

Socially Constructing China: Friend, Foe or Our Choice?

by

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Abstract

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China's rise during the early 21st century is similar to Athens' rise preceding the Peloponnesian Wars. The depiction of China within U.S. strategic and popular culture will shape the debate about how the U.S. should wield its instruments of national power when dealing with China. This paper examines what bronze of China is being cast by Americans via elite political speeches, State and Defense Department policies, and official documents. It also examines the way that China is depicted in the outlets of U.S. popular culture, including high-subscription newspaper articles, political cartoons, and entertaining news programs. Ultimately, the battle of the narrative, or the socially constructed idea of the "other," is important. If the portrayal of China is distorted, the caricature can lead to inappropriate, overly hostile, or narrow policy choices in the event of conflict or crisis.

Socially Constructing China: Friend, Foe or Our Choice?

Thucydides eloquently portrayed the way that people can socially construct the image and identity of another group of people or another nation. He used the speeches that run throughout his text as the vehicle for this activity. In one excellent example, he portrayed a Corinthian speech that characterized the Athenians as a people “born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others.”¹ With these words, the Corinthians were trying to goad the Spartans into taking the “threat” of Athens more seriously. They contrasted the active cosmopolitan Athens with the stoic, conservative Sparta – arguing that Sparta was losing ground to its upstart rival. The Corinthians’ contrasts between an active and vital Athens and a hesitant, halting Sparta did not in themselves cause the Peloponnesian War, but they did help to raise tensions and arouse the assertive elements within Sparta. In the end, the words mattered.

Humans use language to express ideas, thus, they can “socially construct” the world they live in. This matters for national behavior since words can shape images of an “other.” We can create perceptions about other states in the international system by using repeated characterizations in speech and in written texts. Over time, these characterizations become persuasive.

This essay concerns itself with understanding the image of China that is being constructed in the present U.S. national narrative, so that we may also better understand the context for future U.S. policy decisions. How is it that U.S. policy makers come to understand another country’s actions as hostile or benign? Stephen Walt, the consummate realist, explains that, “Beijing is seeking to build its economy, then expand its military capacity, achieve a position of regional dominance, and then exclude other major powers from its immediate neighborhood.”² From this perspective, Chinese

actions will be seen as paving the road to regional hegemony demanded by its strategy. On the other hand, Stefano Guzzini, points out in constructivist terms that “people act towards objects on the basis of the meaning they give to them: objects themselves do not determine their meaning.”³ This idea was first proposed by Alexander Wendt in his writing on constructivism which separated “causal” questions (typical of realism and liberalism) from “constitutive” questions which concern themselves more with “identities and meanings” as the basis for an actor’s behavior.⁴ Once considered a “radical” approach, constructivism is now complementary to realism and liberalism and increases our understanding of international relations.⁵ Joseph Nye and David Welch point out that “constructivists help us understand how preferences are formed and how knowledge is generated prior to the exercise of instrumental rationality. In that sense, constructivist thought complements rather than opposes the two main theories [of realism and liberalism]”.⁶

Using a constructivist lens, this essay will examine how the rise of China has been socially constructed since the November 2011 announcement of the U.S. “pivot to the Pacific.” During that month President Obama announced in a speech to the Australian Parliament that the U.S. was “turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region.”⁷ Also in that month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton penned an op-ed in *Foreign Policy’s* “America” issue that argued that “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.”⁸ Taken together, these statements are generally thought to mark the beginning of what was dubbed by many as America’s “pivot to the Pacific.”

This demarcation by the two most important U.S. policymakers drew a clear line on the current administration's perception of where U.S. attention needs to be focused. Later, because pivot seemed to imply a turning away from other areas, US decision-makers amended the language, choosing instead to use the term "rebalance."⁹

This analysis begins with a brief discussion of the constructivist argument and how it complements other international relations theories. This essay will then walk through selected examples of prepared elite political speeches and published U.S. strategic documents. The examination of elite speeches will include those given by the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense. Publications reviewed include the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* and the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* as they are the only two major U.S. strategic documents published within the timeframe under consideration.¹⁰ Following that, it will look at elite reactions to the establishment of a Chinese Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Seas, and a naval encounter between the USS *Cowpens* and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships in the South China Sea. It will then compare reactions to those events in the three most widely circulated newspapers in the U.S.: *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The USA Today*. Finally, the analysis will turn to popular culture and mainstream media in the form of political cartoons, an entertainment news program, and a survey of public opinion. The results do not predict how the U.S. will respond to the rise of China, but by understanding the picture of China being shaped by elite and popular communication in the U.S., we can better understand the tone of the discourse the U.S. will use, or the range of policy options the U.S. will consider in response to China in a conflict or crisis.¹¹

Social Constructivism

In order to understand how an entity is socially constructed and how that idea can influence policy choices, it is necessary to understand constructivism. Alexander Wendt posited that constructivism concerns itself with “where ... identities and interests come from” and how decision-makers’ cognition causes them to react to the environment around them.¹² In the same argument, Wendt also compared constructivism to other international relations theories and made sure to emphasize that a constructivist model was “not better” but simply different.¹³ The difference, he explained, was that these two paradigms were simply asking different questions. Where realists assumed that actors acted rationally based on “identities and interests,” constructivists inquire “where those identities and interests come from.”¹⁴ Constructivism’s ideational basis for international relations posits that socially constructed ideas form the foundation of how actors rationally react to events based on the “ideas, discourse, and practice within a social context.”¹⁵ This particular analysis focuses on certain elements of the U.S. national “discourse in the social context” of American society in order to discover elements of the U.S. perception of China. Understanding how these elements of national discourse actually affect the construction also requires a brief discussion of perception.¹⁶

Constructivism also draws on social cognitive theory as a way to better explain how events are interpreted.¹⁷ This is similar to the idea posited by Robert Jervis when he laid out the role that perception plays in international relations. In his analysis, Jervis questioned purely rational thought in international relations by bringing elements of cognitive psychology into the discussion.¹⁸ Specifically, he argues that “cognitive consistency” describes the “strong tendency for people to see what they expect to see

and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing images.”¹⁹ When applied to decision makers, cognitive consistency emphasizes the importance of the *original* image of an external actor because all future information will be compared to that original image. Subsequent information will then tend to be discounted if it does not conform to the original image and retained if it does conform to the original image.²⁰ Thus, knowing the texture of the original image becomes of prime importance since all future information will be filtered based on the original image. In addition, understanding the details of the image itself is also of prime concern to this paper. Sensitivity to the image of China being formed in the national discourse since the announcement of the rebalance can help us understand the post-rebalance *original image* and also enhance our ability to understand how future policy choices toward China will be framed.

The image of China after the rebalance is not, of course, without its own history and antecedents. History will influence any ongoing relationship between two nations in the international system, and this is surely true of China and the U.S.. But the image of China that concerns us here is one that is relatively recent, and largely shaped by China’s economic rise in the past two decades and its increasing investment in military spending. China’s GDP has risen so that it is now the world’s second largest behind the U.S..²¹ China is also second to the U.S. in the world on defense spending.²² Lastly, China is, depending on the measured timeframe of the data, the U.S.’s second or third largest trading partner.²³ Coupled with these U.S. – China relationships, China is embroiled in territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas with Japan and the Philippines, both of which are allied to the U.S. by treaty. This complicated relationship

leads U.S. policy makers to spend significant time attempting to characterize and describe China, and its present and future interaction with the U.S..

Elite Speeches and Publications

When the U.S. Presidential campaign kicked into high gear in early 2012, the tone of the administration's rhetoric about China took on a harsher tone compared to the 2011 statements announcing the rebalance. The 2012 State of the Union address set the tone for the remainder of the year when the President spoke of bringing "trade cases against China" due to unfair trading practices.²⁴ Throughout 2012, while the President was on the campaign trail, he repeated a phrase that depicted China as an economic competitor who competed unfairly. At the Democratic Convention in September, 2012, the President amplified his campaign trail rhetoric by claiming to have "stood up to China" by filing trade disputes.²⁵ In the second and third presidential debates, the President again mentioned trade disputes with China but then deviated slightly from that narrative in the third debate by adding that China was "both an adversary but also a potential partner."²⁶ These debates most likely made a significant impact on the national image of China because they reached a large American audience and because they provided an emotionally appealing narrative.

It is not surprising that presidential candidates turn to tougher sounding words during the run-up to an election. As one journalist noted about the 2012 race, both candidates used harsh rhetoric "to score political points with an electorate frustrated by the feeble economic recovery at home."²⁷ But that does not capture the entirety of the situation. As Jennifer Jerit pointed out in 2004, politicians use inflammatory rhetoric "because cognitive biases cause citizens to give emotionally compelling data disproportionate weight" and "political elites who speak the language of emotion have a

better chance of connecting with the electorate than those who do not.”²⁸ Once President Obama was re-elected, his rhetoric returned quickly to the less inflammatory tones that preceded the campaign trail.

The 2013 State of the Union address was remarkably devoid of commentary about China. Later in the summer of 2013, at the retirement of National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, President Obama pointed out that Donilon had “worked tirelessly to forge a constructive relationship with China.”²⁹ The President made a telling comment toward the end of 2013 when he offered remarks after a meeting with President Xi of China. During those remarks, President Obama offered detailed speculation about the future relationship between the U.S. and China:

Although there will continue to be some significant disagreements and sources of tension, I’m confident that they can be managed. And I want to reiterate that the United States welcomes the continuing peaceful rise of China and is interested in a China that is playing a stable and prosperous and responsible role, not only in the Asia Pacific but around the world.³⁰

Although these words were spoken near the end of 2013, there has been no discernible change in the Administration’s depiction of China since then; the U.S. President has consistently, since the 2012 election, depicted the U.S.-China relationship as an opportunity for cooperation as China’s economy grows and as an interaction requiring close management to prevent security tensions.

The Secretary of State’s depictions of China were not noticeably influenced by the presidential election of 2012. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and her successor John Kerry have depicted the U.S. relationship with China as one that needs to be based on increasing cooperation, and whose economic and security ties are in need of further maturity.³¹ This statement was well articulated at the end of Secretary Kerry’s remarks to the opening session of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic

Dialogue in Washington, D.C. in July 2013. There he spoke of the need for the U.S. and China to have “dialogue [that] is about cooperating on our shared interests,” and “addressing our differences, speaking candidly about them, and trying to find ways to manage them.”³² Both Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of State Kerry have complemented the post-Presidential election rhetoric of President Obama by talking about the need for cooperation between the U.S. and China rather than the potential for conflict.

Since the announcement of the rebalance to the Pacific, both Secretaries of Defense Leon Panetta and Chuck Hagel have echoed similar sentiments to those mentioned above: the U.S.-China relationship is an area where both sides should seek cooperation.³³ The Secretary of Defense’s office has provided the two U.S. strategic security documents that have been released since the rebalance to the Pacific: the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* and 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)*. The opening discussion of the U.S. relationship with China in the *Defense Strategic Guidance* mimicked previously-mentioned elite statements except for the confrontational comments spoken on the campaign trail and during the debates. The authors argued that, “over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship.”³⁴

The *QDR* has similar wording, talking about the future DOD actions in relation to China as requiring a cooperative relationship toward areas of overlapping interest while managing “the competitive aspects of the relationship in ways that improve regional

peace and stability consistent with international norms and principles.”³⁵ The environmental scanning section of the *QDR* also mentions China’s opaque military modernization effort and its development of Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which are described as a way to “counter U.S. strengths.”³⁶ Neither the *Defense Strategic Guidance* nor the *QDR* directly refers to China as a threat to U.S. interests, but both emphasize a relationship that requires close attention to manage opportunities for cooperation while working to minimize potential for conflict. As one would expect, these images are aligned with the Secretary of Defense’s prepared speeches.

During Secretary of Defense Panetta’s first trip to China in September 2012, he stated that the goal of both countries was to “build a sustained and substantive United States-China defense relationship that supports the broader United States-China cooperative partnership.”³⁷ Those comments support the notion of a homogenous strategic approach: elite security speeches and relevant strategic documents seeking to promote an image of a rising China that is not threatening.

Homogeneity, however, is more easily achieved with carefully-crafted speeches engaging specific audiences than with extemporaneous remarks. More complexity -- and possibly more accuracy -- of the image constructed by national elites is apparent in improvised crisis response statements. Especially considering the impact that emotional rhetoric is postulated to have on an audience, the reactions to a surprising event may have a greater influence on national perception. Two recent events provoking spontaneous language include the declaration of the Chinese ADIZ in the East China Seas in November 2013, and the maritime incident between the *Cowpens* and ships

escorting the PLAN aircraft carrier, *Liaoning* in December 2013. U.S. policy maker remarks about these two events are excellent examples of crisis response statements that may contribute disproportionately to the national perception of China.

Elite Reaction to Air Defense Identification Zone and *Cowpens* Incident

The People's Republic of China (PRC) announced the creation of an ADIZ on November 23, 2013. U.S. Secretary of Defense Hagel was the first to respond when he announced that the U.S. was "deeply concerned" and continued by characterizing the Chinese ADIZ as "a destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo in the region. This unilateral action increases the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculations."³⁸ Vice President Joe Biden also responded, almost two weeks later, with comments on December 3rd and 6th. On the 3rd, his remarks were made after meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Abe. On the 6th, Biden spoke at the Yonsei University in South Korea; he had met with PRC President Xi the day before.³⁹ In his remarks on the 3rd Biden, speaking from the territory of a strategically significant U.S. ally, said that the U.S. is "deeply concerned by [China's] attempt to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea. This action has raised regional tensions and increased the risk of accidents and miscalculation."⁴⁰ On the 6th of December, after meeting with President Xi and after more time to consider the event, Biden was more constrained with his remarks. He elaborated on the very careful consideration required by the U.S. and the PRC to prevent tension and conflict during China's peaceful rise:

It is not written anywhere that this competition [between the U.S. and China] is destined to be conflict ... It's not only in our interest, it's in the interest of the region, the interest of the world that we get that relationship right with China. ... There will be competition, but the President and I refuse to accept the proposition that it's inevitably going to result in conflict.⁴¹

These remarks prefaced Biden's remarks about the PRC ADIZ which had, he stated, "created considerable apprehension across the region."⁴² Vice President Biden did an excellent job of portraying the tension associated with China's rise as a powerful country. Secretary Hagel's initial reaction was to portray China's action as "destabilizing" but the later, more thoughtful response by Vice President Biden after he had met with President Xi portrayed the event in more even terms, as the kind of action that demonstrates the need for regional measures to prevent certain events from resulting in conflict.

The initial remarks by both leaders portrayed the PRC ADIZ as an inflammatory act that raised tensions in an already tense area. Biden's later remarks, after a few days of consideration, were more in line with how ADIZs are viewed around the world. Many countries, including the U.S., already have established ADIZs; merely having an ADIZ is not a hostile act. Also, the announcement of the ADIZ should not have come as a surprise since *The Japan Times* released information about the PRC's plans for an ADIZ two weeks prior to the actual announcement.⁴³ Three months later, an even less hostile characterization of the incident was articulated by U.S. Air Force General Herbert Carlisle during an interview with *Defense News*. In that interview he said that having an ADIZ was not in itself a threat, but the manner in which it was announced was a cause for consternation.⁴⁴ That statement constructs a much less hostile image of the PRC, but that image was not the one presented by either Biden or Hagel's immediate, reactive statements which presumably reached a much wider audience. Their rhetoric created a much more antagonistic portrayal of China's actions than was necessary and

shows how much care must be taken by political elites during tense moments in order to retain control of the long-term image they are attempting to create.

Another opportunity to examine the American social construction of its relationship with China can be found in the confrontation between the *Cowpens* and the PLAN *Liaoning* Carrier Group. The *Liaoning* is the PRC's first operational aircraft carrier and it was on its first training exercise. The incident involved the *Cowpens* (a U.S. guided missile cruiser) taking "evasive action to avoid colliding with a Chinese warship escorting the *Liaoning* in the South China Sea."⁴⁵ In a press briefing, Secretary Hagel answered a question about the incident by claiming that it was "not a responsible action" on the part of the PLAN; he went on to label the incident as "incendiary, that could be a trigger or a spark that could set off some eventual miscalculation."⁴⁶ Secretary Hagel's reaction focused exclusively on the ship-to-ship encounter without mentioning the larger context of what the *Cowpens* was doing in relation to PLAN operations.⁴⁷

Press Reactions to the ADIZ and the *Cowpens* Incident

The descriptions of these two events, and the language used in those descriptions, were markedly different depending on which article the reader consulted. The three most widely read U.S. newspapers, for example, adopted quite different tones in their respective articles. Chris Buckley wrote an article about the ADIZ declaration in the November 23, 2013 edition of *The New York Times*.⁴⁸ He portrayed the declaration of the PRC ADIZ as a step taken by China in the context of the ongoing Senkaku Islands territorial dispute with Japan.⁴⁹ Overall, the article did not suggest that the ADIZ declaration was, by itself, a hostile act, but it did suggest that it could lead to an unintended confrontation between the two countries.⁵⁰ In a remarkable omission, the article did not point out the ubiquity of such airspace zones around the world.

The *Wall Street Journal* not only presented a more detailed analysis, but also focused on the regional reactions of the Japanese and South Koreans. The article quoted the reactions by Secretaries Kerry and Hagel, and also pointed out that South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and many other countries have established ADIZs.⁵¹ Similar to the *New York Times* article, it speculated on why China had declared this ADIZ, and described the context of the ongoing territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands.⁵² The article explained that ADIZs are common around the world, and mentioned the official Chinese response to the U.S. reaction of the ADIZ announcement. The *Wall Street Journal* article alerted readers to the fact that “China's Assistant Foreign Minister Zheng Zeguang had raised the issue with U.S. Ambassador to China Gary Locke on Sunday, urging the U.S. to ‘correct its mistakes and stop making irresponsible remarks.’”⁵³ Although the article did not elaborate on the Chinese point of view, it did indicate that an ADIZ is common throughout the world and that China had protested the U.S. characterization of the announcement. Although not specified, it can be inferred that the Chinese representatives were referring to the statements released by Vice President Biden and Secretary Hagel which characterized the Chinese action as destabilizing.

An article in the *USA Today* newspaper portrayed the incident slightly differently than the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* articles. The article introduced the PRC ADIZ with an accompanying explanation about what an ADIZ is and the fact that they are common throughout the world.⁵⁴ It described Secretaries Kerry and Hagel's reactions but also included Chinese nationalist reactions from “China's Twitter equivalent” website.⁵⁵ These reactions are included in the context of another comment

not found in the other articles about how “Japan’s wartime (WWII) actions are kept alive in TV series, films, and government propaganda” in China.⁵⁶ Of all three of these widely circulated newspapers, the *USA Today* is the only one to capture elements of the Chinese populations’ reactions to the event in its initial article on the issue. All three newspapers also parroted the words of the U.S. elites who responded to the declaration.

There is a similar pattern in the three articles about the encounter between the *Cowpens* and Liaoning aircraft carrier. The *USA Today* repeated its unique perspective by being the only one of the three newspapers to include a PRC version of events.⁵⁷ *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* both failed to mention the Chinese version of events, which described the protection of the *Liaoning* as the reason for the Chinese ship to cross in front of the *Cowpens*. The *Wall Street Journal* article completely omitted the fact that the U.S. ship was in relative proximity to the PLAN carrier.⁵⁸ The article in *The New York Times* began by stating, “In a sign of the increased tensions between the United States and China on the open seas,” but did explain that the *Cowpens* was shadowing the Liaoning when the encounter occurred.⁵⁹ The reporting reveals that the message in the national media is heterogeneous and shapes the national discourse in inconsistent ways. This leaves one to question which perspective contributes most to the common narrative but also shows how important elite reactions are to an event since each article carried elite quotes to help readers understand the American government perspective on the events. There are certainly many more articles about China that contribute to this narrative but these three

newspapers covering these two events offer insight into the range of characterizations that can be made about a single event.

Visual Images and Popular Television

In addition to news articles, visual images are quite powerful forms of communication and influence.⁶⁰ Going back to the American Revolution, Paul Revere's "romanticized cartoons of the [Boston] massacre were widely circulated" and helped exaggerate the actual incident in order to inflame the domestic population and influence political behavior.⁶¹ Political cartoons are an example of the kinds of images that contribute to the current national narrative. Patrick Chappatte, who draws editorial cartoons for the *New York Times* (and *International Herald Tribune*), penned a cartoon in April 2012, that directly addressed the U.S. pivot to the Pacific. His cartoon depicted a U.S. aircraft carrier running aground next to a building flying a Chinese flag. President Obama sits on the deck of the carrier and asks the presumed President of China "Is this your backyard, really? I'm sorry."⁶² The reader is left with the image of the U.S. intruding in the arena of natural Chinese influence.

Later that year, Chappatte drew Uncle Sam reluctantly getting drawn into a fight between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands; he followed that later in 2013 with an editorial cartoon that depicted China sending an enormous warship to a very small island.⁶³ A similar search of the keyword 'China' on the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists website depicts China more often as a competitor and source of conflict than as a peacefully rising state.⁶⁴ It is not the intent of this article to presume that editorial cartoons dictate the national discourse, but only to submit that they provide additional information and context that is in contest with the rhetoric put forth by the national elites.

The TV show *The Colbert Report*, hosted by comedian Stephen Colbert, also contributed to the image of China shortly after Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines on November 8, 2013. On November 14, after criticizing the PRC for donating a mere \$100,000 to disaster relief efforts, he challenged his viewers (whom he refers to as the “Colbert Nation”) to donate more than the PRC.⁶⁵ During that segment of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert began by outlining the U.S. military and financial contributions to the relief effort. Then, after referring to China as a ‘so-called superpower’, he ridiculed their contribution of \$100,000 and challenged his audience to “out-donate China.”⁶⁶ After providing information on how to donate, he closed by referring to China as “stingy jerks.” Four days later, he disclosed that the “Colbert Nation” did, in fact, exceed Chinese donations to hurricane relief and then proceeded to humorously make demands based on the fact that the “Colbert Nation” should be allowed to have China’s seat at the U.N. Security Council.⁶⁷ Although his show is for entertainment, it still has an impact on popular thought. Colbert presented China as a nation in conflict with American values – values that superpowers are expected to exhibit. While it is difficult to assess the long term impact of popular media, it is clear that it can have a cumulative effect over time, nudging public opinion towards – or away from – hostility.⁶⁸

Public Opinion

In December 2013 *The Washington Post* published an article explaining the Carnegie Endowment’s efforts to assess U.S. perceptions of China. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace study was entitled, “U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey: Findings and Implications.”⁶⁹ What was important about this article was not only what the survey found, but also how that information was portrayed in the

Post article. Although *The Washington Post* is not one of the top three circulated newspapers, it is a prominent newspaper of the nation's capital and thus illustrative for the purposes of this analysis. The Carnegie survey was conducted throughout 2012 in both the U.S. and China; it surveyed elite and general public perceptions in both countries.⁷⁰ This was intended to be the first of many iterations of this survey so that it could chart the change in perceptions over time. The authors argued "Public and elite attitudes in both the United States and especially China are exerting a growing influence on the U.S.-China security relationship."⁷¹

In general, the respective surveys measured perceptions of attributes of their own country and of the other country, and articulated them in three broad categories: partner, competitor, or enemy, in multiple realms.⁷² Even though minorities of elites in both countries view the other country as an enemy, there is a striking difference between the low percentage of U.S. government elites (2%) who see China as an enemy compared to the larger percentage of Chinese government elites (27%) who view the U.S. as an enemy.⁷³ While it is encouraging to know that only a small number of U.S. elites view China as an enemy, this statistic must be understood within the context of the greater U.S. population. In the broader population, a larger, yet still small segment (15%) of the U.S. public sees China as an enemy while clear majorities of each measured category see China as a competitor.⁷⁴ This perception across many demographics echoes Obama's characterization of the U.S.-China relationship during the statement he made in June 2013 after meeting with his Chinese counterpart.

When Presidents Obama and Xi met informally at the Rancho Mirage resort to discuss the U.S.-China relationship, it was the first time they had met together to focus

exclusively on the bilateral relationship. During the post-meeting remarks, the President's comments closely mirrored the Carnegie proposition. He stated "we're more likely to achieve our objectives of prosperity and security of our people if we are working together cooperatively, rather than engaged in conflict."⁷⁵ Coupled with his remarks before the bilateral meeting where he espoused that "healthy economic competition" between the two largest economies was natural," one can easily see the elements of cooperation and economic competition evident in his view of the bilateral relationship.⁷⁶ The President also explained that China's "peaceful rise" is in the U.S.'s national interest.⁷⁷ This statement also clearly indicates that Chinese actions should be viewed and characterized in a manner that understands that they will play an increasingly larger role in international affairs.

Conclusion

In summary, this analysis finds that most planned and prepared elite speeches and strategic publications use relatively homogenous language. This language depicts the rise of China as an opportunity for the U.S. to compete economically and cooperate with the PRC in areas of mutual interest while China continues to grow in power and influence. In contrast, Presidential speeches during the 2012 presidential campaign, initial reactions to the ADIZ and *Cowpens* incidents, and characterizations of China in popular media depict China as an economic and security rival with the potential to cause instability in the East and South China Seas. Awareness of these competing narratives about China is important for two specific reasons. First, initial reactions to Chinese behavior need to be carefully crafted so as not to misrepresent behavior in a hostile manner when in fact that behavior may be interpreted as the rational, predictable action of a nation-state – especially one whose power is increasing. Second,

understanding the socially constructed idea of China can ensure that policy options are not eliminated for the wrong reasons. For example, if U.S. rhetoric about a Chinese act is inflammatory or characterizes that act as hostile, then policy response options may be unnecessarily limited to the kinds of options that respond out of a sense of 'fear' or perceived loss of 'honor,' rather than rational 'interest.'⁷⁸

The disparity between campaign rhetoric and editorial cartoons on the one hand, and the rather more prosaic rhetoric being constructed by U.S. policy elites is curious. Based on the assumption that the public increases their attention to elite speeches during the campaign season because of their interest in deciding how to vote and what the candidates are saying, one could assume that the public's perception of China is influenced more significantly during this period. Especially when one considers that the viewership of each of the three Presidential debates averaged 64 million viewers, the impact of rhetoric during debates cannot be underestimated.⁷⁹ Additionally, the average American probably has not read the *Defense Strategic Guidance*, *QDR* or archived speeches from the White House, leaving the debates and the open press articles as unrivaled advocates for a specific image of China that is generally more antagonistic than the image created by prepared speeches and publications.

Editorial cartoons read by a wider swath of the population are even more likely than formal policy speeches to define the narrative in the public square. These cartoons and articles, coupled with images portrayed by shows like *The Colbert Report*, challenge pre-planned and prepared U.S. elite remarks that attempt to construct an image of China as a rising power and a potential partner whose relationship with the U.S. requires close attention but not fear. These efforts to portray the need for more

engagement between the U.S. and China are potentially drowned out by the emotional rhetoric of the campaign trail and voices read in the news and heard on popular programs. If one accepts the constructivist notion that culture gives context to policy decisions, then avoiding a Thucydidean trap will require extremely careful crafting of the public image of China during emotional events or campaigns.⁸⁰ This need for diligence is especially important as shown by Graham Allison who noted that “in 11 of 15 cases since 1500 in which a rising power rivaled a ruling power, the outcome was war.”⁸¹

It may be accurate, then, to liken the rise of the PRC to the rise of Athens. Those who have a voice in the national discourse need to ensure that they do not unnecessarily constrain policy choices and cause the U.S. to follow the path of Sparta by reacting with emotion to incidents between the U.S. and China that can be characterized in a number of ways. Those incidents need to be portrayed in context so that policy choices are not narrowed because of a socially constructed image that is more hostile than objective analysis might suggest. U.S. policy-makers need to keep a close watch on the image of China being constructed through public discourse. Though they cannot control it, they can monitor it. By doing so they will better understand U.S. public views during a crisis with China. This will better prepare and equip them to keep such a crisis from escalating unnecessarily or arbitrarily.

Endnotes

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