

Competing Diagnoses

The Mirror in Singapore — Eight Readings of One Engine

The map describes an escalation engine. But an engine can be diagnosed many ways, and the diagnosis you accept determines the intervention you'll reach for. Below, eight interpreters — theorists and live political forces — each read the same five documents and the same causal loops, and each locates the "real" problem somewhere different. Per the detective panel's standing test, each is scored on whether it survives both the Sinophobic reading (only China is the aggressor) and the anti-American reading (only America is). A diagnosis that collapses into either is a partisan instrument, not an analysis.

1. The Structural Realist (Mearsheimer / offensive realism)

Diagnosis: There is no engine-fault to fix, because there is no fault. A rising power and a ruling power in anarchy *must* fear each other; intentions are unknowable, so both rationally prepare for the worst. R1 (the Mirror Spiral) is not a pathology — it is the correct behaviour of survival-maximising states. Hegseth's speech and Beijing's rebuttal are both simply true from their authors' positions. The tragedy is real precisely because no one is making a mistake.

Leverage point: None internal. Only a change in the *distribution of power* (which the actors can't choose) alters the outcome. Manage the descent; don't expect to reverse it.

Passes the panel test? Yes — ruthlessly symmetric, assigns no villain, indicts neither side morally. Its weakness is the opposite: it is *too* symmetric, dismissing the scale/history asymmetry Salander insisted on, and it has nothing to say to node n12 (recognition capacity) because it denies such capacity exists.

2. The Spiral-Model Liberal (Robert Jervis / security dilemma)

Diagnosis: The engine's fault is *node n6* — interpretive asymmetry. States misperceive defensive moves as offensive because they have privileged access to their own benign intentions and none to the other's. R2 (the Attribution Amplifier) is the whole disease. The situation is *not* fixed and hopeless (contra the realist); it is a misperception trap, and misperception can, in principle, be corrected through costly signalling, transparency, and reassurance.

Leverage point: Reassurance signals that are expensive enough to be credible — arms-control verification, incident hotlines, declared red lines that reduce guessing. Anything that shrinks n6.

Passes the panel test? Yes, and elegantly — it is built on symmetry of perception and blames neither side's *character*, only both sides' *epistemics*. Its blind spot is R6: it underweights the genuine, non-misperceived clash of interests (oil, chips, Taiwan) that no amount of reassurance dissolves. Some of the threat is real, not misread.

3. The Marxist / World-Systems Reader (Arrighi, Hudson)

Diagnosis: Strip the security language and you find node n10 running the whole show. This is a contest over the *terms of accumulation* — dollar seigniorage, the pricing of commodities, who controls the chokepoints of the semiconductor and energy supply chains. The Chinese "US Hegemony" document is, read this way, largely correct as *description* (seigniorage, sanctions-as-weapon, the Plaza Accord) while being self-serving as *morality*. The military spiral is the visible froth on a deeper struggle over surplus.

Leverage point: De-dollarisation, alternative settlement systems, regional trade blocs — reduce the material stakes and the security froth subsides. Attack n10, not n5.

Passes the panel test? Partially. It resists the Sinophobic reading strongly. But it strains against the anti-American test in the *other* direction: it tends to treat Chinese accumulation as merely reactive/defensive, importing the "never" that the panel flagged as China's exculpation technique. Honest only if applied symmetrically to *both* accumulation strategies.

4. The Constructivist (Wendt — "anarchy is what states make of it")

Diagnosis: The engine runs on *shared meanings*, and those are chosen, not given. R3 (the Legitimation Engine) is the key loop: by narrating each other as "hegemon" and "threat," the two powers are jointly *constituting* an enmity that then feels objective. The realist mistakes a socially-constructed Hobbesian culture for a natural law. The words in these five documents are not descriptions of a rivalry — they are the *construction* of one.

Leverage point: Change the narrative frame. Sustained re-description — "competitor" not "enemy," "shared theatre" not "our priority theatre" — can, over time, re-constitute the relationship. Feed n12.

Passes the panel test? Yes on symmetry — both sides are co-authors, neither is the sole villain. Weakness: it can drift into wishful idealism, underrating how R6's hard interests constrain how freely meanings can be re-chosen. You cannot narrate your way out of the Strait of Hormuz.

5. The Beijing Official Reading (the three MFA documents, taken at their word)

Diagnosis: There is no symmetry. There is one hegemon — the US — with 800 bases, a 240-year war record, a sanctions addiction, and a habit of manufacturing threats to justify encirclement. China is the responding party defending its sovereignty and the region's peace. The engine is real but *single-authored*: remove American forward posture (n3) and the spiral stops.

Leverage point: American withdrawal from the first island chain; abandonment of AUKUS/Quad; cessation of "interference" in Taiwan.

Passes the panel test? **No.** This is the anti-American reading in pure form. The panel's Iran finding (R6) directly falsifies its central "never" — China subordinated its stated principle to oil the moment Hormuz was threatened. Valuable as *primary evidence of how one node narrates itself*, not as a neutral diagnosis. Its

factual claims about American scale, however, are the most auditable in the corpus and should not be dismissed with the morality.

6. The Washington Official Reading (the Shangri-La speech, taken at its word)

Diagnosis: Also no symmetry — mirror image. China is the revisionist seeking regional hegemony; America is the status-quo guarantor of a free and open order, building deterrence reluctantly and only in response. The engine is single-authored the *other* way: remove Chinese build-up and coercion (n4) and stability returns. "We do not seek conflict."

Leverage point: Peace through strength — raise the cost of Chinese action until "it's not worth it." Grow n3 until n4 backs down.

Passes the panel test? No — the Sinophobic reading in pure form (in the strict sense: it locates all agency in Chinese threat). Falsified as *neutral* by its own tell — the "decision-space" warning reveals it is optimising American freedom of action, not regional wellbeing. Like #5, it is best used as primary evidence of self-narration, and its claims about *local* South China Sea pressure are, per Poirot, substantially accurate even though its global framing is not.

7. The Non-Aligned / ASEAN Reader (the small state in the room)

Diagnosis: The engine's most important node is the one the giants barely mention: n7 (economic interdependence) and n8 (coercion pressure on third parties). For the smaller nations, the catastrophe isn't in R1 — it's in B4, the Severed Brake. Both giants are demanding they take sides, and side-taking *destroys the trade web that is their prosperity and the region's actual peace*. Hegseth's "beware entanglement" and Beijing's "don't let the US turn the region into a powder keg" are both, from Jakarta or Singapore, demands to sacrifice the interdependence that keeps the smaller states alive and the giants restrained.

Leverage point: Refuse the binary. Deepen intra-regional interdependence (n7) precisely to resist coercion (the e21 balancing check). Make side-taking too costly for the *giants* to demand.

Passes the panel test? Yes — arguably the *most* balanced reading, because its interest is structurally in symmetry: it is coerced by both and wants both engines cooled. It resists both partisan readings by refusing to care which giant is "right." Its limit: it has the least *power* to act on its diagnosis, which is why B4 keeps losing.

8. The Systems-Ecologist / Common-Interest Reader (the map's own implied stance)

Diagnosis: Every reading above is *locally* correct and *globally* incomplete, because each stands inside the engine and describes the view from its chair. The realist sees the structure, the liberal sees the misperception, the Marxist sees the accumulation, the constructivist sees the narrative, the officials see the other's guilt, the small state sees the severed brake. The engine is *all of these at once* — which is exactly

why no single-cause fix works, and why blame is a trap: every accurate blame-claim is *fuel for R3*. The one move that doesn't feed the spiral is exercising n12 — naming the common interest (the open strait, the working supply chain, the shared planet) that all eight readings quietly depend on.

Leverage point: The dormant loop B5. Not "who is the hegemon" (unwinnable, and the question itself powers R3) but "what does the shared strait need" — the frame that lets one side lower a weapon first without being a sucker. Build the recognition capacity the machine has starved.

Passes the panel test? Yes by construction — it is the meta-reading that holds all the others in tension without collapsing into any. Its risk is the constructivist's risk at a higher order: it can sound like it wishes away the hard scale-asymmetry and hard interests. Guard against that by keeping Salander's ledger and Poirot's local-pressure finding *inside* the frame, not outside it.

Synthesis: What the Eight Agree On (and Don't)

They agree the engine is real and self-propelling; that principle-rhetoric on both sides is at least partly cover for interest; and that the danger lives in the *mutual* dynamic more than in either party's dossier.

They split on whether the mutuality is *symmetric in scale* (the officials say no, in opposite directions; the realist says yes; the rest say "structurally yes, magnitudinally no").

The load-bearing disagreement is about agency: is the engine *authored* (officials — remove the other and it stops), *structural* (realist — no one can stop it), or *dissolvable* (liberal/constructivist/ecologist — the shared loops can be cooled)? Your intervention follows entirely from which you believe.

The map's wager — and it is a wager, not a proof — sides with the eighth reading: the engine is dissolvable but only through the starved loop B5, and every hour spent adjudicating readings #5 and #6 against each other is an hour spent turning the crank of R3. The most rigorous thing the analysis can do is refuse the question "who is the real hegemon" — not because it has no answer, but because *asking it is itself a move in the game the map is trying to end*.