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American Conspiracy: Strategic Suspicion and U.S. Re-engagement in Asia

Zheng Wang

For almost 30 years, East Asia—including Southeast Asia—has been relatively peaceful. No interstate war has occurred since the border wars between China and Vietnam ended in the early 1980s, and the countries of this region have enjoyed rapid economic development as a result of the “peace dividend.” However, 2010 witnessed several incidents that may indicate a shift away from the “East Asian peace.” There is a rising strategic suspicion that could bring Asia back to Cold War–style confrontation and a new arms race. This suspicion and its accompanying conspiracy theories have spawned their own discourse and captured the public imagination, exacerbating a heavy, pernicious political atmosphere in this region.

China’s Suspicions

What is this rising suspicion? Around the world there is a conspiracy mentality about the real motivations of U.S. foreign policy, a mentality that is alarmingly prevalent in China. This thinking assumes that there is a larger, overarching U.S. scheme or hidden agenda behind current events. From the viewpoint of many Chinese citizens, the United States has a master plan to “divide China territorially, subvert it politically, contain it strategically, and frustrate it economically.”² The focus of many conspiracy theorists is U.S. re-engagement in Asia. The nature of U.S. re-engagement, based on conspiracy theorists’ interpretations, is that the United States is purposefully carrying out a “crescent encirclement” of China³ through its use of military bases, deployment of anti-missile systems, military exercises, and alliances. For example, according to Colonel Dai Xu of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force, Washington is creating an “Asian NATO” through its relations with

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¹ For research on the East Asian peace, see Stein Tønnesson, “What Is It that Best Explains the East Asian Peace since 1979? A Call for a Research Agenda,” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009): 111–36.

² David Shambaugh, “The United States and China: A New Cold War?” *Current History* 94, no. 593 (1995): 241–47.

³ Dai Xu, *C xing baowei: neiyao waihuan xia de Zhongguo tuwei* [C-Shaped Encirclement: China’s Breakthrough under Domestic Problems and Foreign Aggression] (Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2010).

Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India, as well as with members of ASEAN.⁴

Oddly enough, events that many view as showing weakness on the part of the United States are viewed by conspiracy theorists as demonstrating China's weakness. For example, China has been the largest foreign holder of U.S. Treasury securities since September 2008. U.S. policymakers worry that China's holdings of U.S. Treasuries have "shifted the balance of financial power between Washington and Beijing." Some U.S. analysts suggest that this power shift will embolden China to demand "greater deference from the United States on issues that China considers core interests."⁵ However, across the Pacific, many Chinese analysts hold a quite different view of their country's ownership of the U.S. economy. Rather than believe that Beijing will be emboldened by such holdings, these analysts believe this is actually a "U.S. dollar trap"—that is, a deliberate attempt to "hollow out" China's economy.⁶ These observers contend that the United States purposefully and shrewdly influenced the Chinese purchase of U.S. Treasury bonds in an attempt to divert funds that would have otherwise strengthened China's defense and technology innovation.

To the dismay of many U.S. diplomats and scholars, every time an incident occurs involving the two countries, a hoard of conspiracy theories from China seem to follow. The sinking of a South Korean ship in March 2010 and the Diaoyu Islands crisis later in September were both interpreted as U.S. conspiracies. Both incidents came after a period of intense domestic protests throughout Japan and South Korea, with local citizens demanding the closure of U.S. military bases throughout the region. The two events, however, provided the United States with a reason for continuing the upkeep and staffing of these bases. Thus, some Chinese military experts believe that the United States was secretly behind the incidents. By this logic, U.S. re-engagement and prolonged military presence in the region was justified through crises secretly coordinated by the United States.

⁴ Dai Xu, "Zhongguo ying gei Meiguo weidu xingwei hua hongxian" [China Should Draw a Red Line Against American Encirclement], *Huanqiu shibao*, August 2, 2010 ~ <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-08/977633.html>.

⁵ Susan V. Lawrence and Thomas Lum, "U.S.-China Relations: Policy Issues," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R44108, January 12, 2011 ~ http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R44108_20110112.pdf.

⁶ He Xin, *Huili fengbao* [Exchange Rate Crisis] (Beijing: China Book Press, 2010).

Worries from the United States

China is not, however, the only country with suspicions. Following China's rapid growth of strength and power, there has likewise been heightened suspicion and vigilance in the United States toward China's strategic motives. Some China watchers in the United States believe that Beijing is pursuing a sophisticated master plan for foreign policy and military strategy that aims to challenge U.S. military dominance in the region. While words such as aggressive, assertive, and arrogant are frequently used to describe China's foreign policy, few people have carefully examined Chinese policies and actions.

However, a country's policy should be judged on the basis of its actions rather than its rhetoric. For example, Beijing has made a strong statement that the South China Sea is a core Chinese interest.⁷ Yet its bark is often far worse than its bite. China does not have a record of using force in any disputes with other countries since 1988 and has been extremely careful in its dealings with its ASEAN neighbors who occupy islands claimed by China in the South China Sea. Rather than being solid and aggressive, Beijing's actual policy on this issue is confused and undecided. Strong statements often compensate for the weakness of its actual policies. That is why Chinese analysts have frequently criticized China's foreign policy as soft and weak.

Reducing Suspicion

U.S.-China relations are at a critical juncture. How to avoid strategic suspicion has become the most important question in the bilateral relationship. Despite the fact that the two countries are growing closer in almost all areas, from economic development to culture and education, they still consider each other opponents or even potential enemies in the security realm. This unique and unbalanced relationship has caused many problems and had a profound impact on regional peace and security.

Lack of communication between the two militaries is one important reason for the current security dilemma. While the existing strategic dialogue between Beijing and Washington has proved to be useful, the two countries should immediately incorporate their top military officials into the regular dialogue. Military officials from both sides, including those considered hard line, should begin meeting now—behind closed doors and

⁷ Da Wei, "A Clear Signal of 'Core Interests' to the World," *China Daily*, August 2, 2010 ~ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/2010-08/02/content_11083124.htm.

with competent facilitators—and these talks should continue at regular intervals for a period of several years.

Another reason is the influence of unaddressed conspiracy theories. As one researcher has suggested, by not seriously acknowledging and addressing the suspicion regarding U.S. policies, Washington, along with the research community, has further nurtured this mentality toward the United States.⁸

The best way to counter conspiracy theorists is to learn from past experiences. Scholars have focused largely on two main factors that contribute to East Asian peace. First, most East Asian countries have adopted a national policy prioritizing economic development. Second, the three major regional powers—China, Japan, and the United States—have maintained good trilateral relations with each other. The United States and China should not take for granted these important sources of peace in East Asia but instead should work together to increase bilateral communication. China needs to dramatically improve both its military and foreign policy transparency. Meanwhile, the United States must clearly communicate to China changes or adjustments in U.S. policy. Improved understanding between the two countries would make it easier for China to become more transparent.

In order to achieve such mutual understanding, the two countries should create opportunities for lengthy private conversations between top leaders on both sides. Strategic suspicions cannot be cleared up by short formal talks; instead, deep conversations between leaders are essential for building confidence and trust. The two countries have a tradition of convening such talks. For example, the dialogue between Henry Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai leading up to President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 changed history for the two countries. Similarly, in the mid-1980s Zbigniew Brzezinski and Chinese leader Hu Yaobang talked for five consecutive hours, and this meeting had a major impact on China's reforms and bilateral cooperation with the United States.

In addition, the two countries should give priority to building credibility with both the American and Chinese publics. Both sides must take into account public opinion and the new level of demand for instant information. Given the media's dependence on the market, governments have less control over information and must distinguish between "hawks" who blog incessantly and the majority of public opinion. Strategic assessments should not be made based on the whims of popular publications and media.

⁸ Daniel Pipes, "Dealing with Middle Eastern Conspiracy Theories," *Orbis* 36 (Winter 1992): 41–56.

East Asia is rife with misperceptions and blurred intent. The United States—through its presence and policies in the region—has unintentionally triggered conspiracy theories throughout China. If conflict is to be avoided, both the United States and China must work to amend their woefully unbalanced and increasingly stressed relationship. Only through dialogue, engagement, and transparency can the incredible East Asian peace continue far into the future. ♦