

# **Toward a Better Understanding of China: *Weiqi* and Its Reflections in Core Leaders' Foreign Policy**

**by Captain Ross Nikides**

*This game [wei qi] bears a striking resemblance to the Chinese way of war and diplomacy. Its concepts and tactics are living reflections of Chinese philosophy, strategic thinking, stratagems, and tactical interactions. This game, in turn, influences the way Chinese think and act.*

—Dr. David Lai, Professor of Strategy, U.S. Air War College

## Setting the Board

Intellectual games created by societies often have a way of transcending the boards on which we play them. On an abstract level, the games represent more than just a past time, they represent a way of thinking emulated by their cultural creators. Such is the case with the strategic game of *wei qi*, a Chinese board game played by two opponents, each seeking to gain a relative advantage over their challenger by possessing a larger number of ‘territories’ at the end of the game. As David Lai suggests in the opening quote, *wei qi* emulates how the Chinese view the world and execute their foreign policy. This article examines the principles inherent in *wei qi* and how Chinese leaders Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping reflect those principles in the past and the present approaches to foreign policy. Although each executed their foreign policy differently, certain *wei qi* principles were always present, demonstrating the significance the game has on Chinese strategic thinking and their perspective on its foreign policy.

Before exploring how *wei qi* has influenced Chinese foreign policy over the last century, it is necessary to describe the game, its principles, and how it has shaped Chinese strategic thinking. In Chinese, *wei qi* translates to “a game of surrounding pieces.”<sup>1</sup> Players have 180 stones of equal value to build up positions across the board while working to limit and neutralize their opponent through encirclement.<sup>2</sup> Good players can simultaneously create multiple dilemmas for their opponent while capitalizing on initiative to gain positions of advantage or territories. According to Henry Kissinger, who catalogs the game in his book *On China*, players must assess “not only the pieces on the board but the reinforcements the adversary is in a position to play.”<sup>3</sup> Altogether, this helps to teach a player “the art of strategic encirclement,” where the player who is able to encircle more of his opponents positions while building up his own position wins the game through an “often narrow margin” of positional relative advantage.<sup>4</sup> In essence, the game is multidimensional, forcing players to simultaneously think in complex terms across multiple fronts.

Inherent in this multidimensional contest are other strategic principles that help the player achieve their relative advantage. Since there is a limit to the number of stones, players must be efficient in their moves, patient and deliberate in their planning, flexible in their execution, and able to envision not only their local engagements but also the consequences of their actions across the board. Ultimately, this complexity gives players a wider sense of strategic thinking, enabling them to pursue interests in full while “mitigating the strategic potential of his [their] opponent’s pieces” to win the game.<sup>5</sup>

## A History of Strategy

Kissinger suggests these principles had considerable influence on Chinese thinking throughout its expansive history. To highlight this, he contrasts *wei qi* against Western notions of domination, annihilation, gallantry, and Clausewitzian notions of decisive victory, as seen in chess. Where *wei qi* teaches encirclement, chess preaches victory through decisive means.<sup>6</sup> As a result, strategic thinking metastasizes in a different way for the Chinese than it does for Western cultures. In the execution of strategy, the Chinese rarely “risk the outcome of a conflict on a single all-or-nothing clash... multiyear maneuvers were closer to their style,” differing from western tradition that “prized on the decisive clash of forces.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Chinese stress “subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage.”<sup>8</sup> This causes them to approach foreign policy issues on a “case-by-case basis, each time calculating the costs and benefits” of their policies to achieve their interests.<sup>9</sup> *Wei qi* has thus taught the Chinese that security can never be absolute, and the key to achieving security is found in the gains made through long-term maneuvers to achieve the best position possible relative to their opponents. Therefore, the Chinese are very realist thinkers, playing a long game to pursue their national goals while simultaneously maneuvering to counteract threats to those interests.

Moving from the abstract to reality, the principles of *wei qi* heavily influenced Mao Zedong’s foreign policy approach of avoiding strategic encirclement during the early stages of the Cold War. Following his struggle against the Chinese Nationalist Party in 1949, Mao Zedong found himself and the newly founded People’s Republic of China (PRC) amid the larger struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States. Mao’s approach to foreign policy focused on fostering the ideological struggle of communism and China’s nationalism through his support of a ‘world revolution’ while balancing more realist notions of security for his newly founded cause. As journalist Edgar Snow recalls, “China supported revolutionary movements but not by invading countries . . . whenever a liberation struggle existed China would publish statements and called demonstrations to support it.”<sup>10</sup> But, Mao was aware of both the precarious domestic situation he found himself in during his efforts to consolidate his revolutionary movement’s power and the ongoing power struggle between the United States and Soviets. Here, *wei qi* notions of balance prevail in Mao’s thinking—he needed to ensure domestic support to his cause while responding to threats regionally. As Peter Grines writes, “the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] has inextricably linked itself, society, and foreign policy by staking its domestic right to rule upon its foreign policy performance.”<sup>11</sup> Joseph Fewsmith furthers this sentiment, writing, “China’s foreign policy seems very tightly bound to

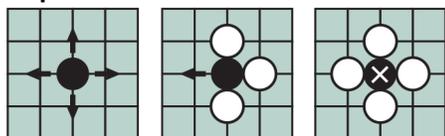
## How to Play Wei Qi

*Wei qi* (Go, Baduk, Igo, or Goe) is an abstract strategy board game for two players. Here are some basics.

- The game starts on an empty board in which players take turns starting with Black.
- During your turn you can either pass or place a stone on an empty intersection, including the sides and corners.
- Stones do not move, but can be captured.
- The game ends when both players pass, and the player with the largest area (stones and territory) wins.

## Liberties

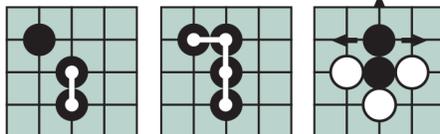
Each stone has lines coming out of it, these are liberties. If all liberties are blocked by the opponent then the stone is captured.



Graphic created by MIPB staff with information from <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~wjh/go/rules/Chinese.html>

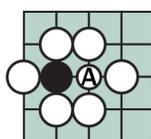
## Groups

Stones of the same color connect and form groups when placed next to each other. Stones in groups share their liberties and cannot be captured if one stone in the group has a lifeline.

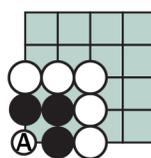


## Self-Capture

A stone cannot be placed where it would be captured, unless it captures the opponent first.



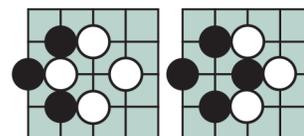
If Black plays at A, both stones would be captured immediately.



If White plays at A, All of the Black stones will be captured and the placed White stone will remain.

## KO Rule

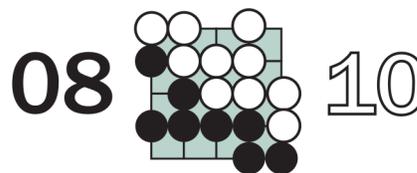
You cannot make a move that immediately repeats a board state.



When Black captures the White stone, White cannot immediately recapture the Black stone, as it would infinitely repeat. White in this case would have to play elsewhere.

## Ending the Game

When both players cannot play a meaningful move and pass consecutively the game ends. Stones are then counted to determine a winner. White can also receive additional points for playing second (Komi) the amount depends on the rule-set.



its domestic politics.”<sup>12</sup> In essence, Mao had to balance both acts to maintain the survival of the communist revolution and the PRC’s future.

In his foreign policy, it would be the play between these two superpowers, his assessment of regional security and necessity to maintain regime survival that demonstrated Mao’s *wei qi* thinking to avoid encirclement. As Kissinger writes, Mao “framed his foreign policy doctrines in terms of analogies with highly traditional Chinese games of intellect.”<sup>13</sup> Mao was “determined to prevent encirclement by any power or combination of powers . . . that he perceived as securing too many *wei qi* stones surrounding China, by disrupting their calculations.”<sup>14</sup> As discussed previously, *wei qi* is about presenting the adversary with multiple dilemmas across the board to aid in both countering their moves and preserving the players own finite resources. This helps explain China’s offensives during the Korean war to prevent the United States from maintaining the Korean Peninsula, its actions against India in the Sino-Indian war, and China’s opening of trade

and diplomatic relations with the United States following the Sino-Soviet split to counter the buildup of Soviet forces on its borders. Mao focused on “long-range projections” of forces that had direct threat to China’s “periphery” or, in other words, used *wei qi* thinking to conceptualize his position and the threats to it.<sup>15</sup> By using *wei qi* to guide his foreign policy, Mao avoided encirclement by playing each side to achieve relative gains and maintained his position of strength, both domestically and internationally. This helped Mao preserve the survival of the PRC and avoid encirclement by powers greater than his own.

After Mao, his successor Deng Xiaoping also demonstrated certain *wei qi* principles in his foreign policy approach. Unhappy with China’s position following Mao, Deng adopted a different foreign policy rooted in pragmatism and the long-term transformation of the Chinese economy. To build China’s economy, it was necessary to reestablish ties with the West and foster “reform and opening” domestically.<sup>16</sup> While rapprochement started during Mao’s regime, Deng was able to

further this transformation and eventually bring China back into the international order. Deng pivoted the trajectory of the Chinese economy toward growth by seeing it as a manageable process that he could lead to enable “peace and development.”<sup>17</sup> Chas Freeman states, part of Deng’s grand strategy in rapprochement was to “cultivate friendships and trade with all nations regardless of their ideology” while minimizing “friction . . . to perceived slights and insults with restraint.”<sup>18</sup> Examples of this approach include:

- ◆ Deng’s exercising restraint, maintaining policies on reunification, and continuing to integrate into the United States-led international order despite the United States continued sale of arms to Taiwan.<sup>19</sup>
- ◆ Deng’s move to realign Hong Kong economically while in 1984, he brokered a treaty with the British for control of the region that expanded China’s positional and economic strength.<sup>20</sup>
- ◆ Deng’s Post-Tiananmen *Taoguang Yanghui* (to conceal one’s strengths and bide one’s time) dictum calling for China to carefully assess the situation, consolidate China’s positions, and calmly cope with challenges—all to advance Chinese interests despite the international backlash over China’s handling of the affair.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, fears of Soviet encirclement persisted into Deng’s regime requiring *wei qi* style moves to avoid encirclement and to support his rapprochement strategy. To “focus on economic development,” Deng believed the PRC needed to “mitigate and eliminate” the Soviet threat to achieve a semblance of security on its borders.<sup>22</sup> This came in the form of conflict with a Moscow-aligned, post-war Vietnam in 1979; selling arms to the Mujahedeen through the United States to neutralize Soviet threats in Afghanistan; and continued engagement with the West to counter Soviet influence in the international system.<sup>23</sup>

Collectively, Deng’s strategy to open the Chinese economy, reestablish diplomatic ties, and avoid Soviet encirclement reflects a more cautious game of *wei qi* in which he maintained flexibility, restraint, and a long-term vision of aligning China’s interests in new areas while bolstering China’s economic and diplomatic position. *Wei qi* is about “moving into empty spaces” to achieve a relative position of strength.<sup>24</sup> Deng achieved this by moving into the diplomatic and economic spaces to drive China’s economic reform. Deng’s reforms were further enabled by *wei qi* style moves to counter Soviet influence along the Chinese border. Thus, Deng’s foreign policy reflects a calculated *wei qi* player seeking to grow their own position while limiting that of others.

## Currently on the Board

Under the current regime, *wei qi* reflects in Xi Jinping’s maneuvers to grow Chinese influence and position globally. The

leaders in between Deng and Xi more or less continued the foreign policy of “biding time,” choosing to focus on domestic reforms and the “peaceful evolution” of China.<sup>25</sup> Yet, by embracing a new sense of nationalism and undertaking internal moves to consolidate power, Xi has taken a more aggressive approach to foreign policy. Xi’s foreign policy reflects *wei qi* notions of relativity, seeking to mitigate the United States power and influence while continuing to rebuild China’s position of strength. Ultimately, Xi seeks to build China’s internal strength and expand its external influence. Xi intends to align China’s status in the international system with historic and Confucian notions of the Middle Kingdom, creating conditions where the system is more Sinocentric and favors Chinese interests.<sup>26</sup>

One of the ways Xi has pursued this foreign policy is through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to Peter Gries, the BRI is an “international megaproject” reflecting Xi’s “promised China Dream of national rejuvenation.”<sup>27</sup> The BRI is an investment and infrastructure project expanding both China’s overland and maritime trade routes. This includes establishing a vast “network of railways, energy pipelines, highways” and ports, along with “expand[ing] the international use of Chinese currency.”<sup>28</sup> Apart from economic advantages, it provides the Chinese with “routes the U.S. military cannot disrupt” and the means for the Chinese to project forces to secure its interests.<sup>29</sup> Combined, it is easy to see how Xi’s BRI reflects *wei qi*—by moving into the empty spaces where the United States has not had significant influence (and some places that it has). Through the BRI, Xi is trying to simultaneously mitigate the United States strategic potential while bolstering China’s own. By limiting the United States economic and military influence, the BRI puts China into a more advantageous position relative to the United States. In sum, Xi’s strategic thinking regarding the BRI mirrors a *wei qi* player’s moves as they seek to win through relative advantage.

## Closing Moves

As seen through the foreign policies of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping, the game *wei qi* wields considerable influence on Chinese strategic thinking and conceptualization of the international system. The game rests on several principles that foster stratagems to help a player avoid encirclement and achieve relative advantage compared to their opponent. Since Mao, the Chinese approach to foreign policy utilizes these principles and stratagems. It seeks to limit foreign threats and influence while it secures China’s own interests, domestically and abroad. Ultimately, understanding the influence of *wei qi* on Chinese thought provides a glimpse into the core leader decision making and supports future policy makers, intelligence professionals, and strategists conducting analysis of China. 

## Epigraph

1. David Lai, "Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept, *Shi*" (monograph, U.S. Army War College Press, May 1, 2004), 2, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/771>.

## Endnotes

1. Patrick J. Garrity, "Kissinger and China," Essays and Reviews, Classics of Strategy and Diplomacy, April 17, 2021, <https://classicsofstrategy.com/2021/04/17/kissinger-and-china/>.
2. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (n.p.: Penguin Publishing Group, 2011), 35–38, Ebook ed., <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/307651/on-china-by-henry-kissinger/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 38.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 35.
8. Ibid.
9. Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy Since the Cold War*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 22.
10. Kissinger, *On China*, 102–105.
11. David Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65.
12. Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 177.
13. Kissinger, *On China*, 102.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 45.
17. Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*, 177.
18. Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 44.
19. Ibid.; and Anne F. Thurston, ed., *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 300–302.
20. Thurston, *Engaging China*, 306.
21. Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 88.
22. Ibid., 45.
23. Kissinger, *On China*, 297. Kissinger indicates that Deng was deeply concerned with encirclement following the Vietnam War, especially because it was in China's interest to grow a Southeast Asian bloc. He writes, "the US, Soviets, Chinese, and Vietnamese were playing a quadripartite game of *wei qi*."
24. Ibid., 37.
25. Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 46; and Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*, 177.
26. Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 75.
27. Ibid., 63.
28. James McBride, Noah Berman, Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, last updated February 2, 2023, 4:30 pm (EST) <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.
29. Ibid.

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