshi partners.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Crombe, Ferenzi, and Jones, “Integrating Deterrence across the Gray.”

¹⁰⁹ HQDA, ADP 3-05, 2-1. The core activities not listed include Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Counterinsurgency, Direct Action, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, Special Reconnaissance, and Unconventional Warfare.

¹¹⁰ 1st Special Forces Group-Airborne, “Green Berets practiced breaching...” Facebook, April 4, 2002, <https://www.facebook.com/1stSFGroup>; 1st Special Forces Group-Airborne, “Our Green Berets have been training alongside our Royal Thai Army partners...” Facebook, March 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1stSFGroup>.

¹¹¹ Special Operations Command Pacific, “Civil Affairs worked with Philippine partner organizations...” Facebook, March 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/socpac.socom>; Special Operations Command Pacific, “Civil Affairs teams conducted a

Military Information Support Teams from the 5th Psychological Operations Battalion have reduced popular support for extremist groups, like Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and helped implement emergency communication systems in Sri Lanka.¹¹² The 1st Special Forces Command's Information Warfare Center supports ARSOF operations by massing the effects of information-related capabilities in the information environment.¹¹³

Critical Factor Analysis Framework

To identify activities for ARSOF in the human rights sector, the researcher used the Critical Factor Analysis (CFA), also known as Center of Gravity (COG) Analysis, as this study's framework. Joint Publication 5-0 describes a COG as a "source of power or strength that enables a force to achieve its objective."¹¹⁴ Rather than attacking the adversary's COG directly, the researcher identified opportunities to indirectly affect the PRC's COG by using human rights as a tool or means.

The CFA logic framework facilitated the tracing of the indirect approach by identifying the COG's critical capabilities, or WAYS, of accomplishing its ENDS.¹¹⁵ Next, the framework helped to identify critical requirements, or MEANS, of

medical first responder seminar..." Facebook, March 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/socpac.socom>.

¹¹² Sharon Engelmeier, "Narrative Fusion Cell," *Special Warfare Magazine* 30, no. 4 (December 2017): 72; Janice Burton, "Crisis Response in Sri Lanka," *Special Warfare Magazine* 30, no. 4 (December 2017): 55.

¹¹³ 1 SFC (A), *Vision for 2021 and Beyond*, 8.

¹¹⁴ CJCS, JP 5-0, IV-22.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV-25.

accomplishing its ENDS, which are associated with the critical capabilities. Lastly, the framework helped to identify critical vulnerabilities or aspects of the critical capabilities that are vulnerable to attack.¹¹⁶ Figure 2 in the next chapter provides a visual depiction of this framework.

The CFA framework drove the data collection process and data analysis by logically categorizing relevant information that answers the study's research questions. If data related to the CCP's ability to wield influence through information, diplomacy, or economic statecraft and is targetable through ARSOF's use of human rights, then the researcher included that information in the study's findings.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher outlined the structure of the international human rights system and described how differing cultural interpretations of human rights create friction between the West and East, specifically between the US and the PRC. The review then explains the strategic tools used by the US and the PRC to compete for influence in the narrative, socio-political, and economic spheres. The PLA has prioritized capabilities to conduct its three warfares strategy, and Chinese diplomats have altered their non-confrontational stance to support this style of warfare. Still, the CCP prefers economic statecraft to gain and wield influence. The US also prefers economic tools to reinforce its diplomatic efforts, yet arguably falls short in the narrative component. ARSOF in INDOPACOM have the strategic guidance and the capacity to contribute to USG efforts.

¹¹⁶ CJCS, JP 5-0, IV-22.

As this chapter illuminated, there is currently a gap in literature in addressing human rights through military means. To understand how ARSOF might achieve this goal, the Critical Factor Analysis framework allowed for targeted data collection and analysis to identify opportunities for exploitation. Chapter 4 outlines these opportunities in Bangladesh and Thailand, and Chapter 5 summarizes these recommendations to answer the primary research question. The next chapter describes the research methodology and how the CFA functions as a logic model to facilitate qualitative case study analysis.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the researcher's chosen method of research, as well as the data collection and data analysis processes. The methodology outlines the construct that the study used to answer the primary research questions: How can ARSOF contribute to USG efforts that exploit America's asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM? This construct also helps to address the secondary research questions: How can ARSOF and their partners (1) highlight Chinese human rights violations through the information environment; (2) promote democracy and human rights over authoritarian practices in the socio-political environment; and (3) undercut Chinese economic practices through a good governance lens in Bangladesh and Thailand? The purpose of this research is to understand human rights dynamics and identify opportunities for the US to compete in the Indo-Pacific, allowing the researcher to propose recommendations for ARSOF to use human rights as a strategic competition tool. The literature review in Chapter 2 informs the choice to use qualitative case studies to answer these questions because Chinese and US human rights dynamics play out differently in different cultural contexts.

Method

The researcher chose to use a qualitative method instead of quantitative or mixed methods because it intends to understand the socio-cultural phenomena of Chinese influence and human rights in Indo-Pacific countries rather than test an objective

hypothesis. Quantitative studies looking at human rights and democracy, like Freedom House's Freedom in the World report, evaluate states based on indicators derived from the UDHR.¹¹⁷ The researcher reviewed the interplay between multiple states and assessed the potential for action instead of a performance evaluation based on a set of criteria. Mixed method studies in the same field, like The Soft Power 30 Report, combine objective data with subjective data from international polling.¹¹⁸ The researcher did not have authorization to conduct polling abroad in the case study countries. Furthermore, individual opinions would not provide substantial context to produce theories of change in the overall system, the case study country. The researcher reviewed both quantitative and mixed methods studies during the data analysis process.

The researcher used a case study method as a research technique because it allowed these phenomena to be bounded in specific cultural contexts in two distinct Indo-Pacific states to illustrate their nuances and provide tailored recommendations for ARSOF. The research design does not choose theorist Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach or a narrative inquiry, developed by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, as the researcher did not focus on individual experiences.¹¹⁹ Nor does it choose an ethnographical approach, as developed by theorist Carolyn Ellis, as the topic

¹¹⁷ Repucci and Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 32.

¹¹⁸ McClory, *The Soft Power 30*, 28.

¹¹⁹ Dale Spurlin, "A211 Research Methods, Lesson 8: Qualitative Research," (Lecture, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, October 21, 2021).

transcends local values, beliefs, and behaviors.¹²⁰ Lastly, it does not choose Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach, as the researcher did not intend to produce a theory from these findings.¹²¹ These research methods all examine social settings by taking an insider perspective to understand and draw meaning. However, the level of analysis for other qualitative research techniques is often the individual or sub-cultures, which was too narrow for the scope of this study. The case study method allowed for a systems analysis, which is appropriate for answering the research questions in this study.

Within this chosen methodology, the researcher followed Robert K. Yin's case study tradition because it suggests more positivistic notions than the constructivist notions laid out by both Robert E. Stake and Sharan Merriam.¹²² The researcher used a positivist rather than a constructivist epistemological lens, meaning the researcher views knowledge and reality as objective and verifiable rather than subjective and constructed.¹²³ Although the research topic is subjective in nature, the subject of human rights is grounded in a body of international laws and norms, which provides the recommendations with an objective and universal moral grounding. The researcher followed Yin's suggestion to collect data from multiple sources and to not draw

¹²⁰ Spurlin, "A211 Research Methods, Lesson 8."

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Bedrettin Yazan, "Three Approaches to Case Study Methods in Education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake," *The Qualitative Report* 20, no. 2 (February 2015): 146, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/2/yazan1.pdf>.

¹²³ Ibid., 136-137, 146.

distinctions between qualitative and quantitative evidence.¹²⁴ Furthermore, Yin’s case study method focuses on designing a “logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions.”¹²⁵ This approach intends to reduce the impact of any bias from the researcher. Additionally, recommendations grounded in theories of logic are more likely to achieve the intended effects.

While Yin’s method is preferential, it does not align with the study in two significant ways. First, the study draws from multiple sources but relies on secondary interviews or observations, as it does not involve field research to produce any original data or direct observations. Second, Yin recommends designing concrete case studies, such as organizations, small groups, and projects.¹²⁶ The relatively loose boundaries of the case studies used, undefined relationships within international borders, are less concrete, thus deviating from Yin’s method.

The two case studies are bound by space, time, and subject. The study analyzes Bangladesh and Thailand, bound by their internationally recognized borders. The researcher chose these countries from a narrowed list of Indo-Pacific countries with ARSOF presence to increase the efficacy of the study’s recommendations. The two countries illustrate contrast – unique in several important ways – highlighting the range of possible ARSOF actions across two sub-regions. Bangladesh is a majority Muslim

¹²⁴ Yazan, “Three Approaches to Case Study Methods in Education,” 137.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹²⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications: 2018), 32-33.

country in South Asia, where Chinese influence is arguably outpacing the US.¹²⁷

Thailand is a primarily Buddhist country in Asia and, by some measurements, is the most influential state within ASEAN.¹²⁸ Both countries are within the PRC's perceived sphere of influence and have potential grievances related to human rights. The cases are bound in time, beginning in 2012, when Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the CCP, until the present.¹²⁹ Xi Jinping's administration is executing a foreign policy unique from his predecessors. However, the majority of the collected data range from 2019 to the present day to inform the relevancy of the analysis and recommendations. Lastly, these case studies focus on the three subjects outlined in the secondary research questions, thus analyzing stakeholders in the information, socio-political, and economic environments in these two countries. These case study boundaries drive the data collection process, described in the following section.

Yin outlines four types of case study design: single-holistic, single-embedded, multiple-holistic, and multiple-embedded.¹³⁰ This study uses a multiple-holistic design because there is more than one case study. The researcher analyzed these cases as holistic

¹²⁷ Jonathan D. Moyer, Collin J. Meisel, Austin S. Matthews, David K. Bohl, and Mathew J. Burrows, *China-US Competition: Measuring Global Influence* (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, 2021), 14, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/China-US-Competition-Report-2021.pdf>.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁹ Cheng et al., *Assessing Beijing's Power*, 7.

¹³⁰ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 49.

systems rather than a cross-study comparison technique.¹³¹ However, the researcher used cross-case analysis to highlight significant commonalities to answer the primary research question after completing the case study analysis. Using the Critical Factor Analysis logic model, the researcher analyzed the two holistic systems, or countries in this study, described in the data analysis section below. The researcher interpreted the findings that resulted from this analysis to answer both the primary and secondary research questions. Figure 1, below, depicts a visual model of the study's design.

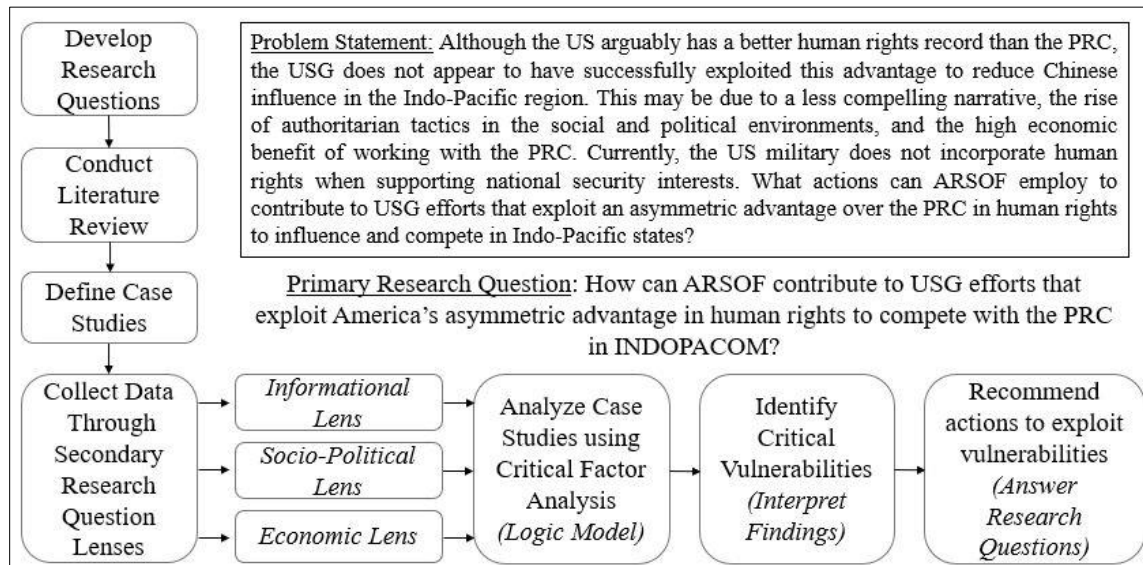


Figure 1. Visual Model of Study Design

Source: Created by author.

¹³¹ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 43. The logic model increases the study's internal validity; however, the use of multiple-case studies decreases its external validity as it lacks replication logic.

Data Collection

The data collected in this study focuses on the information, socio-political, and economic environments in Thailand and Bangladesh, corresponding to the secondary research questions. Due to travel limitations, the researcher collected data primarily through internet research. This research process was similar to the process conducted for the literature review. The researcher relied on some translated versions of Bangladeshi, Thai, and Chinese sources. These data originate from both outside observers, such as the UN and human rights organizations, as well as Chinese and host country stakeholders. The external observers provided a more objective view of the issues, such as human rights reports, surveys, and quantitative studies that measured Chinese influence in different sectors. The data collected for the narrative research question included translated Thai and Bangladeshi news and social media sources. The socio-political data included Thai and Bangladeshi policies, politicians' statements, and reports from civil society organizations. The economic data included financial data, and articles about companies involved in and citizens affected by Chinese business practices. Open-source digital material is the basis for this research.

The researcher used Yin's four principles for data collection to increase construct validity. First, the research originated from multiple sources of evidence. The researcher ended the collection process after reaching data triangulation, meaning when the researcher "collect[s] information from multiple sources that can corroborate the same finding."¹³² Second, the researcher created a database to organize and document the data

¹³² Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 128.

collected – this method allowed for a better assessment of data triangulation.¹³³ Third, the researcher used a chain of evidence method. While collecting evidence, the research produced hypothetical findings or themes. The researcher then ensured these findings linked to both the research questions and additional supporting evidence to ensure consistent methodology throughout the study.¹³⁴ Fourth, the researcher exercised caution with social media sources. These sources often hold biases and must be cross-checked for accuracy.¹³⁵ Although not conducting original research, these principles increase the reliability of the study.

Data Analysis

Yin's case study design requires both the logic linking the data to the research questions and the criteria for interpreting the findings. The Critical Factor Analysis (CFA) achieves this using the logic model analysis method. The CFA is threat-based as the results of this study are recommendations to exploit current conditions in competition with the PRC. The chain of logic begins with the center of gravity. This study chose the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the center of gravity because it is the organization responsible for executing President Xi's vision. The critical capabilities are linked to each secondary research question, seen in green in figure 2. These are interpreted as the ways in which the CCP achieves its ends: increased Chinese influence in the *Case Study Country*.

¹³³ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 130-131.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 134-136.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 136-137.

Each critical capability has critical requirements, or means (in purple), its uses to achieve the ends. The researcher reviewed the collected data to identify potential themes or findings. First, the quantitative and qualitative evidence required examination and categorization before entering the logic model. The evidence needed to relate directly or indirectly to both the CCP and one of its capabilities (secondary research questions) for the researcher to include it as a critical requirement.

The researcher then analyzed the themes to identify critical vulnerabilities or avenues to exploit (in red). Several themes did not result in critical vulnerabilities as there were no clear avenues for ARSOF to exploit. The researcher did not depict these themes in the CFAs but discussed briefly with corresponding justifications in the analysis section for each case study in chapter 4. The themes assessed by the researcher to have vulnerabilities each produced opportunities for ARSOF activities (in blue). These opportunities resulted in the recommendations for ARSOF that answer the secondary research questions, and ultimately the primary research question.

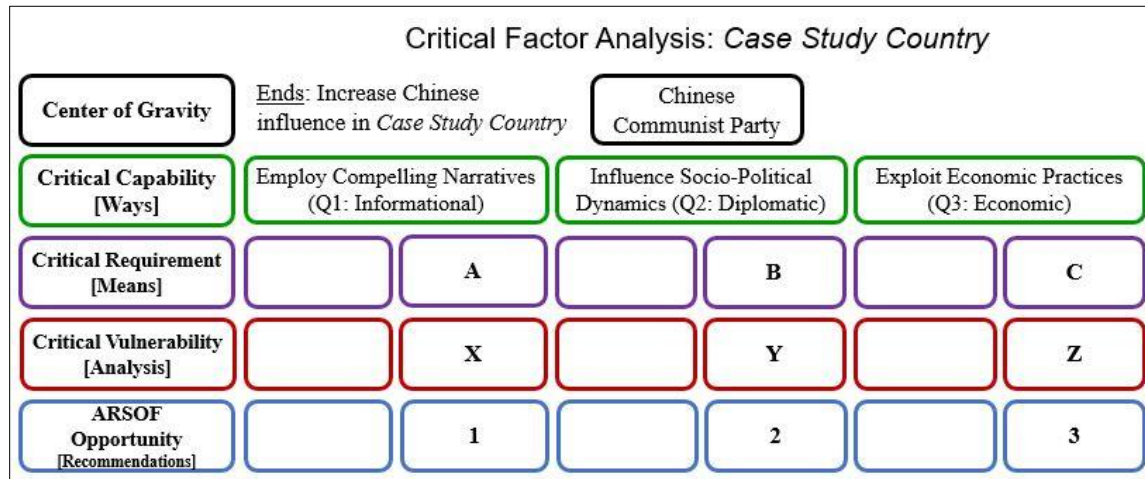


Figure 2. Sample Critical Factor Analysis

Source: Created by author using template from Joseph Krebs, “C501: Joint Planning Process Day 2,” (Lecture, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, October 19, 2021).

Putting this all together, the CCP achieves increased influence in Bangladesh or Thailand by employing compelling narratives, influencing socio-political dynamics, and applying exploitive economic practices, using A, B, and C means. The X, Y, and Z critical vulnerabilities present opportunities to for ARSOF to conduct 1, 2, and 3 activities to decrease Chinese influence and/or increase US influence.

While the study presents the analysis primarily in narrative form, it incorporates figures to illustrate the findings. The researcher presents the CFA logic models for both Bangladesh and Thailand, similar to figure 2. It also includes a figure depicting the operational environment, which illustrates relevant aspects of the PRC’s regional strategy.

Summary

The first two chapters of this study introduced the research topic and the associated context for the problem the researcher seeks to address. This chapter presented an overview of the methodology and research design. Drawing from Yin's qualitative case study method, the researcher analyzed Bangladesh and Thailand through informational, socio-political, and economic lenses to explore Chinese influence. The researcher collected evidence from multiple types of open-source digital material. The researcher then analyzed these data using a CFA framework to identify critical vulnerabilities of CCP operations in these countries. Lastly, the researcher interpreted these vulnerabilities as opportunities for ARSOF to use human rights as a strategic competition tool to exploit America's asymmetric human rights advantage to decrease Chinese influence. The next chapter presents the data, conduct analysis, and addresses the study's secondary research questions for both cases.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The previous three chapters introduced this study's topic and research questions, outlined the context of the human rights field and the dimensions of strategic competition between the US and the PRC, and delineated the case study method used to analyze PRC activity in Bangladesh and Thailand. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the case study analysis and answer the three secondary research questions: How can ARSOF and their partners (1) highlight Chinese human rights violations, (2) promote democracy and human rights over authoritarian practices, and (3) undercut Chinese exploitive economic practices in Bangladesh and Thailand?

This chapter consists of Bangladesh and Thailand case study sections, which begin by providing relevant background information to each case study, including an overview of the military environment. These sections consist of information, socio-political, and economic environment sub-sections corresponding to the secondary research questions. These sub-sections first discuss findings that did not result in key themes and then discuss key themes (critical requirements) drawn from the data collection process and its associated analysis (critical vulnerabilities). These sub-sections include answers to the secondary research questions, which are the building blocks to answer the study's primary research question: How can ARSOF contribute to USG efforts that exploit America's asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM?

The PRC prioritizes its near abroad through its efforts to expand its presence and influence. Figure 3 attempts to illustrate the CCP's interests and activity in the region. The PRC is reliant on the Strait of Malacca maritime chokepoint, which facilitates the transport of energy supplies to the PRC and a significant portion of global trade.¹³⁶ The CCP fears that US and/or Japanese navies could exploit this supply chain vulnerability by blocking energy and other supplies moving through the Strait of Malacca to mainland China.¹³⁷ OBOR was launched, in part, to address this "Malacca Dilemma."¹³⁸ Figure 3 depicts the two relevant land-based OBOR economic corridors most relevant to this study and illustrates the sea-based strategy, coined by security analysts as the "String of Pearls" strategy.¹³⁹ Strategic investments in ports along this string of pearls, as well as along these economic corridors, would enable the PRC to project influence, and potentially naval power.¹⁴⁰ CCP tactics to execute this vision present differently depending on the context, as illustrated in the case studies below.

¹³⁶ Jacob J. Lew, Gary Roughead, Jennifer Hillman, and David Sacks, *China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States*, Independent Task Force Report No. 79 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 62.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Chen Shaofeng, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma' and Implications," *International Journal of China Studies* 1 (February 1, 2010): 20.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

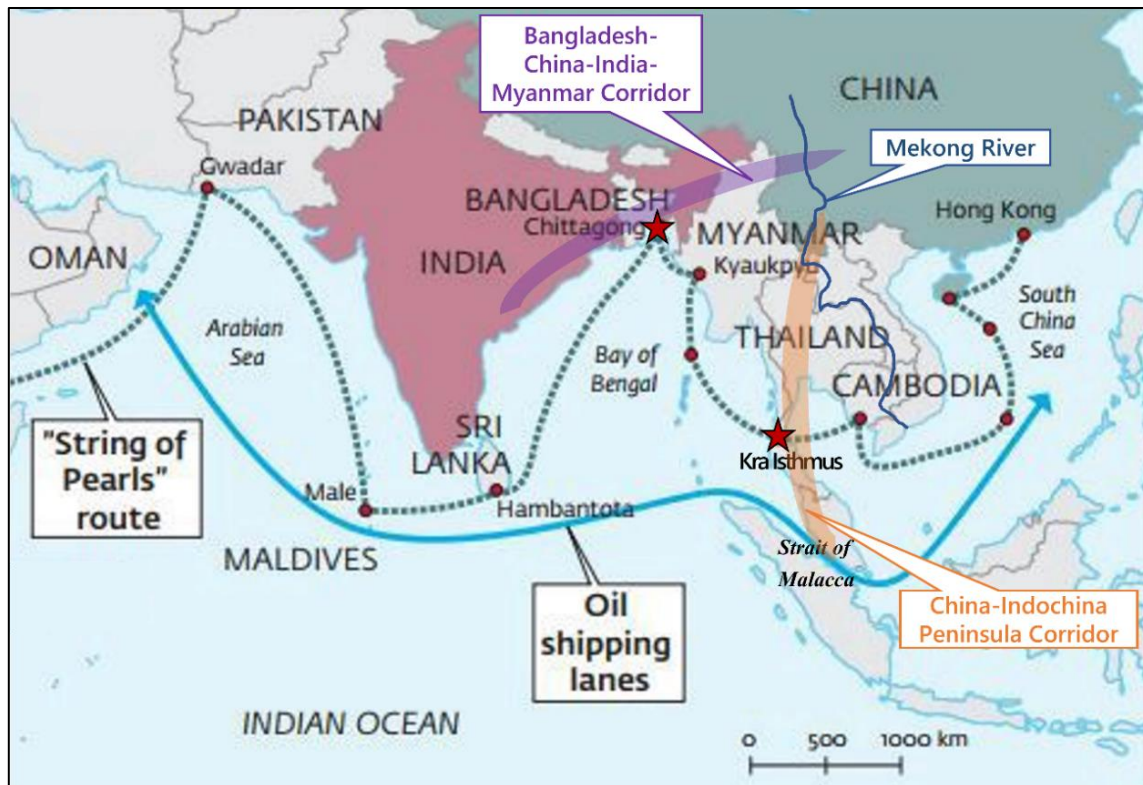


Figure 3. The CCP's Plan to Address the Malacca Dilemma

Source: Adapted by author from Chris Kiyaseh, "China's Economic Imperialism," *Reformer*, September 27, 2020, <https://medium.com/reformermag/chinas-economic-imperialism-477ed22cdd9e>.

In the era of strategic competition, smaller powers develop strategies to maximize their interests. Bangladesh holds a "Friendship to all and malice towards none" foreign policy doctrine, which seeks to primarily balance between the PRC and India and secondarily between the US, Russia, and other larger powers.¹⁴¹ Caught more directly in the US-PRC rivalry, Thailand has adopted a hedging strategy to "avoid becoming too

¹⁴¹ A.K. Abdul Momen, "A Conversation with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister H.E. A.K. Abdul Momen," (video of interview, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, April 5, 2022), 29:25, <https://www.usip.org/events/conversation-bangladeshi-foreign-minister-he-ak-abdul-momen>.

close – and hence too dependent – on any single external power” and thus the US and the PRC are “neither enemy nor friend.”¹⁴² In fact, Thai public opinion has more confidence in Japan and the European Union as trustworthy partners and as their third-party choice to hedge against the US-PRC rivalry.¹⁴³ Although some experts argue that both states have fallen into a “gravitational shift toward China” in response to inconsistent commitment from the US, both states have resisted PRC influence in important ways.¹⁴⁴

Bangladesh

Bangladesh recently celebrated fifty years of independence.¹⁴⁵ Bangladesh was colonized as a part of India under British rule until 1947 and then became the Pakistani province, East Pakistan, until its war of independence against Pakistan in 1971.¹⁴⁶ India, which intervened to aid Bangladesh in this war, sees itself as Bangladesh’s “big brother.”¹⁴⁷ Since gaining independence, Bangladesh has sought to balance the influence

¹⁴² David L. Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10, 140.

¹⁴³ Sharon Seah, Hoang Thi Ha, Melinda Martinus, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), 34, 42-50, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

¹⁴⁴ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Momen, “A Conversation with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister,” 6:52.

¹⁴⁶ Bruce Vaughn and Will Mackay, *Bangladesh and Bangladesh-U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service Report R44094 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, updated October 17, 2017), 10, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44094>.

¹⁴⁷ Samantha Custer, Tanya Sethi, Jonathan A. Solis, Joyce Jiahui Lin, Siddhartha Ghose, Anubhav Gupta, Rodney Knight, and Austin Baehr, *Silk Road Diplomacy:*

of regional and global powers. The appetite for geopolitical competition within Bangladesh is mixed, with 30% equal approval ratings for the PRC and the US and 41% approval of India in a 2020 citizen poll.¹⁴⁸ As alluded to above and illustrated in figure 3, the CCP seeks to increase relations with Bangladesh for geopolitical reasons: access to a deep-water port in the Indian Ocean and a ground connection to the region through the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar economic corridor, which could collectively bypass the Strait of Malacca chokepoint.¹⁴⁹

Bangladesh has balanced its cooperation with the US and the PRC in the military environment. The PRC is Bangladesh's primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines.¹⁵⁰ Notably, Bangladesh has not allowed Chinese military vessels access to its deep-water ports.¹⁵¹ Although the US also supplies equipment, it focuses on multilateral exercises for persistent engagement.¹⁵² Bangladesh is one of the largest

Deconstructing Beijing's Toolkit to Influence South and Central Asia (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, College of William & Mary, December 10, 2019), 33.

¹⁴⁸ Samantha Custer, Justin Schon, Ana Horigoshi, Divya Mathew, Bryan Burgess, Vera Choo, Amber Hutchison, Austin Baehr, and Kelsey Marshall, *Corridors of Power: How Beijing Uses Economic, Social, and Network Ties to Exert Influence along the Silk Road* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, College of William & Mary, December 2021), 60, 64.

¹⁴⁹ Anu Anwar and Michael Kugelman, "America Should Bet on Bangladesh," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/01/us-bangladesh-relations-dhaka-india-china-bri/>.

¹⁵⁰ Bruce Vaughn, "Bangladesh," (Congressional Research Service Report In Focus IF10214, Washington, DC, updated February 2, 2021), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10214>.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 21, 35.

contributors to UN peacekeeping efforts, and training these troops has become a significant opportunity for DoD cooperation.¹⁵³ Additionally, Bangladesh ranks 7th on the Global Climate Risk Index.¹⁵⁴ Thus, disaster preparedness has also been a mainstay of defense, specifically ARSOF, cooperation efforts.¹⁵⁵

Beyond the military environment, the rest of this case study section presents the analysis of the remaining operational variables associated with the DIME construct. Figure 4 depicts the Critical Factor Analysis for Bangladesh. The research's resulting themes, or critical requirements, are in purple. The analysis of these themes, or critical vulnerabilities, are in red. The opportunities for ARSOF action are in blue, which answer the secondary research questions 1A, 2A, and 3A.

¹⁵³ DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 51.

¹⁵⁴ David Eckstein, Vera Künzel, and Laura Schäfer, "Global Climate Risk Index 2021: Who Suffers Most Extreme Weather Events? Weather-Related Loss Events in 2019 and 2000-2019," (Briefing Paper, GermanWatch e.V., Berlin, January 2021), 13.

¹⁵⁵ Aria A. Cohen, "Maritime Foreign Internal Defense in Bangladesh," *Special Warfare Magazine* 30, no. 4 (December 2017): 91-92.

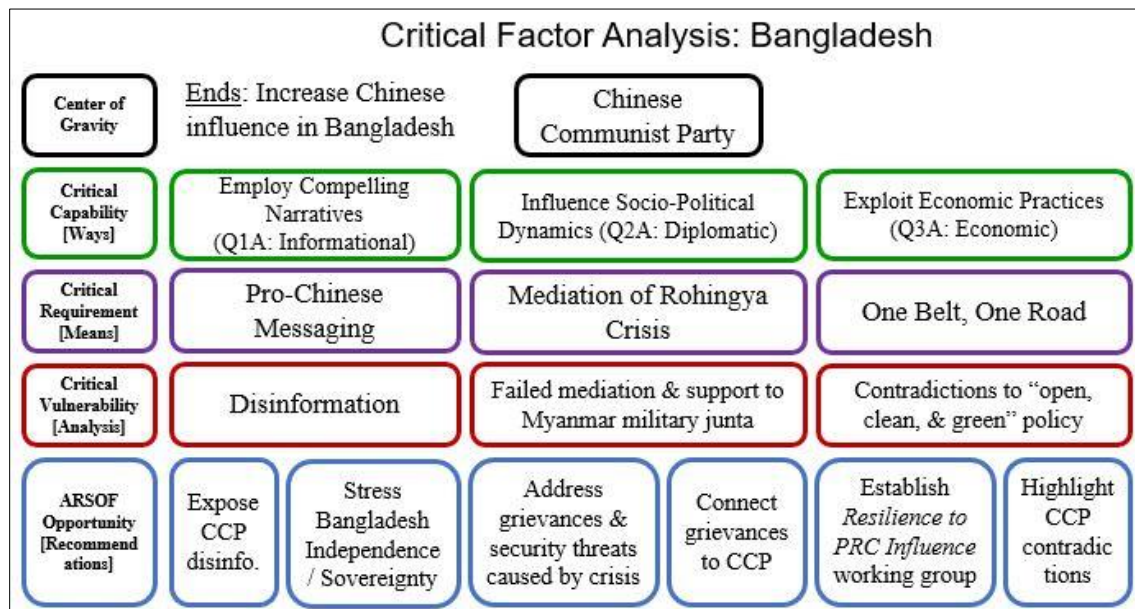


Figure 4. Critical Factor Analysis: Bangladesh

Source: Created by author using template from Joseph Krebs, "C501: Joint Planning Process Day 2," (Lecture, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, October 19, 2021).

Information Environment

Bangladeshis primarily consume information via the internet, while traditional television and newspaper outlets still communicate to older and lower-income populations.¹⁵⁶ Considered to be in a state of "digital emergence," Bangladesh has seen vast increases in internet and social media penetration, with 73% of the population having access to the internet and two-thirds of the population accessing the internet on their

¹⁵⁶ D'reach Rabeth Khan, "A Peek into the Digital Emergence of Bangladesh," WARC, October 9, 2021, <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/opinion/a-peek-into-the-digital-emergence-of-bangladesh/en-gb/4397>.

phones.¹⁵⁷ The government of Bangladesh responded to this trend with the 2018 Digital Security Act, which surveils individual online activity, sometimes leading to arrests, and blocks access to both international and local news sources if deemed to “destroy communal harmony.”¹⁵⁸ The Digital Security Act was considered a potential theme because it appears to be moving Bangladesh closer to authoritarianism by using tactics similar to the Chinese. Despite concerning trends, this did not present a vulnerability for the CCP, nor did it provide a clear opportunity for ARSOF activity.

In the public diplomacy realm, the CCP offered COVID-19 assistance and expertise, in exchange for developing sister-city arrangements to increase cultural linkages between the two countries.¹⁵⁹ In addition to strengthening foreign relations, the CCP uses programs like these to distract from its domestic authoritarianism, like the repression of freedom of speech it used in the initial cover-up of the virus. ARSOF has provided its own assistance to Indo-Pacific partners and should coordinate with the US Embassy’s Public Affairs Office to support future public diplomacy opportunities that undermine CCP efforts at distraction from human rights issues.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Rabeth Khan, “A Peek into the Digital Emergence of Bangladesh,”

¹⁵⁸ “Bangladesh: Online Surveillance, Control,” Human Rights Watch, January 8, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/08/bangladesh-online-surveillance-control>.

¹⁵⁹ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, “Chinese Proposal to Bangladesh for Sister-city Alliance,” Observer Research Foundation, June 12, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/chinese-proposal-bangladesh-sister-city-alliance-67725/>.

¹⁶⁰ IDP FORUM Staff, “U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific Partners with Regional Allies to Combat COVID-19,” Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, July 23, 2021, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2021/07/u-s-special-operations-command-pacific-partners-with-regional-allies-to-combat-covid-19/>.

Pro-Chinese Messaging

The CCP has employed a “charm offensive” in Bangladesh.¹⁶¹ The CCP employs a robust public diplomacy campaign and highlights projects like the 8th Friendship Bridge, completed in December 2021.¹⁶² In addition to promoting Chinese- Bangladesh cooperation, they also emphasize pro-PRC disinformation, such as the “Real Xinjiang” video production to dismiss Uyghur genocide allegations.¹⁶³ This charm-offensive is more prevalent than wolf-warrior tactics because Bangladesh-PRC ties are less strong and the strategic competition space is more crowded than others in the region. The exception to this approach was the CCP’s unprovoked warning to Bangladesh not to join the QUAD partnership.¹⁶⁴

Secondary Research Question 1A: How can ARSOF and their partners highlight Chinese human rights violations through the information environment in Bangladesh?

ARSOF and their partners have an opportunity to expose disinformation of CCP origin in Bangladeshi media. One theme to avoid in this messaging is overtly anti-

¹⁶¹ Asif Muztaba Hassan, “China’s Charm Offensive in Bangladesh,” East Asia Forum, October 21, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/10/21/chinas-charm-offensive-in-bangladesh/>.

¹⁶² “The Main Bridge of the 8th Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge Is Successfully Closed,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, December 29, 2021, http://bd.china-embassy.org/eng/zmjw/202112/t20211229_10477009.htm.

¹⁶³ “Follow the Lens of Sunny to Explore the Real Xinjiang-- Xinjiang in the Eyes of a Bangladeshi Student,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, December 9, 2021, http://bd.china-embassy.org/eng/zmjw/202112/t20211209_10464823.htm.

¹⁶⁴ Hassan, “China’s Charm Offensive in Bangladesh.”

Chinese rhetoric, which Bangladeshis could perceive as part of a proxy information war. One theme to stress in US messaging is the encouragement of Bangladeshi independence and sovereignty.

Socio-Political Environment

During the 8th US-Bangladesh Partnership dialogue, Bangladesh expressed that the “shared commitment to democratic governance and human rights serves as the fundamental basis for partnership.”¹⁶⁵ Despite holding the status of emerging partner, Bangladesh did not receive an invite to President Biden’s Summit of Democracies in December 2021.¹⁶⁶ According to the Economic Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, Bangladesh has recently dropped from a “Flawed Democracy” to a Hybrid Regime” and is labeled “Partly Free,” with low scores in both political rights and civil liberties by Freedom House’s annual report.¹⁶⁷ The ruling Awami party has consolidated power through digital surveillance, election fraud, crackdowns on civil society organizations, political violence, and silencing of opposition, among other increasingly authoritarian

¹⁶⁵ “8th US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue Held,” Bangladesh Beyond, updated March 20, 2022, <https://bangladeshbeyond.com.bd/8th-us-bangladesh-partnership-dialogue-held/>.

¹⁶⁶ Michael J. Green, “Biden’s Democracy Summit Success Now Depends on Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, December 14, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/14/democracy-summit-biden-asia-allies-china/>.

¹⁶⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge* (London, UK: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), 14, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>; Repucci and Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 16.

tactics.¹⁶⁸ The analysis of these authoritarian tactics as a potential theme concluded that pushing Bangladesh on these domestic issues could drive them closer to the PRC. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government has an 83% approval rating, and 76% of Bangladeshis view the country as "heading in the right direction," thus are willing to accept the tradeoff of autocratic tendencies in the short-term for the mid to long-term development of their country and way of life.¹⁶⁹

Although the Bangladesh public broadly accepts this social contract, they have leveraged the limited civic space to express their concerns. The jailing of opposition candidates resulted in a boycott of the 2021 election by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party.¹⁷⁰ However, the Sheikh Hasina government has made concessions to both progressives demanding accountability for rape victims and conservative Islamic activists.¹⁷¹ The conservative Islamic activist group, Hefajat e Islam, advocates for radical Islamic Law in Bangladesh.¹⁷² This group is responsible for violent protests in April 2021

¹⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022*, 73-81.

¹⁶⁹ Center for Insights in Survey Research, "National Survey of Bangladeshi Public Opinion: August 1- September 2019," International Republican Institute, 2019, 4, 23, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/bangladesh_2019_poll_final_public_release_1_0.pdf.

¹⁷⁰ Julhas Alam, "Awami League Set to Win Vote Boycotted by Rivals," *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/awami-league-set-to-win-vote-boycotted-by-rivals/>.

¹⁷¹ "Global Protest Tracker," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, updated April 1, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker#>.

¹⁷² Saimum Parvez, "Understanding the Shahbag and Hefajat Movements in Bangladesh: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 4 (June 1, 2022): 842.

in response to Indian President Modi's anti-Islamic policies.¹⁷³ The US Embassy and ARSOF should monitor this group with regards to Islamic extremism but also encourage active political participation and pluralism.

In December 2021, the Biden Administration enacted sanctions against the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and its leaders for various human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings.¹⁷⁴ Bangladeshi and international human rights groups have been reporting these violations since 2004.¹⁷⁵ Despite these human rights abuses, the RAB holds a 98% public approval rating.¹⁷⁶ The RAB is responsible for what Bangladesh deemed a successful counterterrorism and counternarcotics campaign.¹⁷⁷ These sanctions are an opportunity for exploitation by the CCP because the government of Bangladesh is resentful of the unilateral action with an unclear avenue for reform.¹⁷⁸ The researcher found no clear opportunity for ARSOF in the short-term but could potentially add value

¹⁷³ Parvez, "Understanding the Shahbag and Hefajat Movements in Bangladesh," 843.

¹⁷⁴ Ali Riaz, "US Sanctions on Bangladesh's RAB: What Happened? What's Next?" *South Asia Source* (blog), *The Atlantic Council*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/us-sanctions-on-bangladeshs-rab-what-happened-whats-next/>.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Sebastian Strangio, "Bangladesh's Troubling Death Squad," *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2011, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/09/bangladeshs-troubling-death-squad/>.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Riaz, "US Sanctions on Bangladesh's RAB."

by working with the US Embassy in Dhaka to develop a long-term security sector reform program to provide Bangladesh a path to remove the sanctions.

Mediation of the Rohingya Crisis

Over one million Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar for Bangladesh to escape religious persecution.¹⁷⁹ These refugees are relocating to Bhasan Char, a previously uninhabited island at severe risk of climate disasters.¹⁸⁰ The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar recently commended Bangladesh on its “humane response” to housing the refugees.¹⁸¹ The CCP has attempted to mediate between Bangladesh and Myanmar in an effort to project power in the region and minimize the Uyghur issue.¹⁸² Since 2018, however, the CCP has failed to make progress and, in fact, openly supports the Myanmar military government responsible for the Rohingya crisis.¹⁸³ The researcher’s initial hypothesis was that messaging could appeal to Bangladesh’s Muslim majority to express solidarity with the religiously persecuted Muslim Rohingya. Many Bangladeshis, however, view the crisis as a burden and claim “refugees are taking away

¹⁷⁹ Vaughn, “Bangladesh,” 1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Tom Andrews, “Mission to Bangladesh 13-19 December 2021: End of Mission Statement,” (Statement by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Dhaka, December 19, 2021), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/03/mission-bangladesh-13-19-december-2021?LangID=E&NewsID=28001>.

¹⁸² Poppy McPherson, Ruma Paul, and Shoon Naing, “China Struggles in New Diplomatic Role, Trying to Return Rohingya to Myanmar,” *Reuters*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-china-insight/china-struggles-in-new-diplomatic-role-trying-to-return-rohingya-to-myanmar-idUSKBN1ZJ0SY>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

jobs and engaging in illegal acts such as drug trafficking.”¹⁸⁴ Citizens living along the Myanmar border, where the refugee camps were established, have either been displaced or affected by a decrease in the provision of services and an increase in security threats, like trafficking and radicalization of refugees.¹⁸⁵ Therefore, Bangladeshis may be less sympathetic to Uyghur-Rohingya solidarity messaging but more open to a narrative that attributes partial blame to the PRC for their grievances.

Secondary Research Question 2A: How can ARSOF and their partners promote democracy and human rights over authoritarian practices in the socio-political environment in Bangladesh?

ARSOF has an opportunity to partner with government and non-governmental organizations to improve the conditions surrounding the refugee camps and address Bangladeshi citizens’ concerns. Themes to stress in US messaging should be Chinese silence and ineffectiveness as a mediator and how little the CCP cares about the security threats the alleged genocide and subsequent crisis has created. ARSOF and multilateral partners, like Japan and India, could partner with the Bangladeshi Army and Border Guard, already deployed to the region, to provide support to foreign internal defense (FID) to address security threats. These efforts would complement existing US Embassy

¹⁸⁴ Jinkyung Beck and Ha Eun Yoon, “State of Legal and Social Support for Refugees and Displaced Foreign Nationals in Asia: Comparison of Five Asian Countries,” (ADRN Issue Briefing, Asia Democracy Research Network, Seoul, Republic of Korea, December 29, 2021), http://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/pub/view.asp?intSeq=20995&board=eng_issuebriefing&keyword_option=&keyword=&more=.

¹⁸⁵ Kudrat-E-Khuda Babu, “The Impacts and Challenges to Host Country Bangladesh Due to Sheltering the Rohingya Refugees,” ed. Michael William Scott, *Cogent Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 1770943, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2020.1770943>.

counterterrorism efforts, as well as US humanitarian assistance provided to aid the government's response to the Rohingya.

Economic Environment

Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.¹⁸⁶ After decades of poverty, the government of Bangladesh has developed a long-term economic development plan, Vision 2041, with the goal of becoming a developed country by 2041.¹⁸⁷ Bangladesh is successfully hedging between the PRC, India, Russia, the US, and Japan by broadening and diversifying its economic partners and taking steps to lead economic cooperation efforts across the Bay of Bengal region.¹⁸⁸ During the 8th US-Bangladesh partnership dialogue, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister suggested specific areas for further economic cooperation with the US; however, these are not particularly relevant to ARSOF's ability to contribute to USG competition with the PRC.¹⁸⁹

Bangladesh's largest importer is the US, while the PRC is the largest exporter to Bangladesh.¹⁹⁰ Over seventy percent of Bangladesh's exports are from the Ready-Made-

¹⁸⁶ Momen, "A Conversation with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister," 12:48.

¹⁸⁷ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Making Vision 2041 a Reality: Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041* (Dhaka: General Economics Division, 2020), 1.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁸⁹ "8th US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue Held," Bangladesh Beyond.

¹⁹⁰ Vaughn, "Bangladesh," 1.

Garment (RMG) industry, which has a record of violating workers' rights.¹⁹¹ When analyzing the RMG industry as a potential theme, the researcher considered that the PRC is also a large RMG producer, and the US and Europe are the major export markets for RMG.¹⁹² Although the US has increased its awareness and emphasis on corporate social responsibility surrounding RMG worker's rights, pursuing this avenue does not provide a clear opportunity for ARSOF action that would be beneficial in competition with the PRC.¹⁹³ In fact, in 2019 the Government of Bangladesh agreed to a pay raise for low-income garment workers after a year-long protest against low wages in the industry.¹⁹⁴ Concessions like these mark progress toward a more accountable and democratic government.

OBOR

In 2016, Bangladesh agreed to 27 OBOR projects with the CCP, valued at \$22 billion.¹⁹⁵ Bangladesh has successfully mitigated the risk of "debt-trap" loans by

¹⁹¹ Hinrich Voss, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Human Rights and Modern Slavery Vulnerabilities in Global Value Chains," *Transnational Corporations Journal* 27, no. 2 (2020): 116.

¹⁹² Ibid., 115.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ "Global Protest Tracker," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹⁹⁵ Senior Correspondent, "Bangladesh Formally Joins China's Flagship 'One Belt One Road' Initiative," *bdnews24.com*, October 15, 2016, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/10/15/bangladesh-formally-joins-chinas-flagship-one-belt-one-road-initiative>.

increasing Bangladesh's share in the projects.¹⁹⁶ Since 2020, several projects have been canceled or have faced continuous public scrutiny due to ties to corruption and protests over coal and other environmental concerns.¹⁹⁷ The CCP attempted to reframe OBOR as the "Green BRI" in 2019 in response to foreign criticism, expressing that projects would be "open, clean, and green."¹⁹⁸ Notably, Bangladeshi efforts over the last several years have illuminated contradictions in this CCP rhetoric. Bangladesh has also experienced growing Sinophobia within the working class with occasional clashes "as they not only fear job insecurity" but also experience disrespect to Muslims and Islamic practices.¹⁹⁹ This small example illustrates how PRC activity can infringe on Bangladeshi rights, like their right to Freedom from Discrimination, even if these actions do not originate from the State itself. Despite widespread distrust for the PRC, the Government of Bangladesh is pragmatic about cooperating with the PRC to advance its strategic interests, like economic development.

¹⁹⁶ ANI, "Bangladesh Resists 'Debt-Trap of China, Avoids Belt and Road Initiative Heavy-Handedness,'" *Mint*, July 11, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/bangladesh-resists-debt-trap-of-china-avoids-belt-and-road-initiative-heavyhandedness-11625962332098.html>.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Jason Tower and Jennifer Staats, "China's Belt and Road: Progress on 'Open, Green, and Clean?'" United States Institute of Peace, April 29, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/chinas-belt-and-road-progress-open-green-and-clean>.

¹⁹⁹ ANI, "Bangladesh Hurt by Chinese Worker's Disrespect for Local Sentiments," *The Print*, March 28, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/bangladesh-hurt-by-chinese-workers-disrespect-for-local-sentiments/892155/>.

Secondary Research Question 3A: How can ARSOF and their partners promote good governance and undercut Chinese exploitive economic practices in Bangladesh?

There is an opportunity for ARSOF and their partners to identify and amplify PRC contradictions in OBOR activity to its “open, clean, and green” rhetoric. In close cooperation with the US Embassy, ARSOF and their partners could facilitate a working group centered around enhancing resiliency to PRC influence. This initiative could begin by focusing on egregious abuses in OBOR projects and grow to address other grievances related to PRC activity. Inviting and vetting anti-corruption and environmental civil society organizations, private companies, and government institutions would maximize local buy-in and ownership and minimize the perception of US neo-colonial influence.

Bangladesh Summary

Despite a trend towards autocracy and increased human rights abuses, there are opportunities to partner with Bangladesh to push back on the PRC. The following recommendations suggest activities for ARSOF and their partners in Bangladesh:

- 1A. ARSOF and partners should expose CCP disinformation in Bangladeshi media while stressing Bangladeshi independence and sovereignty.
- 2A. ARSOF and partners should address Bangladeshi grievances surrounding the Rohingya refugee camps, to include providing multilateral FID support to address security concerns. ARSOF messaging should amplify the CCP’s ineffectiveness as a mediator and fueling of the crisis through political and military support to the Myanmar military government.
- 3A. ARSOF and partners should identify and amplify contradictions to the “open, clean, and green” rhetoric of OBOR activities. Additionally, ARSOF should

help facilitate a working group centered around enhancing resiliency to PRC influence.

Thailand

Historically known as Siam, the country has been independent since 1238 and was the only Southeast Asian state to resist colonization by European powers during the 19th and 20th Centuries.²⁰⁰ In 1954, the US and Thailand became treaty allies under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.²⁰¹ During the Vietnam War, Thai soil served as a key logistics hub and staging base for regional operations.²⁰² Meanwhile, the CCP provided political and military support to the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Khmer Communist Party (Khmer Rouge) in Cambodia.²⁰³ The 1978 overthrow of the genocidal Khmer Rouge and the subsequent Chinese retaliation “was a genuine threat to Thai national security and sovereignty,” thus, Thailand continued to receive US foreign aid and military assistance.²⁰⁴ After decades of security cooperation, the US officially labeled Thailand a “major non-NATO ally” in 2003.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 31.

²⁰¹ DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 29.

²⁰² Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolven, and Wil Mackey, *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service Report RL32593 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, updated July 31, 2015), 6, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32593>.

²⁰³ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 127.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 50, 186.

²⁰⁵ DOD, *DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 29.

Although the US has stronger military ties, the PRC has stronger economic and social relations with Thailand. Perhaps the turning point in Sino-Thai relations was when the CCP “came to the financial rescue of Thailand with ‘no strings attached’.” after the 1997 Asian financial crisis.²⁰⁶ Today Xi’s CCP, as discussed in the chapter introduction and illustrated in figure 3, seeks to increase relations with Thailand for geopolitical reasons: access to deep-water ports, a ground connection to the Strait of Malacca through the China-Indochina Peninsula economic corridor, and to cultivate Thailand as a key ally within ASEAN to advance CCP interests.²⁰⁷ The CCP and Thai government have renewed discussions about a potential canal or land bridge project across the Kra Isthmus, the narrowest part of the peninsula, as a partial solution to the PRC’s Malacca dilemma.²⁰⁸ Although the land bridge would be more feasible and cost-effective than the canal, either project would face significant tradeoffs, like isolating the low-level insurgency south of the project site.²⁰⁹ The feasibility assessment for this project is scheduled for completion in 2023.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 186.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12, 169, 181.

²⁰⁸ Toru Takahashi, “Thai ‘Land Bridge’ Project Caught in Sino-U.S. Tug of War,” *Nikkei Asia*, February 20, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Thailand-land-bridge-project-caught-in-Sino-U.S.-tug-of-war>.

²⁰⁹ Chanlett-Avery, Dolyen, and Mackey, *Thailand*, 1.

²¹⁰ Takahashi, “Thai ‘Land Bridge’ Project Caught in Sino-U.S. Tug of War.”

Since becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has had nineteen military coup d'état and coup attempts.²¹¹ The most recent 2014 coup was a turning point in US-PRC competition and relations with Thailand: the US condemned the coup and paused many aspects of diplomacy and cooperation, and as a result, the PRC grew closer.²¹² The 2019 election restarted and reinvigorated US cooperation, namely through military partnership and exercises.²¹³ This shift in policy is crucial for the US because experts assess that “given its size and location... [Thailand] is the most important “swing-state” in the US-China strategic contest in the region”²¹⁴

The rest of this section presents the analysis of the non-military instruments of national power in Thailand. Figure 5 depicts the Critical Factor Analysis for Thailand. The research's resulting themes, or critical requirements, are in purple. The analysis of these themes, or critical vulnerabilities, are in red. The opportunities for ARSOF action are in blue, which answer the secondary research questions 1B, 2B, and 3B.

²¹¹ Kirt Smith, “Thailand Set to Hold Long-Awaited Election,” (Congressional Research Service Insight IN11071, Washington, DC, March 12, 2019), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11071>.

²¹² Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*, Asian Arguments (London: Zed, 2017), 299-303.

²¹³ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 188, 191.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

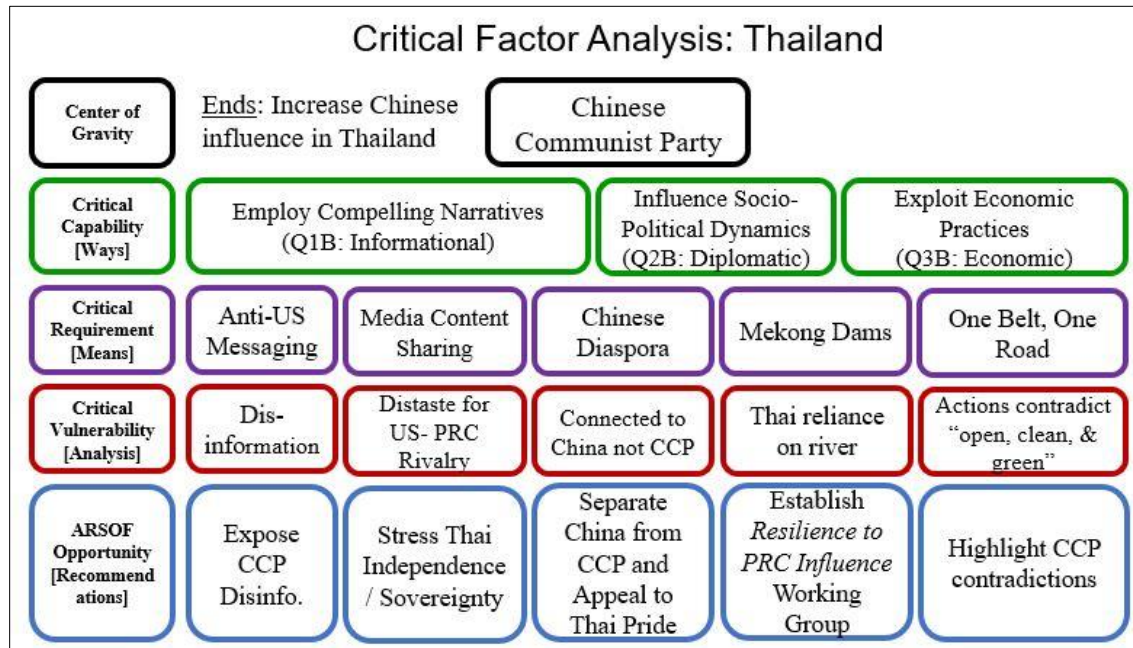


Figure 5. Critical Factor Analysis: Thailand

Source: Created by author using template from Joseph Krebs, "C501: Joint Planning Process Day 2," (Lecture, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, October 19, 2021).

Information Environment

Unlike Bangladesh, the CCP has already built a robust public diplomacy presence in Thailand that is arguably "beyond a charm offensive."²¹⁵ Thailand has thirty-four sister city agreements with the PRC, sixteen Confucius Institutes, and over 170,000 Thai students who have studied in the PRC this century.²¹⁶ The PRC and Thailand refer to their relationship as "family since ancient times" and "one big Chinese-Thai family,"

²¹⁵ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 300.

²¹⁶ AidData, "China's Public Diplomacy Dashboard Dataset," version 1.2 (AidData, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, 2021), <http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org>.

whereas the US is rhetorically only seen as a friend.²¹⁷ Despite this enhanced soft power influence, the US is still the preferred location to attend university with a scholarship and has a 39% degree of trust, as opposed to 16% for the PRC.²¹⁸

Although traditional media still exists, social media in Thailand has influenced how Thais communicate and receive information. The older generation is particularly active on Facebook groups, Line, and WeChat.²¹⁹ Twitter has proven useful in connecting and mobilizing youth activists. The Milk Tea Alliance, for example, gained momentum on Twitter as an anti-China activist group in 2020, expressing solidarity with Hong Kong protesters and uniting East, South, and Southeast Asians opposed to authoritarianism.²²⁰ Some of the tactics shared in this movement were deployed on the streets of Bangkok during the 2020 #freeyouth protests, which served to mobilize citizens from across the political spectrum.²²¹

Anti-US Messaging

The CCP uses networks of social media bots to amplify its disinformation and anti-US rhetoric. An example of a popular Chinese narrative is that the US orchestrated

²¹⁷ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 4; Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 189.

²¹⁸ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, 42-50.

²¹⁹ Jane Tang, “China’s Information Warfare and Media Influence Spawn Confusion in Thailand,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/thailand-infowars-05132021072939.html>.

²²⁰ Jasmine Chia, “The Milk Tea Alliance: One Year in, Where Is It Now?” *Thai Enquirer*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/26671/the-milk-tea-alliance-one-year-in-where-is-it-now/>.

²²¹ Ibid.

the protest movements in Hong Kong and Bangkok.²²² Another example that went viral in Thailand is video footage of an Ecuadorian prison riot that the CCP framed as US violence against Asians.²²³ These narratives travel quickly within Thai social media networks as misinformation or without knowledge that they are false. This phenomenon is particularly true within Sino-Thai communities, discussed further in the Socio-Political section.

Media Content Sharing

In 2018, the CCP signed a cooperation agreement to establish 11 media partnerships with Xinhua and CCTV, which feed news content to Thai media outlets, like the major Thai language TV channel TNN 24.²²⁴ Thus, Chinese state media and the CCP narratives result in “vast amounts of Chinese state media content dominating portions of the news.”²²⁵ This is an example of an activity where many within Thailand may be unaware of this vulnerability to PRC influence.

²²² Joel Sawat Selway, “Thailand in 2021,” *Asian Survey* 62, no. 1 (February 1, 2022): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2022.62.1.10>.

²²³ Tang, “China’s Information Warfare and Media Influence.”

²²⁴ Samantha Custer, Mihir Prakash, Jonathan Solis, Rodney Knight, and Joyce Jiahui Lin, *Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, College of William & Mary, December 2019), 14-15.

²²⁵ Cook, *China’s Global Media Footprint*, 7.

Secondary Research Question 1B: How can ARSOF and their partners highlight Chinese human rights violations through the information environment in Thailand?

ARSOF and their partners have an opportunity to expose disinformation of CCP origin in Thai media. When combatting anti-US messaging, one theme to stress is Thai distaste for the US-PRC rivalry and to frame CCP narratives as an intrusion on Thai independence. USG messaging should also promote local Thai content creation and foster a higher degree of press freedom, where possible.

Socio-Political Environment

Before the military coup in 2014, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra began cracking down on human rights and freedoms; this trend has continued through the 2019 elections and has allowed the military junta's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha to remain in power.²²⁶ Despite holding elections, Thailand was not invited to President Biden's Summit of Democracies in December 2021.²²⁷ The Democracy Index labels Thailand as a "Flawed Democracy," and Freedom House's annual report labels it as "Not Free."²²⁸ The Prayuth administration has "restricted fundamental rights, particularly free expression and assembly, and arbitrarily arrested democracy activists and critics of the monarchy."²²⁹

²²⁶ Emma Chanlett-Avery, Dolyen, and Mackey, *Thailand*, 1.

²²⁷ Green, "Biden's Democracy Summit Success Now Depends on Allies."

²²⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021*, 14; Repucci and Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 16.

²²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022*, 653.

The 2019 election sparked wide-sweeping protests demanding election, constitutional, and monarchical reforms and advocated for democracy and human rights.²³⁰ Distaste for the corrupt military government and a desire for reforms has united both the older-conservative upper-class People’s Alliance for Democracy party, or “Yellow shirts,” as well as the younger emerging middle-class Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship party, or “Red Shirts.”²³¹ These anti-government protests resulted in a return to the 1997 electoral system, which favors pluralism and accountability.²³² Some experts argue that active citizen participation combined with high development indicators “suggest a readiness for democracy” despite authoritarian tactics used by the current Prayuth administration.²³³ ARSOF should help the US Embassy monitor this space to identify potential areas to add value in support of human rights and democracy.

Despite this potential for democratization, the Thai government has collaborated with the CCP to enhance authoritarian tactics. Thailand has increased its digital authoritarianism by seeking surveillance equipment and advice on tactics from the CCP.²³⁴ Thai security forces are “accommodating” the CCP through a series of directed

²³⁰ James Row, “Behind Thailand’s Protests, Cracks in the Establishment,” *The Diplomat*, August 27, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/behind-thailands-protests-cracks-in-the-establishment/>.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Selway, “Thailand in 2021,” 111-112.

²³³ Rafiq Dossani, Eugeniu Han, Cortez A. Cooper Iii, Sale Lilly, *Democracy In The Asia-Pacific Region* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 26.

²³⁴ Gerard McDermott, “Thailand’s Creeping Digital Authoritarianism,” *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/thailands-creeping-digital-authoritarianism/>.

detainment and deportations of Uyghur Muslims back to the PRC.²³⁵ Additionally, Hong Kong Protest leader, Joshua Wong, was detained and arrested in Bangkok on Chinese orders.²³⁶ These deportations by security forces have received some domestic pushback; however there may be potential to more effectively channel this outrage toward the PRC instead of solely their own government. The researcher dismissed this issue as a potential theme because there is not a clear path for ARSOF to achieve effects at this time.

Despite harsh tactics by security forces, there are still significant law and order concerns, such as human and drug trafficking. The US Department of State downgraded Thailand from Tier 2 to Tier 2 Watchlist in its latest Trafficking in Persons report.²³⁷ Reports reveal “direct military involvement in sending tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees into trafficking networks.”²³⁸ Currently, the Royal Thai Army and Border Patrol Police (BPP) are addressing security concerns and assisting Rohingya refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border.²³⁹ The US recently funded a new BPP training facility, which could provide a foundation for cooperation along these efforts.²⁴⁰ Although there may be

²³⁵ Mark Cogan, “Is Thailand Accommodating China?” *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* 4, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 41-42.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

²³⁷ US Department of State (DOS), *Trafficking in Persons Report* (Washington, DC: DOS, June 2021), 544-551, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

²³⁸ Chanlett-Avery, Dolyen, and Mackay, *Thailand*, 15.

²³⁹ Paul Rujopakarn, “Royal Thai Army Focuses on Helping People Affected by Conflict Near Thai-Myanmar Border,” *National News Bureau of Thailand*, December 29, 2021, <https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG211229120610047>.

²⁴⁰ “United States and Thailand Inaugurate Elite Border Patrol Police Training Facility,” U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, January 28, 2022,

an opportunity to partner with vetted security forces to improve their capacity to combat trafficking, ongoing US Embassy Trafficking in Persons efforts may make this an oversaturated space where ARSOF would not add value, particularly in competing more directly with the PRC.

Chinese Diaspora

One reason the Chinese narratives, discussed above, resonate so easily within Thailand is because of the substantial Chinese diaspora, eight million (14% of the Thai population), the second-largest after Indonesia.²⁴¹ Sino-Thais are a significant target audience for the CCP, particularly with only 46,000 North American and 200,000 European expatriates living in Thailand.²⁴² As China has developed and grown more powerful, Sino-Thai people feel a renewed connection with China, especially since anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments in Southeast Asia have subsided significantly in the past several decades.²⁴³ Although many Chinese families in Thailand have lived there for generations, the CCP has recently made more deliberate efforts to leverage this revived sentiment.²⁴⁴

<https://th.usembassy.gov/united-states-and-thailand-inaugurate-elite-border-patrol-police-training-facility/>.

²⁴¹ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 189.

²⁴² Patama Vapattanawong, *Foreigners in Thailand* (Thailand: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, June 30, 2017), <http://www.ms.ipsr.mahidol.ac.th/ConferenceXI/Download/Book/447-IPSR-Conference-A12-fulltext.pdf>.

²⁴³ Custer et al., *Influencing the Narrative*, 22-23.

²⁴⁴ Tang, “China’s Information Warfare and Media Influence.”

Secondary Research Question 2B: How can ARSOF and their partners promote democracy and human rights over authoritarian practices in the socio-political environment in Thailand?

ARSOF messaging efforts should separate the CCP from the Chinese people and China writ large. Themes in this messaging should embrace their Sino-Thai heritage while appealing to their sense of pride in being Thai citizens. This messaging would drive a wedge between the CCP and its target audience before the CCP exchanges these positive attitudes for political capital.

Economic Environment

In contrast to Bangladesh, Thailand is already an upper-middle-income country, and as such, the CCP dedicates more energy and resources towards the information domain than economic investment.²⁴⁵ Like Dhaka, however, Bangkok is wary of Chinese “economic dominance,” with 59% of Thais listing this as their top concern about China.²⁴⁶ Thailand has solicited investment from South Korea, Japan, and is in negotiations for a free-trade agreement with the EU.²⁴⁷ On January 1, 2022, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ASEAN, the PRC, Australia, Japan, and New

²⁴⁵ AidData, “China’s Public Diplomacy Dashboard Dataset.”

²⁴⁶ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, 37.

²⁴⁷ Selway, “Thailand in 2021,” 113.

Zealand went into effect.²⁴⁸ The US also has robust investments in Thailand to include large US companies like Ford and Chevron.²⁴⁹

OBOR

As a part of OBOR, the CCP envisions connecting mainland China to the Strait of Malacca via the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor. In addition to the potential land bridge project across the Kra Isthmus, the CCP aspired to connect the entire peninsula by high-speed rail. Due to concerns over the terms of the loans, Thailand has suspended or halted some projects, such as this high-speed rail project and a coal power plant.²⁵⁰ The driving force behind the rail project cancelation was the State Railway Workers Union, who demanded enforcement of land-use policies and strict permits for Chinese engineers.²⁵¹ The environmental impacts of these projects could also be a significant vulnerability for the CCP, as 96% of Thais are concerned about climate

²⁴⁸ “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement to Enter into Force on 1 January 2022,” Association of Southeast Asian Nations, November 3, 2021, <https://asean.org/regional-comprehensive-economic-partnership-rcep-to-enter-into-force-on-1-january-2022/>.

²⁴⁹ DOS, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, 18.

²⁵⁰ Akshay Narang, “After the Kra-Canal Shocker, Thailand Gives a \$5 Billion-Dollar BRI Jolt to China,” *TFIGlobal*, January 16, 2022, <https://tfiglobalnews.com/2022/01/16/after-the-kra-canal-shocker-thailand-gives-a-5-billion-dollar-bri-jolt-to-china/>.

²⁵¹ Benjamin Zawacki, “Of Questionable Connectivity: China’s BRI and Thai Civil Society,” *Asia Unbound* (blog), *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/questionable-connectivity-chinas-bri-and-thai-civil-society>.

change.²⁵² Thais included the “right to a healthy environment” in their constitution, and the Thai government has implemented progressive climate regulations.²⁵³

Mekong Dams

The Thai population relies on the Mekong River for their food and livelihoods. Chinese upstream activities, particularly those related to its eleven upstream dams, have created significant concerns among the Thai.²⁵⁴ As the second-largest concern about the PRC, this issue has become depoliticized and one of the few unifying issues among the Thai people.²⁵⁵ Of the remaining five downstream states, in response to public discontent, the Thai government has been the only downstream country pushing back against PRC activity along the Mekong.²⁵⁶ The PRC’s Mekong activity infringes on the Thai population’s Right to Adequate Living Conditions. In a 2020 concession to environmental activists, the Thai government reversed its decision that would have allowed for PRC dredging operations, intended for 500 ton PRC barge traffic, which

²⁵² Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, 14.

²⁵³ Kevin Casas-Zamora, “Democracy and the Challenges of Climate Change,” (ADRN Issue Briefing, Asia Democracy Research Network, Seoul, Republic of Korea, December 6, 2021), <http://www.adrnresearch.org/publications/list.php?at=view&idx=222>.

²⁵⁴ Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra, “China Has Started a Full-Blown Water War with Thailand by Selectively Stopping and Releasing Mekong Water at Will,” *TFIGlobal*, April 18, 2021, <https://tfiglobalnews.com/2021/04/18/china-has-started-a-full-blown-water-war-with-thailand-by-selectively-stopping-and-releasing-mekong-water-at-will/>.

²⁵⁵ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, 37.

²⁵⁶ Akshay Narang, “Thailand Is the Last Stand against China’s Mekong Push,” *TFIGlobal*, February 2, 2022, <https://tfiglobalnews.com/2022/02/02/thailand-is-the-last-stand-against-chinas-mekong-push/>.

would have displaced communities and degraded ecosystems along the Mekong.²⁵⁷ The US recently announced plans to expand its consulate in Chiang-Mai, close to the Mekong River on Thailand's northern border, and has an ongoing messaging campaign for a "Free and Open Mekong," which could add pressure and scrutiny on the sub-region.²⁵⁸

Secondary Research Question 3B: How can ARSOF and their partners promote good governance and undercut Chinese exploitive economic practices in Thailand?

Like in Bangladesh, there is an opportunity for ARSOF and their partners to identify and amplify PRC contradictions in OBOR activity to its "open, clean, and green" rhetoric. Similarly, ARSOF and their partners could facilitate a working group centered around enhancing resiliency to PRC economic dominance and influence. This initiative could begin by coalescing around egregious abuses along the Mekong River and grow to address other grievances related to PRC activity. ARSOF can also leverage Thai environmental concerns through public diplomacy efforts that provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), specifically to assist in the frequently flooded Chao Phraya flood plain in central Thailand.²⁵⁹ This activity would draw a sharp contrast between PRC and US concern for environmental rights.

²⁵⁷ "Thailand Ditches China-Led Plan to Dredge Mekong River," *The Straits Times*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-ditches-china-led-plan-to-dredge-mekong-river>.

²⁵⁸ Arkshay Narang, "Trump's Deal with Thailand Has Just Come to the Fore and China Is Rattled," *TFIGlobal*, September 4, 2021, <https://tfiglobalnews.com/2021/09/04/trumps-deal-with-thailand-has-just-come-to-the-fore-and-china-is-rattled/>.

²⁵⁹ Ron Gluckman, "Bangkok: The Sinking City Faces Severe Climate Challenges," PreventionWeb, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, June 10, 2019, <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/bangkok-sinking-city-faces-severe-climate-challenges>.

Thailand Summary

Although Thailand's hedging efforts fuel a desire to maintain an arms-length from the US, there are opportunities for ARSOF to collaborate with local partners to compete against the PRC. The following recommendations suggest activities for ARSOF and their partners in Thailand:

- 1B. ARSOF and partners should expose CCP disinformation in Thai media and promote local content creation while stressing Bangladeshi independence and sovereignty.
- 2B. ARSOF and partner messaging should separate the CCP from China and the Chinese people while appealing to their sense of pride in being Thai.
- 3B. ARSOF and partners should identify and amplify contradictions to “open, clean, and green” rhetoric and Mekong activities. ARSOF could assist with HA/DR support to contrast US and PRC concerns for environmental rights. Additionally, ARSOF should help facilitate a working group centered around enhancing resiliency to PRC influence.

Summary

This chapter outlined the data analysis conducted on Bangladesh and Thailand. This analysis answered the secondary research questions by providing recommendations for ARSOF activities related to the key themes. One important caveat to these recommendations is that ARSOF units on the ground must confirm assumptions made in this study and consult with local partners and the US Embassy to determine the best course of action. The analysis found opportunities common to both countries to expose CCP disinformation and emphasize host nation independence in the information

environment, as well as opportunities to facilitate working groups aimed at strengthening resilience to detrimental Chinese business practices in the economic environment. In the socio-political environment, the analysis of Bangladesh presented an opportunity to assist in addressing grievances caused by the Rohingya crisis. The analysis of Thailand presented opportunities to drive a wedge between the CCP and the Sino-Thai diaspora and address grievances caused by PRC activity along the Mekong River.

These recommendations intend to empower both negative and positive rights: they promote the exercising of civil and political by highlighting CCP infringements on their freedoms. They also empower Indo-Pacific governments to provide social, economic, and cultural rights. The closing chapter continues the discussion of these opportunities by providing strategic context and conclusions, which help answer the primary research question through a cross-case analysis of common themes to recommend action for ARSOF operating in INDOPACOM.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study aimed to understand human rights dynamics through a strategic competition lens in the Indo-Pacific. This allowed the researcher to propose recommended actions for ARSOF to use human rights as a strategic competition tool in INDOPACOM. The study began with an introduction to the topic, next explored the relevant literature on human rights and US-PRC competition, and then outlined the study's methodology. The previous chapter answered the secondary research questions related to the case studies in Bangladesh and Thailand.

The chapter begins with broad conclusions derived from the study but not yet depicted in the case study analysis. Using these conclusions as a strategic outline, this chapter seeks to broaden the scope of the tactical recommendations made in the previous chapter to answer the study's primary research question at the operational level: How can ARSOF contribute to USG efforts that exploit America's asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM?

Conclusions

The following conclusions provide context for the recommendations section of this chapter. This section presents a broader USG strategic approach beyond the country-specific CFA framework, which can undergird ARSOF contributions at the operational and tactical levels.

Ukraine as a Backdrop

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates the cultural relativism described in this study's literature review. The war unified the West in their widespread support for Ukraine and response to this attack on democracy.²⁶⁰ President Biden has used human rights language like alleging war crimes and genocide against the Ukrainian people.²⁶¹ Notably, this democracy and human rights messaging has not resonated in the developing world or across the Indo-Pacific. Western aligned states (Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore) remain the only Indo-Pacific states to impose sanctions on Russia.²⁶²

This muted response from Asia is understandable given both "hard strategic interests and a history of non-interference in other nations' affairs," particularly nations in remote regions.²⁶³ Regarding interests, Russia has an outsized influence as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a trading partner for oil, arms, and other

²⁶⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, "How Asia is Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *The Japan Times*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/03/04/commentary/world-commentary/asia-ukraine-response/>.

²⁶¹ Aamer Madhani, Zeke Miller, and Chris Megerian, "Biden: Putin Should Face War Crimes Trial for Bucha Killings," *AP NEWS*, April 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-crimes-biden-putin-84767d1c3c35a7a36f2f70ceaccc3fa0>.

²⁶² David Adler, "The West v Russia: Why the Global South Isn't Taking Sides," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/10/russia-ukraine-west-global-south-sanctions-war>.

²⁶³ Kurlantzick, "How Asia is responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine."

goods.²⁶⁴ In these ways, both Russia and the PRC are more relevant to the region than Ukraine. Many Indo-Pacific states are also members of the non-aligned movement, which may guide them toward a passive stance if they abide by the Bandung Principles of peaceful co-existence and mutual non-interference.²⁶⁵ Holding this viewpoint, the strong Western response to Russia seems contradictory and unbalanced compared to other recent conflicts and suffering, specifically in contrast to the primarily rhetorical responses to the genocides against the Rohingya and Uyghur populations.

The reactions from Thailand and Bangladesh reflect these viewpoints. Thailand expressed “deep concern” and supports “ongoing efforts to find a peaceful settlement” in unity with ASEAN, which “focuses on preserving dialogue and eschews what it perceives as moralistic gestures.”²⁶⁶ In the UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russia’s action, Bangladesh was one of 35 nations to abstain, along with India, Vietnam, and others.²⁶⁷ Bangladesh stays committed to its “culture of peace” where it desires not to pit one group against the other, reiterating its “friendship to all, malice towards none” foreign policy.²⁶⁸ Understanding this perspective can help ARSOF frame their messaging to better compete with the PRC. The CCP rhetorically values the principles of non-

²⁶⁴ Sebastian Strangio, “How Southeast Asia Is Responding to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/how-southeast-asia-is-responding-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

²⁶⁵ Adler, “The West v Russia.”

²⁶⁶ Strangio, “How Southeast Asia Is Responding to the Russian Invasion.”

²⁶⁷ Adler, “The West v Russia.”

²⁶⁸ Momen, “A Conversation with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister,” 34:42.

interference and sovereignty. Highlighting where the CCP encroaches on sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific would resonate more effectively than explicit democracy and human rights themes.

Democracy versus the “China Model”

The State Department’s Integrated Country Strategy for Thailand expresses a “failure to consolidate democratic gains,” which could also describe large swathes of the Indo-Pacific region.²⁶⁹ President Biden was “strong on democracy rhetorically out of the gate,” but the “strategic challenge [is to] get buy-in from allies and partners that are not all democracies.”²⁷⁰ Although well-intentioned, accusations “of human rights violations in countries receiving foreign aid leads to a decline in public support for aid.”²⁷¹

Instead of pressing a human rights agenda, the USG should compete with and undermine the “China Model,” which is appealing to autocratic governments. As discussed in the literature review, developing countries often view civil and political rights as a luxury that developed countries enjoy. The populations in developing countries often agree to social contracts with autocratic leaders to first achieve social and economic development. The USG could undermine the “China Model” of an economy

²⁶⁹ US Department of State (DOS), *Integrated Country Strategy: Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: DOS, 2020), 6.

²⁷⁰ *China in the World*, episode 171, “Live Recording Replay: U.S.-China Relations One Year into the Biden Presidency,” directed by Paul Haenle, featuring Sheena Chestnut Greitens, aired March 28, 2022, 37:55.

²⁷¹ Niheer Dasandi, Jonathan Fisher, David Hudson, and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson, “Human Rights Violations, Political Conditionality and Public Attitudes to Foreign Aid: Evidence from Survey Experiments,” *Political Studies* (January 18, 2021): 1-12, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0032321720980895>.

with capitalistic tendencies under an authoritarian regime by separating the economic model from the political model.

Addressing the economic model, the US should present the argument that better human rights protections produce better economic development results. Evidence from development research shows that by “investing in human rights, the economic growth rate of a country is likely to increase. The positive effects from freedom and participation rights on economic growth are channeled through institutional and economic factors such as government effectiveness, investments, and trade.”²⁷² Addressing the political model, the US should argue that repression of civil society yields instability and/or regime change in the mid to long term. In a 2011 Chenoweth and Stephan study of nonviolent protest movements, the data show that 57% of campaigns succeeded in producing democratic outcomes, and 35% of those that failed had democratic outcomes five years afterward.²⁷³ Instead of attempting to export democracy and human rights to other contexts, the “US must convince and demonstrate that doing so is in their own interest.”²⁷⁴ This effort is not likely to produce short-term gains but will yield success over time.

²⁷² Hans-Otto Sano, Sigrid Alexandra Koob, and Stinne Skriver Jorgensen, *Human Rights and Economic Growth* (Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2017), <https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/human-rights-economic-growth>.

²⁷³ Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman, *Preventing Mass Atrocities: From a Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) to a Right to Assist (RtoA) Campaigns of Civil Resistance*, ICNC Special Report Series, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, May 2019), 7, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Right-to-Assist.pdf>.

²⁷⁴ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 13.

Leveraging Protest Movements

“Conflict is inevitable between and among populations and governments,” which begs the question: how can these conflicts be constructive?²⁷⁵ Often, conflicts result from a disparity between the rights of a state and those of an individual, or in a non-Western framing, between the rights of the government and the collective public. In these circumstances, the government has three options: (1) repress protests, (2) ignore protests, or (3) make concessions. Unlike this study’s argument that strategic competition is not a zero-sum game, these interactions are zero-sum: autocratic power is either consolidated in option one or transferred to the people in option three.²⁷⁶ While repression creates conditions for instability in the mid to long-term, as alluded to above, by expanding public discontent, concessions degrade autocracies by expanding space for civil society and increasing the government’s responsiveness to its population. Both case studies described ways the Bangladeshi and Thai governments made concessions to their populations’ desire to push back on CCP activities and OBOR projects in their respective countries.

The Right to Assist framework proposed by Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman suggests outsiders can aid this progress with specific capacity-building measures that would raise the cost of and mitigate the effects of repression on civil society.²⁷⁷ The USG should exercise caution because adversaries, like the PRC, are quick to accuse the US of

²⁷⁵ Ackerman and Merriman, *Preventing Mass Atrocities*, 34.

²⁷⁶ Joseph Bedingfield, personal communication with author, Fort Leavenworth, KS, April 4, 2022.

²⁷⁷ Ackerman and Merriman, *Preventing Mass Atrocities*, 13-15.

orchestrating protest movements in other countries. The US should first ensure movements are rights-based and not regime change-oriented; then, any assistance should emphasize the benefit to these independent nations' overall stability and prosperity, outside of strategic competition framing. By nature of expressing grievances through peaceful assembly, citizens are expanding their civil and political human rights.

Shared Values versus Zero-Sum Game

As Indo-Pacific allies and partners are hedging between great powers, USG action should not force a zero-sum game but instead appeal to shared values and interests. The US seeks to “advance a free and open Indo-Pacific” and “drive regional prosperity” as two principal components of its Indo-Pacific Strategy.²⁷⁸ The US can achieve both aims without opposing every PRC action. In fact, Chinese investment is contributing to Indo-Pacific prosperity and development. Instead, the US should observe and highlight violations of shared values and actions detrimental to these goals.

For example, the US intends to empower regional partners and organizations like ASEAN.²⁷⁹ The US can emphasize the ASEAN principles of “openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law.”²⁸⁰ Democracy and

²⁷⁸ The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 7.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸⁰ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” (Speech delivered in Bangkok, Thailand, 2019), 2, <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

human rights messaging should be reframed in these terms, specifically as the Western framework emphasizes the individual rather than the benefit of these rights to the collective good. This reframing would also deemphasize the belief that the US is using third-party states purely to advance its interests in the US-PRC ideological rivalry. The US “goal should be to help them hedge.”²⁸¹

Recommendations

As discussed in this study’s literature review, the 2022 National Defense Strategy centers around the concept of integrated deterrence, particularly against the PRC, America’s number one pacing threat.²⁸² The recommendations in this study do not prescribe tasks to tactical ARSOF units. Instead, the recommendations provide a framework for ARSOF can leverage the vision for “What We Do” to contribute to the USG’s integrated deterrence of the PRC in INDOPACOM. To answer this study’s primary research question, ARSOF can contribute to USG efforts that exploit America’s asymmetric advantage in human rights to compete with the PRC in INDOPACOM in the following ways:

Build Relationships

1. Find a balance of partners who have mutual interests with the partner nation and seek to build resiliency to PRC influence. The need for solid partnerships undergirds all strategic documents on these issues.

²⁸¹ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 102.

²⁸² DOD, “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy,” 1.

2. Earn local buy-in for all ARSOF activities. ARSOF's by-with-and-through approach will mute the "New Cold War" mentality by increasing the sustainability and trustworthiness of the initiatives.
3. Work closely with the US Embassy and interagency partners to ensure unity of effort and added value.

Integrated Deterrence by Denial: Set Conditions

1. Facilitate working groups to enhance societal resilience to empower local partners and "psychologically harden populations against adversary influence operations."²⁸³ Strengthen cognitive awareness by identifying potential vulnerabilities of the partner nation.
2. Emphasize partner nation's independence from great powers. Separate China and the Chinese People from President Xi and the CCP.
3. "Cultivate opportunities for progress" by identifying opportunities to support civil society and democratic practices and undermine authoritative tactics.²⁸⁴

Integrated Deterrence by Punishment: Observe and Mitigate Threats

1. Address grievances that directly and indirectly result from CCP human rights violations, such as displaced and disaffected populations along the Myanmar border in Bangladesh and the Mekong River in Thailand.

²⁸³ Crombe, Ferenzi, and Jones, "Integrating Deterrence across the Gray."

²⁸⁴ Repucci and Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, 30.

2. Expose CCP disinformation. Leverage a neo-colonialism narrative that paints the CCP as encroaching on partner nation sovereignty despite the PRC's non-interference policy.
3. Identify opportunities to subvert CCP influence by "Imposing costs and creating dilemmas... by shaping and amplifying grievances that divert resources, challenge adversaries' cohesion, and undermining [its] strategic positions."²⁸⁵

Implications

If ARSOF implemented the recommendations proposed in this study, Indo-Pacific partners would view the PRC and authoritarian tactics less favorably, thus influencing their alignment toward US allies and partners. Although Bangladesh and Thailand are only two Indo-Pacific states with their own specific cultures, ARSOF Cross-Functional Teams can apply this framework to their mission countries. The study is not entirely generalizable; however, it could provide a baseline understanding of how one could approach the DoD gap in both addressing human rights concerns and integrated deterrence in the grey zone by leveraging ARSOF's persistent engagements abroad.

Recommendations for Future Research

Ideally, other Combatant Commands can apply these recommendations by adapting them to specific cultural contexts to compete with the PRC in other theaters or areas of responsibility (AORs). The researcher recommends future research to analyze

²⁸⁵ Crombe, Ferenzi, and Jones, "Integrating Deterrence across the Gray."

specific human rights dynamics and cultural contexts in other AORs to understand better how ARSOF can compete with the PRC outside of INDOPACOM.

Concluding Remarks

Indo-Pacific states are caught in the middle of the US-PRC strategic competition. Many seek to hedge between two or more great powers. USG action to directly challenge the PRC or forcefully push the democracy and human rights agenda in these states would likely produce a negative backlash toward the US. Indirectly competing with the PRC to promote democracy over authoritarianism would be more effective than direct competition but will carry more complex second and third-order effects. The benefit of ARSOF as a strategic competition tool is that they are trained to understand the operational environment and navigate complexities in “politically sensitive environments.”²⁸⁶

Another advantage that ARSOF provide is “sustained presence” and “sustained engagement.”²⁸⁷ America is “seen as diplomatically disengaged and undependable.” because of its inconsistent engagement over the last several decades, which is now a “pronounced weakness” of the US in competition.²⁸⁸ ARSOF’s value proposition contributes meaningfully to the USG strategy in this regard: “to remain a steady, present, attentive, engaged, and predictable partner.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ CJCS, JP 3-05, GL-11.

²⁸⁷ HQDA, ADP 3-05, 1-9, 1-11.

²⁸⁸ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 101, 246.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

Strategic competition looks different in different places. ARSOF provide outsized influence through their bottom-up indigenous approach that complements the US top-down strategy. The US can “win” this competition by effectively arguing in favor of and encouraging others to adhere to the international rules-based order and corresponding liberal values and assisting allies and partners in becoming more resilient to PRC influence.

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