Chinese Academia’s Debate on the New US Strategy toward China

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Abstract

This paper aims to research into the ongoing debate about the new US strategy toward China among the Chinese scholars and its implications for the China-US relations in the future. The larger ambition here is to promote the mutual interaction and understanding between the informed debates on the bilateral relationship in both countries. The paper focuses on the major consensuses and controversies formed during the ongoing debate in the Chinese academic circles regarding how China should respond to the new US strategy toward China, which is now partly reflected in the furious trade policy of the Trump administration. Based on the summary and analysis of the agreement and disagreement among the Chinese academics, several suggestions are presented at the end for a stable and sound China-US relationship.

Keywords: Chinese academia, debate, US strategy toward China, China-US relations

Introduction

The release of the new national security strategy by the Trump administration in December 2017, followed by other official strategy documents, seemed to signify the end of the long China debate in the US, which began in 2015 during the Obama administration. That end, however, just witnessed the beginning of a new round of debate in China, discussing the best response to the emerging new US strategy toward China. Now, the debate has begun to feature calmness and maturity although the ongoing trade conflict is raging on between China and the United States. In order to see a clear picture of the upcoming bilateral relationship, it is an appropriate time now to examine and recognize what both sides are thinking about the other country. This paper is such an attempt to feel the pulse of the Chinese side by focusing on the debate on China’s response toward the incoming new US strategy in the Chinese academia.

Chinese academia

Chinese academia here refers to the scholars studying China-US relations in universities, research institutes and think tanks. Although not as active as their American counterparts involved in the “revolving doors”—frequently entering and exiting various government agencies, Chinese scholars also play a significant role in the shaping of Chinese foreign policy and strategy. They could join in the foreign policy making by directly acting as advisors to the state leadership or
foreign policy departments, or indirectly by debating about Chinese foreign strategy in famous periodicals and newspapers on foreign issues, which will form an informed opinion pool and an effective social mood bearing greatly on decision makers.

Methodology

This research mainly adopts a qualitative method to capture the major opinions regarding China’s response to the US among the Chinese scholars. The study makes a survey of all the related articles in the major Chinese foreign-issue journals or newspapers, covering the period of over half the year of 2018 since the release of the new National Security Strategy by the Trump administration in December 2017. The study analyzes and interprets the convergences as well the divergences among the various academics who present their opinions in a great variety of academic media. By surveying the agreements and disagreements of Chinese scholars regarding how best to respond to the new US strategy toward China in the forming, this paper aims to promote the understanding and interaction of opinion leaders in both countries.

The fuse of the debate

The fuse of an intensified debate about an upcoming new US strategy toward China obviously began with the release of the new National Security Strategy by the Trump administration in December 2017. In the new strategy report, the US redefined the nature of its relationship with China as one of rivalry, with China as its biggest potential rival. Several other important official documents released afterwards only reaffirmed and even intensified this narrative. This sudden turnabout of China’s identity in US strategic circles stimulated the debate about the new US strategy among the Chinese scholars as well as Chinese policymakers. But how the Trump administration has since behaved in its policy toward China—from security issues to trade and economic issues has actually kept the debate going and aggravating.

Although the debate has turned more focused toward trade and economic issues as the trade conflict between China and the US is becoming more virulent, the debate has covered general issues like China’s response toward the new US strategy as well specific matters like trade conflicts between the two countries. Throughout this period, Chinese scholars have been debating on broad questions like “Has the US defined China as its real strategic enemy?” “Is the Trump administration implementing an all-out containment strategy toward China?” or “Will there be a cold war between China and the US?” and “How should China respond wisely to the new US strategy,” etc.. The major part of the article will present the
consensuses and controversies among Chinese scholars in addressing these questions

Consensuses

US defining China as a strategic rival

In the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2017, China is seen as a “revisionist power”, engaged in an effort to realize a “repressive vision of world order” by overthrowing the long-standing free world order led by the United States (National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017). Using different but more outright language, the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2018 states that “China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors” for regional dominance (Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge, 2018). Although the Trump administration’s strategy documents defined China in very clear terms as “revisionist power”, “strategic competitor,” Chinese scholars went through a process, though a short one, of debating about the sincerity and seriousness of the US strategic community about this assessment. (Some Chinese scholars first did not take seriously labels like “strategic rival,” and reminded others of the fact that the newly-elected George W. Bush administration also labeled China as its strategic rival in 2001, but later changed that strategic view with the common challenge of terrorism. They argued that the U.S. might change this cyclical assessment soon with the appearance of other common challenges.) Now, more than half a year past the release of the documents, most scholars in China have come to accept the fact that the US has truly seen China as a strategic rival, which could “pose a serious threat” to its strategic interests in the near future. At the same time, however, a few scholars still hold that China should not read too much into the strategy documents, which seems to imply a sharp turn in US strategy toward China.

After making a historical and comparative analysis, some Chinese scholars have promoted the acceptance of the change of American strategic view of China. They recognized this as a somewhat “natural” development of the US China policy debate, which underwent a long period of evolution, by trying to find some signifying events and opinions (Zhou, 2018). During the Obama administration, amid the ongoing debate about the US strategy toward China, the Council on Foreign Relations published a special report, Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China, written by Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis. The authors argue that instead of evolving into the “responsible stakeholder,” China represents and will remain the most significant competitor to the United States for decades to come” (Tellis and Blackwill, 2015). The Report recommends placing less strategic emphasis on the goal of integrating China into the international system and more
on balancing China's rise, placing “less emphasis on support and cooperation and more on pressure and competition, less hedging and more active countering” (Tellis and Blackwill, 2015). Actually, the Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” policy was just the embodiment and reflection of the result of the debate. When Trump entered the White House, his policy statement and action naturally inherited and intensified from those of Obama, given the campaign promises and personal style of the new president.

Looking back into the bilateral relations of China and the U.S., many Chinese scholars have realized that competing with or “containing” China, together with “engaging” China, has always been a significant part of US grand strategy toward China. This is best explained by Christopher Layne in his book review, *A House of Cards: American Strategy toward China*. Layne argues that “there is a mainstream consensus view about the future of the Sino-American relationship and that within this consensus the differences between containers and engagers are of degree, not of kind” (Layne, 1997). In that article, Layne also recommends the US taking an off-shore balancing strategy to balance the rise of China. Anyway, the key goal of US strategy is to balance the rise of China by using a whole toolbox of means. A big shift now for China to accept is that the U.S. government will put more emphasis on “containment” rather than “engagement” of China for the coming years, but engagement will always be there.

**China maintaining current international order by continued opening up**

What president Trump has said and done after the release of the new US strategy documents basically reaffirm American strategic view of China’s identity in the world, though his policy statements and actions have been full of dramatic twists and turns. Chinese scholars have found an interesting paradox of American politics: Trump’s strategic shift toward China has been widely hailed as wise and bipartisan while his domestic reform agenda has been roundly criticized as stupid and authoritarian. Despite the appearance of dissenting voices regarding his recent overheated trade offensive aimed at China, the strategic community in the US seems to largely agree with Trump’s comprehensive set of military, security and economic measures against China.

Confronted with this new strategic view of China’s identity as the biggest competitor and Trump’s reckless trade policy moves, Chinese academia still concludes that China should stick to the current international order initiated and led by the United States, although the latter has become reluctant to integrate and engage China in the order. China admits that it has benefited and will continue to benefit from this current international political and economic order, even though it wants to reform those elements in it which are out of date and unfair. Actually maintaining and reforming the current international order is the historical trend and
will benefit China, other countries as well as the United States. With the current intensifying crisis of the trade conflicts initiated by the Trump administration, Chinese scholars almost unanimously hold that China should turn this great challenge into an opportunity to make domestic economic structural adjustments and further technological innovation, pushing its economic development smoothly forward.

Most scholars agree that China should learn to persuade others to believe that it will not change this current rules-based international economic and trade system. China will further reform and improve the domestic market environment, as well as continue its efforts to open China even more to the outside world. Actually, Ying Fu argues that “some of the requirements recently proposed by the US and the EU about China’s trade and economy also match Beijing’s goal of reform” (Fu, 2018). China will continue and intensify its efforts on addressing issues like intellectual property protection, which relate to the success of both domestic reforms and opening up of China. By partly meeting some requirements of the Trump administration, Chinese scholars also hope “rational and moderate voices in the US as well as interest groups will not want to give up access to China’s huge $8 trillion-market” (Chen, 2018).

**US recognizing the rise of China as a socialist country**

Related to the above-mentioned determination to maintain the current international order and opening up is another common conviction held by the large intellectual community in China—the United States will have to recognize the rise of China as a socialist country. In a recent report released by the Center for China and World Economy (CCWE) of Tsinghua University, the authors argue that the ongoing China-US economic friction, if handled properly, may lead to a new pattern of China-US cooperation, featuring three main hallmarks, i.e. “three acceptances” on the part of the US:

1) The US must accept the fact that China and the US have different development paths, and it is impossible for China to follow a Western path of political and economic development. China and the US should seek peaceful co-existence despite their differences.

2) The US must accept the fact that China will play a primary role in its surroundings regions, since China is the most populous country and will soon be the largest economy.

3) The US must accept a new type of leadership from China in improving global governance (Li, et al., 2018).
Actually, China differs from the U.S. not only in its political system, but also, or even more importantly, in its history and culture. Real China experts in the west can or should learn to see the Chinese political and economic system from the lens of Chinese history and culture. The whole socialist Chinese governance system contains many elements unique to Chinese long history and rich culture. This is also the case with the United States, which has a rather short history, though. Serious, self-reflecting Americans concur that the basic elements of the U.S. political system today all originated in the disunited 13 states before the American Revolution. It is fair to say that China has achieved its present economic success (economically) by drawing on American/western model of development; it is even fairer to say that China has found its path to ensuring its success (politically) by inheriting the essentials in its culture formed throughout its 5 thousand years of history. It is futile, if not ill-willed, for the US to try to change or remodel China’s political system in the American image, because it cannot sever the connection between the past and present of China’s culture, especially given that China has experienced a very long but always continuous civilization.

This recognition has lied in the deep heart of Chinese scholars as well as policy makers in the past four decades since the opening up of China, although most American strategists have not recognized that or claimed that recognition disproved their grand strategy toward China. Reflecting further on their strategy, they might have to at least acknowledge that they had actually considered the possibility that their strategy might ‘fail’ on that front at the beginning. Although the US strategic establishment almost unanimously agrees that American grand strategy toward China in the past 30 years has failed completely. This conclusion is open to debate if their original intentions are wholly reexamined. This issue will be discussed later in the article.

China now has found its success path through generations of exploration and confirmed it via the proof of economic achievements in the past forty years, so it is imperative for its government to continue to stick to it. Now, it is time for the US to recognize the fact that China will rise as a socialist country, mainly in the sense that it has a uniquely different history and culture from the similarly unique America.

Controversies

The advent of the era of strategic competition

Without doubt, the bilateral relationship has entered a new era. But it is controversial whether we have witnessed the advent of an era of strategic
competition between China and the US. It is obvious that different scholars define the term “strategic competition” in different ways, but oftentimes scholars focus on different dimensions of the upcoming competition between China and the US, no matter how they label the competitive part of the bilateral relationship.

Based on the strategy reports of the Trump administration and the recent raging trade conflict between China and the US, some scholars emphasized the changes in the bilateral relations. Xinbo Wu argues that “we have entered an era of competing for power and influence, when the US policy toward China will be characterized by constraint, confinement and containment” (Wu, 2018). Likewise, Peng Yuan claims that the nature of the bilateral relationship totally changed. The competition goes beyond the field of economics and trade and the area of Asia-Pacific (Yuan, 2018).

However, a few scholars have bluntly denied the claim that China and the United States have entered a new era of strategic competition on a global scale. Yin Chu argues that China’s security concern and US’ security concern are different in nature: China is more concerned with its own security (internal stability and unity) while the US is more concerned with its hegemonic security (safe hegemonic status in the world). He identifies three security concerns throughout China’s dynastic history: dynastic stability, domestic unity among ethnicities and regional stability. The Chinese government today is still mostly concerned with those three issues, though in different forms: justification of the Communist Party rule by promoting economic development, safeguarding national unity against separatists (in Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang), and its peaceful relations with neighbors. Given the current state of those three issues, therefore, China has neither the capability nor the will to challenge US interests globally, competing with the US ‘strategically.’ Although these concerns form the major core interests of China, they are largely not in collision with the major ambitions of the United States (Chu, 2018). This line of reasoning is reasonable especially considering the fact that China is bordered by 20 countries on land and at sea. And the population of China and its neighbors accounts for over 50% in the world (Jin, 2018). So it is obvious to see why China is so concerned with the stability and security of its surrounding areas and why China will not seek to achieve its global primacy long before it could ensure its stable status in its near abroad.

Still, this argument can be understood as emphasizing the core security concerns on the part of China in the competitive bilateral relations. Considering President Trump’s campaign promises and the current trade conflict between China and the US, some scholars focus on the economic power component of the new China-US competition stage. Cheng Gao argues that the core part of the bilateral competition is the economic potential in dominating the future world power structure. China’s
rise is first facing “the economic pressure trap,” not “the Thucydides trap.” China should stick to the principle of enhancing economic power and the orientation of economic interests in its foreign strategy, focusing on East Asia and translating its economic power into actual political influence (Gao, 2018).

In China, there are also loud voices stressing the unavoidable strategic competition between the two great powers. Xuetong Yan argues that chaos and disorder will soon become the normal state in the world; a bipolar system with the two superpowers of the U.S. and China will probably come into being within five years. The unpredictability of the Trump administration’s China policy will possibly pose danger to the bilateral relationship, particularly by intensifying the separatist trend of Taiwan. China should compete for world leadership by setting a ‘Wangdào’ (benevolent government) model (Hao & Liu, 2018).

New “Cold War” dynamics already in the forming

Related to the debate on the strategic competition between China and the US, Chinese scholars have discussed the possibility of a real cold war between the two countries, although the concept of cold war mentality always exists in the imagination of policy makers in both countries.

Some Chinese scholars have often criticized the Cold War mentality lying in the corner of some American strategists because they tend to emphasize and exaggerate the threat posed by the rising power of China despite the fact that China has always pursued and acted on a serious of peaceful, cooperative and win-win principles. But few have really recognized the possibility of a real cold war unfolding between China and the US. After the release of the new strategy reports and especially the launching of “trade war” by the Trump administration recently, some Chinese scholars have begun to take the issue of a US-China cold war more seriously.

By reexamining the new US strategy documents, Hanwen Ge argues that the NSS and NDS are written in the tone of “the Cold War”, by emphasizing good vs. evil forces and judging friends or foes based on power (Ge, 2018). Not just focusing on the cold war mindset reflected in the official documents, Yongnian Zheng analyzes the significant factors leading to “the US-China cold war.” He argues that the US has launched a new cold war against China based on three judgments: 1) China and the U.S. have different ideologies; 2) They have different economic models; 3) The U.S. has seen China’s new initiatives such as the Belt and Road initiative as new expansionism (Zheng, 2018).

While some scholars might realize the sufficient intensity of US strategic suppression on China as to consider seriously the chances of a cold war between
the two countries, most scholars in China adopt a more rational and cautious attitude toward the debate. Xiying Zuo argues that “we should not give ‘cold war’ its undeserved role in explaining and predicting the bilateral dynamics, so that it will not become a real self-fulfilling prophecy. Foreign policy is more of a choice than of predestination (Zuo, 2018).” Others remind people of the still healthy state of the infrastructure of the bilateral relationship. Gang An holds that the essential factors underpinning China-US relationship have not collapsed and the cyclical influence of US domestic politics on its foreign policy is still functioning. Although the new era of China-US relationship features more competition than cooperation, among the elements to restrain an all-out confrontation are rationality of policymaking, the entanglement of mutual interests, the imbalance of power, public opinion (eg. Over 50% of Americans hold a favorable opinion toward China), and common needs/challenges etc. (An, 2018).

Even in the area of economic and trade issues, some scholars have emphasized the limited range of the bilateral conflict. Daokui Li et al argue that the conflicts in some economic areas are unavoidable, but a comprehensive economic confrontation will not appear, to a great part because 1) “Chinese and US interests are deeply entwined,” 2) “the appeal of the Trump-led ‘traditional America,’ and that of the “new-era China” are strategically mutually complementary,” and 3) “the Chinese top leadership is capable of drawing lessons from history” (Li, et al, 2018).

**Implications for China-US relations**

It seems that the debate on a new US grand strategy has ended with the release of a set of official documents at the turn of 2017-2018. American scholars of all political beliefs have told their Chinese counterparts that whoever takes the helm of the White House will adopt the “new” economic containment policy Trump has done. That argument should not become the final voice on US strategy toward China. People considering the potential harms of the unilateralist and protectionist strategy should continue and let continue the debate on US-China relations.

One of the first debating topics American strategists might need to reexamine is the assumption of China and the US being falling into the “Thucydides trap.” They seem to share the concern that China is challenging American strategic interests throughout the world. China is on the way to becoming a new ‘hegemon’ in place of the United States. Most Chinese scholars, though, hold that China will not follow the path of the US seeking hegemony because of historical and cultural reasons. As a matter of fact, China always seeks to avoid the so-called “Thucydides trap,” which is a western concept haunting US strategists. It is also imperative for the US to reexamine their assessment of the so-called “engagement” strategy toward China in the past thirty years, which most American strategists
conclude is basically a failure. Possibly they have to admit that the very assumption behind the strategy is wrong, because China probably will never become an Americanized democracy. If that is the case, the engagement strategy is not a big failure since part of the original goal is to integrate China into the international order without necessarily transforming it in the American image. Actually, Hao Wang argues that the so-called engagement strategy has not failed, which seemed out of date only because both countries experienced the change of relative power and adjustment of strategic priorities (Wang, 2018).

Debating can never achieve real and valuable conclusions if debaters stick to their old mindsets. The emphasis on strategic threat posed by China and the repressive policy of the Trump administration reflect the accumulation and flare up of the “China threat” sentiments in the US, behind which is the established arrogance and prejudice inherent in the US “exceptionalism.” There has appeared a great variety of “China threat” concepts since the 1990s. The more recent versions are represented by The Hundred Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower written by Michael Pillsbury, and the latest waves of criticism of Chinese “sharp power.” It is fair to say those sentiments sometimes play a positive role in stimulating Americans to innovate further and march forward ahead of others, while at the same time it may also play a negative role in exaggerating the imagined threat from without the United States. Although a few Americans are able to reflect on this inborn weakness, most Americans just inherit and act on it impulsively. The cunning politicians often waste no time in exploiting the neurotic part of the public to put forward a ‘new’ strategy or policy.

In China, there is another explanation to this haunting suspicion of foreign threat outside the US: lack of self-confidence. Actually, some Chinese scholars now tend to overemphasize this view: the suspiciousness of Americans reflects the lack of confidence of the western elites in their ideology and economic model. This assessment may be an exaggeration and overreaction on the part of the Chinese side. But on the US side, maybe it is wise not to rush to a conclusion about the efficacy of their past strategy as well as the nature and consequence of the rise of China. Actually, Chinese scholars, not just the Chinese government, are widely exploring questions like how the Belt and Road initiative can function as an international cooperation forum and a global common good, and how China’s advocacy of new type of great power relations can turn into a new benign and practical attempt to benefit the global community sharing a common future. The US maybe could also see this as a joint venture, trying to shape it in a peacefully competitive way.

Anyway, the debate should continue.
References


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