

Response to PacNet #19 “Origins of misperceptions between China and the US” by Deng Zhenghui and Denny Roy

Since publication of his PacNet, Deng Zhenghui, Director for Research, China Energy Fund Committee International Center (owen27@gmail.com), and Denny Roy, Senior Fellow at the East-West Center (RoyD@EastWestCenter.org), have had a robust discussion. Thanks to Chris Nelson of the Nelson Report for facilitating this dialogue.

Denny Roy replies:

Deng’s article shows balance and magnanimity in many instances. He concedes that “conservatives” in China misunderstand US foreign policy, incorrectly oversimplify it as “containment,” and fail to grasp the workings of the US political system. His characterization of actual US policy toward China as “mixed integration and insurance” is reasonable. He is actually more restrained than many Americans would be in criticizing the US response to China’s AIBB proposal.

Let’s be clear, however, that Deng’s moderate stance here is not representative of the policy-making mainstream in the Xi Jinping regime. This distinction gets lost partway through his article, when he begins to speak for “China.” He says, for example, “China generally acknowledges the preference of some Asian countries to invite the US to Asia.”

This does not square with the official PRC position that the United States is “stirring up trouble” to manufacture demand for greater American involvement and an anti-China alliance in the region. This matters because the extent of the strategic distance between China and the US is larger, and the achievement of “trust” more difficult, than he describes.

Deng describes the heart of the problem as disagreement over what constitutes a “challenge” to the regional order. I think, again, the problem is bigger: the disagreement is over which “order” is being challenged. While there is much, and perhaps even increasing, overlap between the US and the Chinese outlooks on managing global affairs, the US order demands peaceful settlement of international political disputes, while in China’s preferred order the region should acquiesce to a Chinese sphere of influence (in which smaller countries show proper respect to China’s wishes in accordance with the pre-modern Sinocentric model) and to Beijing’s claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, parts of the East China Sea, and Taiwan.

I don’t deny that Americans have plenty of gaps in their understanding of China. But I question Deng’s point that it’s a “misperception” and “false” of Americans to believe that China intends to “drive the US out of Asia when it is powerful enough.” He goes on to say the actual Chinese goal is to “encourage [neighboring countries] to see the US

presence as counterproductive,” and to choose on their own not to ally with the United States. So the alleged misperception on the part of Americans is to expect that China will use “coercion and force” to push US strategic influence out of the region, when the Chinese would prefer to use leverage and maneuvering. This turns out to be a rather minor alleged “misperception,” and in any case I would argue the Americans who know something about foreign affairs already agree with Deng.

Finally, Deng finishes the article by himself joining the “conservative” Chinese crowd in criticizing the US government for calling out five PLA officers for cyber crime as “hypocrisy and arrogance.” Given the overwhelming evidence that the Chinese government is complicit in a massive economic espionage campaign combined with the comparatively weak American response, this oft-repeated Chinese overreaction is an odd and disappointing way to finish what is an otherwise constructive piece of bilateral dialogue.

Deng replies:

I don’t think China perceives the US as “stirring up troubles” all the time, but it’s true that China perceives the US role as not constructive enough. We cannot deny that the Philippines and Japan sometimes miscalculated the US position and made provocative actions in some cases. It is not fair to blame China for all tensions surrounding maritime disputes. The US is only concerned with whether the problems are solved by peaceful means but it takes no position on the final status, while China is concerned with both. If you stand in China’s shoes, it is natural for China to perceive the US role differently. Mutual understanding is more helpful than simply criticizing the other.

However, as I indicated in the article, the fact that China doesn’t welcome the US presence doesn’t necessarily mean that China will drive the US out by coercion or even force. Don’t underestimate China’s rationality. It is rationality that makes China concerned with the US presence in Asia in the long run because of the existence of mutual distrust, while it is also rationality that forces China to accept the US presence in Asia. For sure, China cannot bear the costs of military conflict with the US. The US should be confident of its power, and be confident of China’s rationality as well.

In addition, “Sinocentric” describes the pre-modern era when there was nothing called sovereignty. (It is also the origin of a lot of problems now). It is not accurate to use this outdated concept to describe China’s intentions in the modern era.

On cyber, I don’t mean to defend China’s positions on cyber issues, but it might also be a mistake to overestimate the government’s roles in economic spying. The need for China to be more transparent on the relationship between

government and state-owned enterprise goes beyond the simple cyber issue. What's more, the Echelon project also helped Boeing Company win advantage over Airbus in business negotiations: the US government is not perfect when it comes to economic spying. I do think China should improve its stance on cyber, otherwise it will be detrimental to its long-term interest, but it is not smart for the US to publicly charge the five PLA officers. The US should be more patient, and China should be more serious on this issue.

Dr. Roy responds:

The statement "Mutual understanding is more helpful than simply criticizing the other" is another way of saying China wants the US to stop criticizing Chinese policies, which is another way of saying the US should accept Chinese policies. But US and Chinese criticism of each other is a reflection of bilateral strategic disputes, which should not be glossed over by characterizing the problem as a lack of trust or mutual understanding.

I can understand that "China perceives the US role as not constructive enough." The US side complains about Chinese activities in the South China Sea more than Vietnamese or Philippine activities, for example. Because China is a huge country and recent historical adversary with an authoritarian political system, its actions are inherently more ominous to Americans.

I believe the term "Sinocentric" is still relevant in the sense that Chinese believe the natural state of affairs, both anciently and in the future, has China as the greatest political, economic, and cultural power in Asia and the region's leader. I also believe Chinese feel entitled to a regional sphere of influence on China's periphery.

Even if we recognize that China doesn't intend to drive the US out of Asia by force, it does not follow that Washington should be "confident." China is gaining leverage through a variety of other means – from economic penetration of the region, to "strategic partnerships," to a buildup of China's armed forces, to sponsoring alternative international institutions, to building military bases in the South China Sea. Chinese influence is rising relative to US influence, and it is not clear the United States can maintain its present level of effort because of financial challenges and dysfunctional government. China, of course, has weaknesses and challenges of its own. Each side perhaps thinks too much about its own weaknesses and the other side's strengths.

If the international community, of which both Americans and Chinese are members, decides that cyber economic espionage is unlawful, then neither government should do it, and both should be called out and condemned if they do. I cannot accept the notion that Washington should "be patient" and wait for the Chinese government to decide on its own to stop sponsoring cyber-attacks. Many Americans are angry that Washington's response to the years of reported PRC-involved cyber-attacks has been so tardy and so mild. "Not smart"? I would argue that China benefitted from the public accusation of the five PLA officers. It was a symbolic gesture that may have helped mollify US public criticism of the White House, while allowing Chinese cyber warriors to continue business as usual.

I appreciate Mr. Deng's sincere desire to improve bilateral relations and his willingness to engage in this debate.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.