



STRATEGIC DISTRUST IN THE AGE OF CHINA'S RISE

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How is the US responding to “China’s rise?” In an age of China-centered growth and American strategic realignments, an honest answer to this question is as common as a four-leaf clover. Unfortunately, a majority of responses are coated in political correctness or rendered meaningless by the use of political clichés, making a candid answer hard to come by. Fortunately, a recent monograph released by the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, entitled “Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust,”¹ shirks political niceties and overly vague language in an attempt to spark candid and realistic dialogue about the current status, and likely future, of Sino-American relations.

The monograph gives space to two prominent academics, one American and the other Chinese, whose analyses represent the views and opinions of each country’s leadership on the status of Sino-American relations. Kenneth Lieberthal sketches an appraisal of the American perspective, while Wang Jisi spills ink for China. The ultimate purpose of the monograph is to give the authors, both of whom have a long history in US-China relations, an opportunity to discuss their countries’ level of “strategic distrust” towards the other. Distrust is a straightforward word, but its counterpart, strategic, is awarded a precise definition worthy of a full quote:

[S]trategic’ means expectations about the nature of the bilateral relationship over the long run; it is not a synonym for ‘military.’ ‘Strategic distrust’ therefore means a perception that the other side will seek to achieve its key long-term goals at concerted cost to your own side’s core prospects and interests.²

Stated alternatively, the level of strategic distrust in the Sino-American relation-

1 Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, “Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust,” *China Center at Brookings, John L. Thorton Center Monograph Series*, No. 4, March 2012.

2 *Ibid.*, 5.





ship represents the degree to which one side perceives itself to be in a zero-sum game with the other. Lieberthal and Jisi write for the stated purpose of “explaining candidly the perceptions each side has of the other’s motivations, the concerns each leadership consequently has as it looks to the long-term future, and the implications of this analysis for future efforts to reduce strategic distrust in U.S.-China relations.”³ To accomplish this, the authors cover issues related to differences or misunderstandings between political and value systems, diplomacy, economics and trade and the military, with each difference or misunderstanding representing a source of strategic distrust. Both authors provide insightful analysis from each country’s perspective; however, it seems that one does it better than the other.

Lieberthal’s Elephant in the Geopolitical Room

The American perspective presented by Lieberthal may not strike the reader as entirely candid — with emphasis on the word entirely.⁴ Sources of US distrust towards China mentioned in the monograph are: intellectual property theft, currency manipulation, the withholding of rare earth materials, an offensive posture taken in the South China Sea and China-based cyber theft of highly sensitive information. This, in addition to the US belief that authoritarian nations are inherently less stable and trustworthy, particularly regarding human rights, does not create conditions conducive to cultivating strategic trust.

The elephant in Lieberthal’s room, however, is his failure to make a convincing counterargument against claims that since the winding down of America’s efforts at social engineering in far away deserts, the US “will move its strategic spearhead away from the Greater Middle East and redirect it at China as its greatest security threat.” Jisi’s analysis reveals that America’s current “rebalancing” strategy (known alternatively as the “Asia pivot”) is not perceived as a benign strategy with the goal of simply maintaining peace and stability in the region, but is instead interpreted as a neo-containment strategy aimed at reigning in China’s regional influence in order to secure the continuation of American hegemony.⁵

3 Ibid.

4 The American perspective for understanding strategic distrust is found on pages 20-34.

5 Lieberthal and Jisi, 18.



From Beijing's perspective,⁶ America's rebalancing in China's backyard aggravates a number of sensitive issues, all of which swell strategic distrust. These issues range from political and values issues to military strategy and freedom to navigate in territorial waters.⁷ Consider this quote from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's article entitled "America's Pacific Century,"⁸ which may, in due time, be compared to George Kennan's "Long Telegram" as a document responsible for shaping an American policy of containment in the Asia-Pacific:

In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to **sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values**. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment — diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise — in the Asia-Pacific region. [emphasis mine]

Without even reading the quoted text, the title of Secretary Clinton's article must be menacing enough for Chinese policy planners, politicians and the educated elites, especially given China's recent history of exploitation and domination by foreign powers — China's so-called "100 years of humiliation."⁹ The quote itself, and the rest of Clinton's article for that matter, most likely heightens fears in China "that the ultimate goal of the U.S. [...] is to maintain its global hegemony [...] and] seek to constrain or even upset China's rise."¹⁰

Lieberthal's shortcomings make Jisi's analysis all the more signifi-

6 The Chinese perspective for understanding strategic distrust is found on pages 7-19.

7 These issues are considered by many within the Chinese leadership to be part of China's "core interests." For more on China's core interests, see: Edward Wong, "China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a 'Core Interest' Worth War," *New York Times*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html> (accessed April 20, 2012); "Political System Now China's Core Interest," *Global Times*, September 7, 2011, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/674311/Political-system-now-Chinas-core-interest.aspx> (accessed April 20, 2012); and Michael J. Green, "China the Aggressor?" *The National Interest*, September 2, 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/china-the-aggressor-4017> (accessed April 20, 2012).

8 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full (accessed April 18, 2012).

9 For more on China's "100 years of humiliation," see: Alison Adcock Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order," *Pacific Focus*, 24, no. 1 (2010): 1-33.

10 Lieberthal and Jisi, 15.



cant. The main theme running through Jisi's analysis is that the US time as the world's lone superpower and arbiter of global institutions is coming to an end. Contrary to times past, the opinion of contemporary Chinese leaders, with support from the news media and the education system, is that the US is "on the wrong side of history."¹¹ For the Chinese, America has lost its appeal as a great and prosperous nation and is no longer worthy of emulation. Many Chinese are convinced that it is only a matter of years before China overtakes the US as the world's largest economy — a perception reinforced by the 2008 financial crisis.¹² According to Jisi's analysis, the fact that America continues to assert itself as global hegemon and regional superpower, while China's economy is ascending to the top spot, gives more than enough reason for Chinese leaders to have a high level of strategic distrust towards the US. Despite repeated verbal and written assurances by US officials and academics that the US is not containing China, policymakers and politicians in Beijing are not buying it. Why else would the US be rebalancing towards Beijing's region of the world if it did not feel threatened by China's rise?

Hegemonic Responsibility

Let us return to the question posed at the beginning of this review: How is the US responding to China's rise? Both authors propose an answer. Lieberthal's answer, although not necessarily wrong, is left wanting, while Jisi's answer more accurately reflects geopolitical reality: The US is moving to consolidate its power and contain the spread of Chinese power and influence in the Asia-Pacific through a neo-containment policy. US rebalancing a la containment, and the subsequent Chinese response, have resulted in a cyclical pattern of distrust begetting distrust, best highlighted by this quote from Lieberthal:

11 Ibid., 10.

12 The view that China's economy is poised to overtake America's as the largest economy is not the exclusive view of some in China. See: Robert Fogel, "\$123,000,000,000,000*." *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/04/1230000000000000?hidecomments=yes> (accessed April 22, 2012); and "Dating Game: When Will China Overtake America?" *The Economist*, December 16, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/17733177> (accessed April 22, 2012).





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Various sources indicate that the Chinese side thinks in terms of a long-term zero-sum game, and this requires that America prepare to defend its interests against potential Chinese efforts to undermine them as China grows stronger.¹³

Has the perception that China has little strategic trust with the US convinced Washington that containing China by renewing America's strategic focus towards the Asia-Pacific is the best response? If a peaceful and a conflict-free Asia is the end goal, Washington must take the necessary steps to avoid great power conflict. As the father of Power Transition Theory, A.F.K. Organski, asserted more than fifty years ago, whether a conflict arises between a hegemon and rising power is largely determined by how the dominant power responds to the rise of a new great power.¹⁴ In order to avoid a more turbulent future, US policy planners should study this monograph and adjust accordingly. **PEAR**

13 Lieberthal and Jisi, ix.

14 See A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), esp. 334-336.

