

Gone with the Wind? Strategic Distrust and U.S.-China Relations*

Yeh-Chung Lu and Szu-Hua Chen

In early November 2012, President Obama was re-elected in the United States and General Secretary Xi Jinping was promoted to first among equals in China's ruling circle. These two events occurred within 10 days of each other, and yet the impact of this reconfiguration of political power will affect the world for years to come. This article preliminarily seeks to investigate the shape of U.S.-China relations under Obama and Xi Jinping, and sketch out the possible future trajectory of this critically important dyadic relationship. The U.S. policy of “rebalancing” is likely to continue to shape the Asia-Pacific security situation in the years ahead, while China's response may exacerbate the already fragile U.S.-China relationship with a high level of strategic distrust. The U.S. may maintain the policy option with the name of “strategic ambiguity” concerning cross-Strait relations, and at this moment it is in our interest to extend this policy's validity.

Mutual Perceptions between the U.S. and China

Perception plays an important role in international politics, especially in the domain of foreign policy as opined by Robert Jervis. Based on this line of reasoning, how the U.S. and China perceive each other has an impact on their respective policies and the overall bilateral relations.

According to Kenneth Lieberthal, the U.S. seems to perceive China as no longer a developing country, but rather as a steadily rising power with a focus on its relative gains while interacting with the U.S. China's assertive behavior in recent years, such as its flexing of its military muscles, promotion of mercantilism abroad and at home, and lack of enthusiasm for political reforms, has deepened U.S. suspicion of China.¹ Conversely, China's perceptions of the U.S. also remain ambivalent, as Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell recently suggested, especially when the U.S. economy has yet to recover.² When seemingly power transition from the U.S. to China is in progress, China's suspicion of an ill-intent U.S. continues to exist. In China's eyes, the U.S. is the party regarding interactions between the two countries as a zero-sum game.

China's top leaders have yet to officially respond since the U.S. launched its “rebalancing” policy toward Asia. However, as Michael Swaine notes, China's responses from government agencies and pundits are clearly attentive to the United States' regional strategies and their impact on U.S.-China relations.³ Government views have been revealed only through Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of National Defense (MND) press conferences, and are typically phrased as abstract comments laced with the term “constructive” in an effort to avoid possible negative consequences for U.S.-China relations as a whole. In addition, China also calls on the U.S. to respect the “interests and concerns of other parties in the Asia-Pacific, including China.” Views from China analysts and pundits are more critical of the U.S. rebalancing strategy. To them, this is a means to counterbalance China's growing influence in Asia, and may therefore result in zero-sum interactions between the two giants.

Although China has paid relatively less attention to military strategy in connection with the U.S. pivot to Asia, discussions on this issue will be no less critical. At an MND press conference, China expressed its concerns about the American Air-Sea Battle Concept, which has been described as an expression of a Cold War mentality only serves to destabilizing regional peace and stability. In



Beijing is concerned about U.S. military strategy in connection with the “pivot-to-Asia policy.” Special attention is paid to the AirSea Battle Concept. (Source: U.S. DoD)

* To prevent confusion and for reading convenience, in this article, the “Republic of China” is indicated as “Taiwan”, while “China” means “Mainland China.” The views expressed in this article should not be interpreted as those of the Ministry of National Defense.

line with Nathan and Scobell, Robert Ross has warned that the Obama administration's pivot policy may unnecessarily heighten China's sense of insecurity, and is therefore counterproductive to stability in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴

Sources of Strategic Distrust

Lieberthal and Wang Jisi define “strategic distrust” as a perception that the other side will seek to achieve its key long-term goals at your expense, and contend that this growing feeling of distrust may be self-fulfilling in the near future.⁵ They further identify three sources of strategic distrust between the U.S. and China, namely different political traditions and values, inadequate understanding and appreciation of each other's policymaking processes, and a perception of a narrowing gap in power between the U.S. and China. According to them, while the first of these is structural and therefore the most difficult to be solved, the other two can be managed through bilateral and multilateral dialogues.

This paper concurs with Lieberthal and Wang's analysis and argues that a sense of insecurity is highly geopolitical and deep-rooted in U.S.-China relations. As Nathan and Scobell maintain, China's analysts tend to see the U.S. with offensive realism in international relations (IR) theories and thus employ assertiveness as reaction. Most China's analysts are “linking up with the international track” with the usage of IR theory, and they seem to blame the U.S. for the possible conflict preordained by the offensive realist

thinking. For instance, Wu Xinbo hopes for a wiser China policy in President Obama's second term, so that both parties can build a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship” as agreed to by both sides during Hu Jintao's visit to the U.S. in 2011.⁶

Sources of strategic distrust between the U.S. and China include different political values, inadequate understanding of each other's policymaking processes, and a perception of a narrowing gap in power between the two.

“Managing Competition and Maximizing Cooperation” in U.S.-China Relations

While the political restructuring that occurred in both the U.S. and China in early November 2012 has not eliminated strategic distrust in their bilateral relations, both sides seemed to ease their harsh criticism of each other. In a congratulatory message to President Obama following his re-election on November 7, Hu Jintao expressed that, in general, steady progress has been made in U.S.-China relations, and China expects to see mutual respect and benefit to take root in an emerging new type of relationship between these major powers.

One week later, the U.S. also congratulated China on the latter's political transition to Xi Jinping, and on November 15, the State Department reiterated that the U.S. is “committed to building a cooperative partnership with China.” During a trip to Australia, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that “the Pacific is big enough for all of us” while expressing the importance of forging a cooperative relationship with China and Australia. Clinton also emphasized that the U.S. would encourage increased cooperation throughout the Asia-Pacific region, “as long as there is a level playing field and everybody knows what the rules are and everybody is held to the same standards.”

Since 2009, the Obama administration has employed the “Three D's”—Diplomacy, Development, and Defense—as the essence of its Asia policy. Recently, speaking in reference to American China policy, Secretary Clinton



U.S. State Secretary Clinton and Mainland China's Foreign Minister Yang emphasize the importance of developing a cooperative relationship in 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings. However, due to different political values and narrowing power gap, strategic distrust still lingers in the bilateral relations. (Source: state.gov)

stated that the U.S. wants to “continue our strong economic engagement, cooperate on regional and global issues, deepen our people-to-people ties, and encourage progress on human rights.” With regard to these “Four Wants,” this paper argues that the U.S. will gradually focus its effort on “managing competition and maximizing cooperation” with China, as suggested by David Shambaugh.⁷ However, we still need to pay heed to the effect of strategic distrust in U.S.-China relations.

Implications for Taiwan: Hoping for Business as Usual

While strategic distrust lingers in U.S.-China relations, the Obama administration has continued to adopt a strategy of “strategic ambiguity”—an approach that has served to balance competing U.S. interests in both China and Taiwan for decades. The U.S. government has made clear that it opposes any unilateral moves by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo and disrupt peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Under this policy approach, Washington has committed to make arms sales to Taipei to serve as deterrence against Beijing’s attack, whereas making no reliable commitments regarding the circumstances of breaking peace under which Washington would defend Taipei so as to prevent Taipei’s provocation.

However, with the continuing rise of China and its increasingly assertive public statements and actions over the past two years, the strategy of “strategic ambiguity” has induced a heated debate in the U.S., with some experts stressing the potential for cooperation, while others pointing to the likelihood of strategic competition between the U.S. and China. Five distinct schools of thought can be distinguished, with each growing out of a particular strain of optimism or pessimism concerning the future of U.S.-China relations or cross-Strait relations.

Adopting a gloomy outlook on U.S.-China strategic competition, Charles W. Freeman Jr. argues that American defense support for Taiwan, from China’s point of view, would serve nothing but a motive to increase “China’s perceived need to prepare itself for future combat with the United States.” Freeman therefore proposes to cater to China’s demands by eliminating U.S. defense support to Taiwan in the hope of avoiding possible conflicts.⁸ On contrast, although concurring with Freeman’s negative outlook on U.S.-China relations, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser emphasize the need for maintaining defense assistance to Taiwan in view of the fact that the sacrifice of Taiwan would create a China even more confident that it could extract concessions from the U.S., not to mention its need for demonstrating its power would not thus be fully gratified based on its potent nationalism.



Withdrawal of U.S. defense assistance to Taiwan will merely gratify Beijing and thus generate new problems. (Source: Taiwantoday.tw)

Rather than chiefly focusing on the direction of U.S.-China ties, Robert Sutter is more concerned about the future development of cross-Strait relations, and suggests that the U.S. would suffer if Taiwan by any chance accommodates itself to China. Conversely, Bruce Gilley, Bill Owens and Charles Glaser suggest that the U.S. “get Taiwan out of the way” ahead of potential cooperation between the U.S. and China, and see Taiwan as moving toward China. According to Gilley, a move toward “Finlandization” will benefit both sides of the Taiwan Strait as the two parties will “embrace a view of security that is on the premise of high-level contact, trust, and reduced threats of force.” From the U.S. perspective, China’s military buildup is likely to slow down due to its fear of encirclement and naval inferiority dissipates.⁹

Lastly, considering that policy changes may result in more unnecessary risks, Richard Bush, Alan Romberg and Shelley Rigger suggest that maintaining “strategic ambiguity” will best promote America’s interest in peace and stability. In Rigger’s eyes, withdrawal of U.S. defense assistance to Taiwan without Taiwan’s readiness for unification will merely gratify Beijing and thus generate new problems. In addition, according to Bush and Romberg, Taiwan’s current strategy of engaging China “reduces the probability of war” and “lays a foundation for a cross-Strait relationship on terms acceptable to both sides,”¹⁰ which would seemingly prove the U.S. status quo strategy of “strategic ambiguity” is worth continuing.

Table: Recent Discussions in the United States concerning Taiwan in U.S.-China Relations

Future scenario	Argument	Policy suggestion	Proponent
Growing strategic competition between the U.S. and China; Taiwan's disturbing presence to China	Accommodation of China's demands to avoid elevation of conflict	U.S. withdrawal of military support to Taiwan	Chas W. Freeman Jr.
	Checking China's ambitions	U.S. maintenance of military support Taiwan (through arms sales)	Nancy Tucker, Bonnie Glaser
Taiwan's movement toward China	U.S. dominant role in the Taiwan area and its efforts to maintain a peaceful environment favorable to Taiwan and U.S. interests will be challenged	No specific course of action is proposed, but there is a challenge to longstanding U.S. policy goals in the Taiwan Strait	Robert Sutter
Potential for cooperation between the U.S. and China; Taiwan's movement toward China	The benefits of "Finlandization"	U.S. withdrawal from its security commitment to Taiwan	Bruce Gilley, Bill Owens, Charles Glaser
An uncertain future	Taiwan's unpreparedness for unification, and the efficacy of Taiwan's current strategy of engaging China	U.S. continuation of "strategic ambiguity"	Richard Bush, Alan Romberg, Shelley Rigger

Source: Adapted from Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan in U.S.-China Relations," in David Shambaugh ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. 304-310.

In a nutshell, political power restructuring in the U.S. and China has yet to fundamentally eliminate strategic distrust between the two countries. With new leaderships in town, nevertheless, both sides demonstrate pragmatism and willingness at this point to forge a positive and cooperative relationship. "Management" would continue to characterize U.S.-China relations in the near future, in which both sides understand it is of importance to minimizing the competition while maximizing the cooperation. For Taiwan, the U.S. policy choice of "strategic ambiguity" seems to fit our need. If it is not broken, we should not ask to fix it.

Dr. Yeh-Chung Lu is an assistant professor in the Department of Diplomacy at National Chengchi University. Szu-Hua Chen is a research assistant in a project commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council, R.O.C.

1. Kenneth Liberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012).
2. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, "How China Sees America," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (September/October 2012), pp. 32-47.
3. Michael Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 38 (Summer 2012).
4. Robert Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (November/December 2012), pp. 70-82.
5. Kenneth Liberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012), p. 5.
6. Wu Xinbo, "Beijing's Wish List: A Wiser China Policy in President Obama's Second Term," *Brookings Northeast Asia Commentary* No. 64, December 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/12/11-china-obama-wu> (accessed 2012/12/14).
7. David Shambaugh, "Tangled Titans: Conceptualizing the U.S.-China Relationship," in David Shambaugh ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. 3-26.
8. Chas W. Freeman, Jr., "Beijing, Washington and the Shifting Balance of Prestige: Remarks to the China Maritime Studies Institute," May 10, 2011, <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/speeches/beijing-washington-and-shifting-balance-prestige>. (accessed 2012/12/13).
9. Bruce Gilley, "Not So Dire Straits: How the Finlandization of Taiwan Benefits U.S. Security," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2010), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65901/bruce-gilley/not-so-dire-straits> (accessed 2012/12/13).
10. Richard Bush and Alan D. Romberg, "Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—A Response to Robert Sutter," *Pacnet*, Vol. 17A (2009), <http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac0917a.pdf> (accessed 2012/12/13).