1

PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY:

WHY IDEAS WILL DRIVE THE INDO-PACIFIC

Scott D. McDonald

When immersed in the daily cycle of meetings and position papers, it is easy for the security practitioner to become focused on the minutiae of the crisis of the day. Even when one has time to step back and look at strategic trends more broadly, it is too easy to assume one grasps a state's strategy and intended security policy by tracing the trails of individual decisions and positions. In hindsight, events appear to have a logic of their own and it is tempting to extrapolate from one's own experience to hypothesize *why* leaders of a state behaved a certain way, rather than attempting to understand their intellectual context.

However, the study of international security policy entails the study of the human animal. Humans make decisions within a context. The various schools of international relations theory have offered the international system, institutions, and culture as candidates for placing policy within an understandable context. However, if decision-makers matter—and the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) invests a lot of time and effort on the assumption that they do—then we need to understand the context brought to the problem by the individual decision-makers that ultimately drive policy.

Throughout human history, ideas have driven the development and orientation of civilization. Our unique means of survival—the rational faculty—demands we make judgments about the world around us to act, survive, and prosper. To accomplish this, each individual accepts a set of assumptions about the way the world works and their individual relationship to it. These assumptions form the basis of the individual's philosophy.

Philosophy is the science devoted to understanding the fundamental nature of existence, knowledge, and choice. It is the tool-kit for assisting individuals in making sense of their world and acting within it. As American philosopher Ayn Rand summarized for the West Point graduating class of 1974, an individual's philosophy provides answers to the basic questions of a human's life: "Where am I, how do I know it, and what should I do?"[1] The answers to these questions reflect an individual's fundamental philosophic orientation regarding the three primary branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Whether these questions are answered explicitly, through a process of study and analysis, or implicitly, as the received wisdom of those who influenced one's education and moral development, individuals use the fundamental outlook provided by these assumptions to guide them as they attempt to understand the world and succeed within it.

HINDSIGHT

With the aid of hindsight, it seems obvious that an individual's ideas are important in policy creation. However, the individual decision-maker in general, and ideas specifically, have been underemphasized in the international relations field in the search for parsimonious theories. Ideas are hard to measure and track, while individuals retain volition—the ability to choose—and are resistant to prediction. Conversely, looking across the span of human history, we see how general trends in fundamental ideas about the world have shaped the organization of society and the interaction of political units.

In Europe, Catholicism, its understanding of the world, knowledge, and ethics, shaped society and politics for a thousand years—from the fall of Rome to the Enlightenment. The individualist philosophy of the Enlightenment then changed our understanding of those fundamentals, leading not only to revolts across Europe and the birth of the United States, but to changes in the way those polities interacted with one another. Similarly, in Southwest Asia, the rise of Islam not only shaped individual lives, but influenced the expansion of the spice trade and complex networks stretching across the seas and into Southeast Asia. In East Asia, the Confucian philosophy shaped China, the imperial system, and the way it attempted to order its relations with those along its periphery. With hindsight, it is clear that all these thought systems—and many others—led directly to different norms of human interaction within the societies that held them.

INSIGHT

Early in my career, the Marine Corps trained me as a Foreign Area Officer (FAO) and educated me in the history, culture, politics, and economics of China. As a FAO, my mission was to bring an understanding of this broad and rich topic to my commanders and fellow Marines. In doing so, I was always looking for an overriding theme that could tie everything I had learned about China together and concisely communicate it to various audiences in a manner that was useful. A tour on the faculty at DKI APCSS gave me the opportunity to explore these ideas in an academic setting and apply them to security policy.

The key insight from this research is that an understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy brings order and coherence to the policies and operations being pursued by the People's Republic of China (PRC). In short, to better understand what General Secretary Xi Jinping is doing, one should consult Confucius and Laozi. As a FAO, I was supposed to provide the perspective of those I studied. Philosophy allowed me to get behind the policies and explain how decision-makers in the PRC view the world and understand it. Moreover, it provided insight into what sort of policy options would seem ethical and efficacious to those operating within the context of Chinese philosophy. As I distilled my new knowledge, I was able to derive philosophy-based strategic tenets that helped me understand and explain a Chinese philosophical approach to strategic thought.

Though I find a lot of value in this approach, attempting to employ it highlights the difficulty of discerning an individual's philosophy. Many people have not taken the time to explicitly define their philosophy and fewer have committed it to writing. With politicians the problem is often mitigated with speeches and policy statements that provide insight, but these are unlikely to include an explicitly stated philosophy. However, an individual's answers to those three basic questions—where am I, how do I know it, and what should I do?—are central to how they think and act. Therefore, in analyzing a leader's philosophy one must often use proxies. The most obvious, which is already explored within the international relations field is culture. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, culture is composed of "distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period."[2] While the fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science all have extensive literatures arguing over the definition of culture, the key point for this discussion is that embedded within the way individuals within a culture act, one can find evidence of the *ideas* that drive those customs, social behaviors,

and other outward manifestations of a culture. In studying philosophy, the goal of using culture is to understand what ideas about the world, knowledge, and ethics influence security policy decision-making.

In contemporary international relations literature, culture is usually discussed in association with the Constructivist School. However, this body of literature tends to treat "cultures" and "societies" as black boxes that *determine* behavior, rather than ideas that *influence* choices. The leading scholar of this school, Alexander Wendt, argues that cultures are given "meaning by the ideas they share with other states—that *cognition* depends on states systemic culture."[3] Although Wendt is speaking at a systemic level, constructivists in general agree that norms are created through an "inter-subjective consensus" within a society. While some, such as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, make a case for norm entrepreneurs affecting change, it is only to establish a new consensus, which is then used to explain the population under study.[4] In short, constructivists' use of culture actually focuses on collectives, discounts the individual as agent, and transfers the level-of-analysis back to the state- or system-level and the ideas that shapes a consensus there.

If the individual decision-maker is important in understanding security policy, a cultural analysis should focus on providing insight into the philosophy that guides individual action. Culture aids this by providing a baseline of understanding on general norms that are operative within a society, as depicted in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Cultural Norms as Markers of the Answers to Philosophical Foundations

Cultural Norms as Markers of the Answers to Philosophical Foundations	
Metaphysics: Where am I?	What is the nature of existence?
	Is existence stable, changing predictably, or utter chaos?
	Is existence real, or is it a figment of my imagination?
Epistemology: How do I know?	Is that world knowable through my senses or am I doomed to watch shadows on a cave wall as Plato surmised?
	Is knowledge discovered through reason, faith, or tradition?
Ethics: What should I do?	What is moral?
	How should I treat others?
	Politics: How should society be governed?
	Aesthetics: What is beauty?

As one starts digging into a culture with a philosophic mindset, trends in assumptions about metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics become apparent. Insights into individual thinking provided by these cultural cues enable one to better understand others, predict how they might act, and communicate more effectively. In fact, though it is not labeled a philosophical exercise, security practitioners at DKI APCSS are already practicing this when they learn to identify, understand, and respond to norms when conducting cross-cultural communication.

Analysis of the philosophical ideas resident in a populace can provide similar insight into these tendencies. For example, since its founding in 1949, the PRC has alternately turned its back on and embraced traditional Chinese philosophy. In order to establish whether it still plays a role in establishing and reinforcing norms within a society, one can look to the contemporary culture to see that the basic underlying foundations of society continue to conform to the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical prescriptions of classical philosophy. However, understanding how policy-makers use philosophy is more difficult than mapping general cultural trends, because each individual retains volition and the ability to go against cultural norms. Therefore, cultural analysis must be cross-checked with authoritative sources, such as government press releases, personal writings, and biographies to discern the intellectual influences that may have shaped that particular individual's philosophy. For example, growing up as the son of a prominent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official, then being subjected to the Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping experienced an array of cultural influences. Even if the evidence of classical Chinese philosophy is prominent in the populace, additional verification must be used to verify it is operative in Xi Jinping's decision-making. For confirmation, one can look to his own writings, speeches, and policies to examine the extent to which he uses these ideas and test their ability to correctly describe his policy choices. These sources suggest he continues to be influenced by Chinese philosophy, not only in the terms he uses, but in the policies he is pursuing. Thus, by combining cultural analysis and research into individual thought and actions, the security practitioner can gain key insights into the fundamental ideas and assumptions regional decision-makers use to define, understand, and interact with their world.

Foresight

If philosophy provides insights into how decision-makers act, then security practitioners would benefit from understanding the philosophical sys-

tems that influence regional leaders. In conducting exercises and thought experiments with DKI APCSS Fellows, I always found it important to get into the decision-makers' heads and attempt to see the world through their eyes. Of course, this is not new, but the rigor of breaking down an individual's approach to the world that is encapsulated in philosophy goes beyond understanding what type of interests or policies they may advocate, focusing instead on the assumptions that make those possible so that one may confidently apply those principles to other situations. Given the diversity of thought systems held in the Indo-Pacific, it is understandable that the assumptions upon which policy is built vary across the region as well. Consequently, to improve our foresight regarding the Indo-Pacific order, we must look to the philosophies held by regional decision-makers.

What does philosophy tell us about the future of the Indo-Pacific? What ideas are driving regional leaders and how will it shape their interaction with the region? My research is focused on the PRC. Here, the philosophic traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism competed and mixed over the centuries into a syncretic philosophy that still influences the population today. Some have argued the legacy of Marxism-Leninism, or Mao Zedong Thought are equally important, but cultural and historical analysis suggests otherwise. The CCP certainly began with an attraction to Marxism-Leninism, and Maoism had a dramatic impact in the revolution and Cultural Revolution. However, neither of these thought systems managed to supplant the norms of traditional Chinese society and philosophy. Though they were certainly driven underground during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, once government sanction was removed, traditional values quickly took hold. This is evident in the manner in which the PRC implements policy, its official pronouncements, and in the way the average subject of the PRC lives their life and interacts with others.

Consequently, when attempting to understand the foundational ideas behind PRC policy, it is not Marx, Lenin, or Mao that one must turn to, but Confucius and Laozi. This is not to say there are not many influences in PRC society today, but that the ideas advocated by the intellectual schools inspired by these philosophers form the basis of the philosophy that guides General Secretary Xi today. This philosophy's foundational views of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics can aid security practitioners exercising strategic foresight to understand the future trajectory of the PRC.

Metaphysically, Chinese philosophy teaches the cosmological centrality of China (中國; *zhōngguó* or Central Kingdom) and the primacy of the

family as the basis for society. Consequently, the emperor sits atop a world family.[5] Daoist metaphysics suggests that PRC leaders see the world as constantly changing, by nature, in a cycle where power ebbs and flows in a zero-sum system.[6] To act in this context, one must understand the concept 勢 (*shì*, situational potential)[7] and leverage the opportunity of change to steer the natural development of history in one's desired direction, but do so by 無為 (*wúwéi;* non-action), better understood as minimal disruption of the natural order of things.[8]

Epistemologically, Confucius teaches that knowledge is gained primarily from the ancients[9] and can be manipulated through the power of a name.[10] Meanwhile Laozi offers that you never can truly know reality and that enlightenment comes to the one who sits alone, detached from the world in contemplation.[11]

In ethics, Daoists refer back to *wúwéi* and argue one should act in accordance with nature and disturb its course as minimally as possible.[12] The Confucians agree, noting that nature is built on the family and hierarchical relations that give order to society.[13] This structure assigns each individual a place in relation to others and an individual acts morally by fulfilling one's assigned role.

Politics, which is a subbranch of ethics, asks how a society should be governed. For Confucius, this remains a question of proper roles and hierarchy: "the ruler is the ruler; the minister is minister; the father is father; and the son is son. That is government."[14] Moreover, according to the concept of "all under heaven" (天下; *tiānxià*), that hierarchy properly encompasses the entire world and the emperor sits at the apex of the world family. [15]

Taken together, one can see that a leader in Beijing who accepts these premises would seek to take advantage of U.S. retrenchment and reestablish a hierarchical order with the PRC at its apex. Not surprising, perhaps, but knowing that this is founded on a belief in the metaphysical centrality of China and the natural potential of a situation helps to explain why General Secretary Xi and the CCP think this is not only morally right, but a fact of existence. Understanding the important role of a name in epistemology helps to explain why the PRC insists on odd terminology and sees certain language as an existential assault. In short, the foundational principles behind these policy positions suggest why some things are more important than others, why some can be traded away and others are sacrosanct. Philosophy may not provide an answer for every concrete policy, but it provides the context in which those decisions are made.

Additionally, appreciation for regional philosophical systems may provide a better explanation for the emergence of international norms, as well as provide tools for crafting and refining them. These are inherently questions of ethics. Each nation, each leader, will approach international norms based on their own concept of morality. Understanding this, the security practitioner can look to philosophy to understand what norms are valued by various leaders and be better prepared to search for common ground. Thus, understanding philosophy can aid in establishing agreed upon norms of behavior that are likely to be more durable because they rest not on transient interests, but the foundational morality of all involved.

The opposite side of that coin involves recognizing where two philosophies will necessarily find themselves in opposition. Even this is valuable as security practitioners look for ways to identify points of contention and establish mechanisms to mitigate or prevent conflict. If a leader's philosophy is understood, it is easier to understand why they hold the positions they do and devise policy options that make cooperation more palatable, because proposals can be crafted that move towards common objectives without undermining the core principles of those with whom one disagrees.

CONCLUSION

The very word "philosophy" too often frightens security practitioners, who tend to be unaccustomed to dealing with abstract concepts and feel more at home in the concrete details of daily foreign and security policy. However, exploring philosophy need not be frightening, rather, it is part of good cross-cultural preparation that many practitioners are already incorporating into their tool-kit. Philosophy provides the foundational framework for incorporating that knowledge and using it to understand how individual decision-makers will relate to the world, and the pressing issues that are faced every day by legions of mid-career diplomats, military officers, and civil servants across the Indo-Pacific region.

By the 50th anniversary of DKI APCSS, staffs may sit down with their policy-makers to prepare for international fora and begin, not with the problems faced in the upcoming multilateral meeting, but with philosophy. Perhaps evaluations of other leaders will begin not with "what does Xi Jinping want," but with "what are his metaphysics?" A stretch perhaps, but at a minimum, security practitioners should learn to understand the powerful impact of the foundational assumptions that each of us carries into every interaction.

Philosophy is too important to leave only to the academics in ivy-covered buildings. As the philosopher told the future leaders of the U.S. Army, philosophy exists to help us understand and resolve "concrete, particular, real-life problems—i.e., in order to be able to live on earth."[16]

Notes

1   Ayn Rand, "Philosophy: Who Needs It?" *Philosophy: Who Needs It?* (New York, NY: Signet, 1982), 2.

2   The *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed 26 February 2020, https://www.oed.com.

3   Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 372. Emphasis in the original.

4   Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998).

5   Fan Ruiping, "A Confucian Notion of the Common Good for Contemporary China," in David Solomon and Luo Bingxiang, eds. *The Common Good: Chinese and American Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014), 202.

6   Laozi, *Daodejing*, James Legge, trans, available at https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing. 36.

7   For a discussion on the translation of shi (勢) see Scott D. McDonald, Brock Jones, and Jason M. Frazee, "Phase Zero: How China Exploits It, Why the United States Does Not," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 124. Though I ultimately disagree with his translation, Sawyer provides an excellent discussion of the concept and its translation in Ralph D. Sawyer, ed., *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 429, note 37.

8   Laozi, *Daodejing*, 2. See also explanation in Chan Wing-Tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 136. By *wúwéi* it "is not meant literally 'inactivity' but rather 'taking no action that is contrary to Nature'—in other words, letting Nature take its own course."

9   Confucius, *Analects*, James Legge, trans., available at https://ctext.org/analects, III: 14, VII:1, VII: 5.

10   *Analects*, XIII:3.

11   *Daodejing*, 47. See also 14. The importance of pursuing development through contemplation and reflection is also reflected in Confucianism. See *Analects*, XIV:42; Mencius, *Book of Mencius*, XIII: 1 and XIV:78, James Legge, trasn., available at https://ctext.org/mengzi.

12   *Daodejing*, 2. See also Chan Wing-Tsit, 137. "Man is to follow Nature but in doing so he is not eliminated; instead, his nature is fulfilled."

13   *Analects*, XVIII:10. See Also *The Book of Rites* [Liji], IX (Li Yun):31, James Legge, trans., available at https:// https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun.

14   *Analects*, XII:11. Author's translation.

15   *Analects*. In III:11 and IV:10 one sees how *tianxià* is used interchangeably for the entire world and the area which is ruled.

16   Rand, 4.