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Information-based Arms Control and Sino-American Trust

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This paper was prepared for the Fourth Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, a conference sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Military Science and the People's Liberation Army, to which I am grateful for inviting me to participate. Asia-Pacific security issues are obviously of great importance to our two countries, to Pacific Rim relations, and to peace and security more generally. This paper explores some aspects of China's relationship with the United States and with its neighbors, as well as the role Sino-American strategic transparency may be able to play in managing those relationships.

I. *Converging Distrust*

Among those who study Sino-American relations, increasing attention is being given to the issue of "strategic distrust," which is said to be growing.¹ Officials, scholars, and commentators in People's Republic of China (PRC) have certainly viewed the United States with "strategic distrust" for many years. This was true under Mao Zedong, of course, but PRC "America-watchers" have been describing the United States as a dangerous hegemon – determined both to exert coercive dominance over other nations and to constrain China's own "return" to status and power – since early in the period of Dengist "reform and opening."² This story of American hegemony was amplified in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda narratives after the June 1989 killings on Tiananmen Square, and has persisted ever since. When I was in Beijing doing research for my upcoming book, I heard numerous Chinese say that the U.S. "hegemon" wished to "contain" China, and this theme appears repeatedly in PRC writings.

Strategic "distrust" by *China*, therefore, is nothing new. Indeed, there are interesting parallels between present-day CCP thinking and the conclusions of the late Qing Dynasty reformer and political theorist Liang Qichao. More than a century ago, for instance, Liang wrote that "[t]he general trend of world affairs is daily concentrating more and more on the Pacific." He felt, moreover, that China was "the nation that will be most severely victimized" by the naval and military power of the United States – power which he felt stood in the way of China's destiny there, as well as more broadly in the world.³ These are antagonistic Chinese strategic assumptions that seem to have survived all sorts of changes in the actual behavior and circumstances of the countries in question.

What is thus perhaps more interesting, therefore, is the degree to which *American* strategic distrust has been growing – or, more specifically, the degree to which distrust has been seeping out of hawkish circles into the more conciliation-minded U.S. "China policy" thinking that has been the American mainstream since the beginning of Dengist reforms. Many factors have contributed to this, including the PRC's development of increasingly sophisticated military capabilities seen to be aimed at precluding the United

¹ See, e.g., Kenneth Lieberthal & Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012).

² See, e.g., David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), at 238, 246-47, 253, & 255-56.

³ *Land without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (R. David Arkush & Leo O. Lee, eds.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), at 89.

States from coming to the aid of its friends and allies in the Western Pacific, Beijing's ongoing nuclear build-up, the PRC's development of anti-satellite weaponry, Beijing's newfound assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and ongoing Chinese cyber-espionage campaigns against American companies and the U.S. Government. Americans are also, I suspect, intrinsically uncomfortable with seeing *any* autocracy become so powerful and ambitious, regarding the PRC with greater unease as its regional and global strength increases while its leaders remain determined to deny its population civil and political rights.

America's China policy thinking is today in a state of flux. It has not fully crystallized around hawkish themes, but it has clearly left behind much of its earlier, fairly uncritical approach to congenial engagement – which is now increasingly felt to have been rather naïve. Even some of our more prominent so-called “Panda huggers” now voice concerns about regionally aggressive PRC policies and “misbehavior,” about hardened Chinese attitudes of anti-American animosity, and about the implications of the PRC's domestic rigidity, official corruption, and entrenched political oligarchy. In short, there is in today's Washington much less of the optimism of earlier years that development would bring not just economic but also behavioral stability and political and human rights progress to China, making it a “normal” state and a respected and honored member of the international community.

Everyone acknowledges that our two countries have important common interests, that they are economically interdependent, and that they need to cooperate on many critical issues. But there is also an increasing understanding that the Sino-American relationship has significant *competitive* aspects – not least in the political and security arenas – and that this competition is sharpening. We Americans, in other words, seem to be beginning to catch up to the endemic suspicion that has been apparent for so many years, in the PRC, in looking at *us*.

It is increasingly coming to be felt in Washington that Deng Xiaoping's philosophy of low-profile “biding one's time and hiding one's capabilities” is losing ground in Beijing in favor of more aggressive and impatient approaches. Worse still, whatever China's *tactics* in this respect, there is a growing body of opinion suggesting that the PRC's ultimate *aims* are fundamentally antagonistic to the open, liberal order of political and economic autonomy that has prevailed in so much of the world for decades, underpinned in part by American power, and which has provided enormous benefits of development and increased prosperity to many countries, including China itself.

Anyone who has read much of the writing on international affairs produced in the PRC in recent years will have noticed the frequency with which Chinese writers have argued the need to replace the current, purportedly U.S.-dominated global order with an allegedly better and fairer system. Such commentators are usually rather vague about what that replacement system would expected actually look like. Nonetheless, it is striking the degree to which those Chinese who *have* offered views seem to describe PRC's ambition as being to lead the creation of a so-called “harmonious world” modeled on China's own ancient traditions of Confucian hierarchy, as interpreted through the prism of CCP propaganda and modern political practice in the PRC itself. Such

conceptions, to put it mildly, do not reassure non-Chinese observers, and are helping lead to the “mainstreaming” of “China Threat” thinking.

It is not uncommon for mouthpiece organs like the *People’s Daily* to speak about how “[t]he concept of ‘harmony’ goes into the world from China.”⁴ PRC writers have also explained President Hu Jintao’s concept of a “harmonious world” in explicitly Confucian terms. Yu Yingli, director of the Department of China’s Foreign Affairs at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, for example, has described the “harmonious world” concept as originating in “the Chinese ancient code *Rites of Chou* [Zhou]” and is expressed in “the ‘China Model’” of governance as “China’s practice of this ideal.”⁵ Zhou Tingyang, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, explains the approach as reflecting the ancient conception of *Tianxia* – the political unity of “All Under Heaven” (a.k.a. the world) – as China’s “philosophy for world governance,” indicating the ambition of a Chinese-led global order reflecting the kind of hierarchical Confucian relationships suggested by that between father and son.⁶ As Professor Zhao apparently envisions things, “[n]ow that China looks set to become a great power, if not *the* great power, the Chinese state is viewed as the carrier of cosmopolitan values that will spread throughout the rest of the world.”⁷ Tsinghua University’s Professor Yan Xuetong has also argued along such lines, offering what he says is a basis in pre-Qin Chinese philosophy for “harmonious world” diplomacy that can create a system of moralistic hierarchy in which China provides leadership for the world.⁸ Nor is this just the view of a few academic eccentrics. CCP Compilation and Translation Bureau deputy director Yu Keping also proclaims Hu Jintao’s “harmonious world” theory to be “a new facet of the ancient Chinese dream of ‘great harmony in the world’ (*Tianxia datong*).”⁹

Such invocations of quasi-Confucian ideas of Sinocentric hierarchy – in which China, as the leading player in the system, shapes global values and guides the operations of the international system, expecting deference and “harmonious” compliance from other players – are often vague about how precisely such a future world order would work. Some Chinese writers, however, have tried to provide more specificity by offering analogies drawn from the PRC’s *domestic* politics. According to Yu Keping, for instance, the “harmonious world” concept is a “natural extension of China’s domestic strategy of constructing a harmonious society,” and can be understood by looking at China “domestic harmonious society strategy” because the “harmonious world” is an

⁴ Wang Hanglu, “China’s Concepts Enrich the World,” *Renmin Ribao* (April 25, 2011).

⁵ Yu Yingli, “Redefining ‘China Model’: Concepts, Impacts,” *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (June 20, 2010), at 25-32.

⁶ See Zhao Tingyang, “An Introduction of *Tianxia* system” [*Tianxia Tixi de Yige Jianyao Biaoshu*], *World Economics and Politics* (October 2008), at 85; Zhao Tingyang, *The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution* [*Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun*] (Nanjing, China: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005).

⁷ Daniel A. Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), at 25 (describing views of Zhao Tingyang).

⁸ See, e.g., Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Daniel A. Bell & Sun Zhe, eds.) (Edmund Ryden, trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), at 49, 62, 95, 96, & 104.

⁹ Yu Keping, *Democracy is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2009), at 169.

“extension of the domestic idea.”¹⁰ Similarly, according to the scholar Li Jingzhi, “‘harmonious society’ and ‘harmonious world’ are interlinked and complementary.”¹¹

The foreign observer, then, is apparently actually *encouraged* to look to the PRC’s domestic order for an example of the kind of “harmony” that would characterize a Chinese-led international order. Remarkably, in fact, Chinese experts such as Yu Yingli and Renmin University philosophy professor Zhang Jian have even cited the Party-State’s treatment of minority populations like the Tibetans and Uighurs as examples of how a “harmonious world” will integrate and “harmonize” *its* various participants.¹²

Chinese writers explaining the “harmonious world” concept have emphasized that it is not the PRC’s ambition to *homogenize* the world, of course, for their theory envisions participants being “harmonious but different.”¹³ The important point, however, is not “difference” in itself, but how the component parts of such a system will be expected – or perhaps compelled – to behave. As this audience will certainly know, the elements of traditional Confucian society were indeed different, but the point was integrate them, with their differing roles and degrees of status, into a system of order in which each stuck to his proper place in a sharply-defined hierarchy. (As Tsinghua University philosophy professor Qian Xun puts it, “the bottom line ... [was] not to disturb the status of harmony.”¹⁴) There is, therefore, an intrinsic authoritarianism and hegemonism in the concept of “harmony” as imagined by the CCP in the PRC’s domestic affairs and – it would appear – in its ambitions for future global order. It is such authoritarianism that China’s neighbors, and Western observers, are coming to fear.

II. *Arms Control, Information, and Distrust*

So what does all this have to do with arms control and Asian-Pacific security? Strategic arms are only one component of the overall picture, of course, and perhaps not the most important one at that. Distrust exists along multiple axes. But strategic arms issues are an important component. The PRC’s continuing opacity on such matters – coupled with its ongoing status of the only Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) nuclear weapons state to be building *up* its nuclear arsenal – plays into contemporary “China Threat” narratives, contributes to perceptions that Beijing’s ultimate intentions are to be feared, and helps make the PRC seem like an adversary power against which Pentagon planners will need to plan, to maintain and posture perhaps otherwise unnecessary forces, and to develop ever more sharply pointed competitive strategies. There may have been a time when opacity served China’s interest, but to my eye – at least provided that the PRC’s ultimate aims vis-à-vis its neighbors and the United States *are* indeed benign, as officials in Beijing insist – this secretiveness is becoming counterproductive, even dangerous.

¹⁰ Yu Keping, *Democracy is a Good Thing*, *supra*, at 169 & 171.

¹¹ Quoted by Yu Keping, *Democracy is a Good Thing*, *supra*, at 171.

¹² Yu Yingli, “Redefining ‘China Model’: Concepts, Impacts,” *supra*; Zu Xuan, “Harmonious Society Not Just Utopian Dream,” *Global Times Online* (October 27, 2010) (quoting Zhang Jian).

¹³ Yu Keping, *Democracy is a Good Thing*, *supra*, at 180.

¹⁴ Quoted by Zu Xuan, “Harmonious Society Not Just Utopian Dream,” *supra*.

I have been arguing for some time that arms control approaches based upon “strategic transparency” are strongly in the interests both of the United States and of the PRC. It seems clear that transparency and confidence-building measures (T/CBMs), even without any force limits, can contribute in important ways to Sino-American relations and global stability.

I certainly understand that when PRC officials are asked to provide “transparency,” they *perceive* this to be an American attempt to *locate* Chinese strategic assets for a potential first strike. It is important to remember, however, that transparency does *not* need to entail any such vulnerability – as both the United States and the Soviet Union discovered during the Cold War in employing a wide range of transparency measures, data-exchanges, and inspection protocols even with regard to mobile assets such as submarine-launched and land-based mobile missiles. Transparency measures during the Cold War contributed to stability and mutual understanding, helping the two sides – despite a fierce rivalry – to manage their relationship and avoid war. T/CBMs, one might say, are what mature and responsible strategic rivals in the nuclear age *do*.

T/CBMs could be particularly important in the Sino-American context, where our modern challenge is to keep the relationship from *developing into* the kind of competition that gave rise to arms racing between the United States and the USSR. Most people regard “arms control” as being about limiting the number or type of armaments the parties may possess, and regard transparency as, at most, a kind of ancillary requirement (*e.g.*, for verifying compliance with force limits). I would like to offer a broader conception of “arms control,” however: one that envisions *the mutual provision of information* as being arms control’s primary purpose, with force-limiting agreements being merely one particular (and not always essential) way to do this.

As I see things, arms control is *principally* about information. Specifically, arms control is about bounding or reducing strategic uncertainty, providing each party with more of what it needs to know for strategic planning. The key value of force limits *in the context of a strategic relationship* is thus perhaps not in limiting weapon type or number *per se*, but rather in the degree to which force limits reduce the range of each party’s uncertainty about what the other party has now, and will have in the future.

One can, I think, explain most strategic arms control through this prism. There was apparently a time, very early in the U.S.-Soviet nuclear competition, when it was apparently felt that information about the other side’s capabilities and planning was not terribly important. It was an early view of the seminal U.S. nuclear theorist Bernard Brodie, for instance, that once one side had a minimum force level capable of providing basic deterrence by being able to incinerate key enemy cities, any weapons beyond this level were essentially irrelevant.¹⁵ (One therefore had little reason to care about the nature or extent of such surplus capabilities.)

¹⁵ See Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), at 27-31.

That view quickly disappeared, however, as it became apparent that it *did* matter what the other side had, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. This was one driver for the development of intrusive strategic reconnaissance of the Soviet Union, and the eventual development of “overhead” – that is, satellite-based – surveillance capabilities. Uncertainty about Soviet strategic efforts also led to great controversy in the United States about the appropriate size and scale of America’s strategic arsenal, leading to a focus in the U.S. policy community upon the need for a U.S. nuclear build-up in response to a purported “missile gap” in the late 1950s. An observed Soviet SS-6 missile test in 1956 and the “Sputnik” launch in 1957 – coupled with the conclusion of a Presidentially-appointed committee that Moscow could have a significant missile force by the turn of the decade – prompted many American political leaders to react with alarm, and to make the “missile gap” an issue in the 1960 presidential election.

That a gap did not actually exist at that point simply underlines the ways in which uncertainty can exacerbate arms race dynamics. Seeing only pieces of the puzzle, U.S. leaders drew conclusions based upon what *could* have been the case – opting, in effect, to plan against grimmer scenarios rather than risk being caught short. Aerial reconnaissance imagery from U-2 aircraft helped provide a better understanding of the real situation, and CIA estimates of Soviet numbers were thereafter gradually revised downward until Defense Secretary Robert McNamara admitted in 1961 that there was no “missile gap” after all.¹⁶ Had the Soviets better concealed their programs, the U.S. misconception would presumably have lasted much longer, producing an even more aggressive American missile-building program with which the USSR was not then prepared to compete – thus, ironically, penalizing Moscow for successfully keeping secrets.

Clearly, information is important to arms race stability. Except for the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, in fact – which prohibited nuclear testing not conducted underground but did not constrain weapons development, and which should perhaps thus be considered more of an environmental treaty than an arms control agreement – most arms control arrangements can be understood as efforts to reduce uncertainty about the other side’s future capabilities. Indeed, the most recent strategic arms accord, the so-called “New START” agreement between the United States and Russia, probably provides the parties more useful information from its mutual transparency provisions (*e.g.*, inspections and data-exchanges) than from the actual force limits it imposed.¹⁷ Reducing uncertainty can add stability and reduce potentially dangerous misconceptions.

¹⁶ See, *e.g.*, Greg Thielman, “The Missile Gap Myth and Its Progeny,” *Arms Control Today* (May 2011), available at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_05/Thielmann.

¹⁷ Today, the most important stabilizing – or destabilizing – factors in the Russo-American balance probably relate not to numbers themselves but rather to types of system and specific capabilities, modernization issues, upload and/or reload capacity, certain non-nuclear capabilities, and strategic intentions. There being apparently neither much perceived pressure for numerical “racing” nor much appetite for significant cuts, the “New START” force limits were set at a point that required only small American reductions, and which was actually *higher* than the Russian levels at the time. The transparency measures provided in the treaty, however, are likely a key source of information to each side about the others’ capabilities and force planning.

Strategic planners have long recognized, of course, that *some* element of uncertainty can help deterrence, such as with regard to the specific circumstances in which one party might be willing to use nuclear weapons. (If really believed, for instance, setting out such details too clearly might be considered a “roadmap” to what provocations the other side would thereafter feel it could commit with nuclear impunity.) Various nuclear powers’ at least partial reliance upon mobile systems also suggests an understanding that certainty in *some* respects – e.g., the specific location of a ballistic missile submarine or land-based mobile missile – can be destabilizing. In general, uncertainty plays a role in the risk manipulation inherent in a deterrent posture.¹⁸

Uncertainty, however, also has costs – particularly if a profound lack of knowledge about a party’s broad strategic intentions and/or the basic size and capability of its strategic force leads the *other* party to assume the worst and plan accordingly. In a now obscure but nonetheless interesting book published in 1965, Martin McGuire tried to use economic models to understand the role of information, secrecy, and uncertainty in strategic arms race behavior.¹⁹ His book contains a number of interesting ideas, but one important observation is that *significant* uncertainty – or uncertainty that can be overcome only at an exorbitant cost – may tend to drive a party toward “greater numbers of missiles, or greater yields, or accuracies, and so on, to compensate for one’s ignorance.”²⁰ A great level of uncertainty, in other words, can exacerbate arms racing, because parties facing uncertainty have, in effect, higher incentives to adopt behavior that “hedges” aggressively against worst-case scenarios.

This is an important insight. I would add, however, that this presents not just a force-planning problem, but also an operational and indeed a *crisis-stability* challenge. Uncertainties about the other party’s capabilities and intentions can also encourage assumptions about an adversary’s likely *behavior* that exacerbate instability in a crisis. Politico-psychological context naturally helps color what decision-makers will tend to conclude – or feel that they *have* to conclude out of prudence, for fear of being badly surprised – on the basis of incomplete or ambiguous information. By encouraging worst-case assumptions, strategic uncertainty can tend to push parties toward postures and behavioral choices that will be destabilizing in a crisis.²¹

¹⁸ See, e.g., Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), at 91 & 99-101.

¹⁹ Martin C. McGuire, *Secrecy and the Arms Race: A Theory of the Accumulation of Strategic Weapons and How Secrecy Affects It* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965). I am grateful to Thomas Schelling for drawing my attention to this work by McGuire, who was a graduate student of Professor Schelling’s in the 1960s.

²⁰ McGuire, *supra*, at 18-19.

²¹ See, e.g., Christopher A. Ford, “Playing for Time on the Edge of the Apocalypse: Maximizing Decision Time for Nuclear Leaders,” *Hudson Institute* (November 2010), at 27, available at <http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/Decision%20Time%20Final%20for%20Print.pdf> (“... [L]eaders interpreting potentially ambiguous or false-alarm-prone early-warning data are more likely to conclude that their sensors show a real attack when they are *worried* about being attacked or are primed to *expect* one from a hostile adversary in the teeth of a crisis. This makes the ambient political temperature of the strategic environment, as it were, a critical variable in the vulnerability of nuclear command-and-control systems to accident and mistake.”)

It is *these* costs that I see as being particularly dangerous in the Sino-American context, because Beijing's strategic secretiveness has contributed to making it increasingly easy for Americans, and China's own neighbors, to assume the worst about the PRC's strategic planning and the intentions such planning supports. If indeed the PRC's intentions *are* what other states would consider malign – such as if “harmonious world” thinking really *is*, as so many prominent Chinese scholars have suggested, an effort to replicate on the regional or global stage some analogue to the coercive “harmony” one sees in PRC domestic society – perhaps strategic opacity really is necessary. (Having others *tend* to assume the worst is presumably better than *proving* it to them.) If that really is the case, however, opacity will likely be of only limited utility, and the PRC should not be surprised if more and more members of the international community draw dark conclusions and act accordingly anyway.

But if engineering a coercively Sinocentric regional or global “harmony” is *not* in fact the PRC's ambition, and Beijing's objectives are indeed as benign as its leaders claim, then it is vital to bring about vastly greater transparency. Both the United States and China's neighbors seem to be drawing ever-grimmer conclusions about the implications of China's “rise” and “return” to global power and status. Reducing uncertainty – not just on specific issues of nuclear force posture, but more generally, on broader questions of military posture and strategic thinking – would surely be beneficial in the Sino-American relationship and regional relations.

Given its potential benefits in reducing arms race incentives, improving crisis stability, and perhaps reducing other states' tendency to draw dark conclusions about Sinocentric hegemonism, real transparency should be an important priority, both in Sino-American relations and between the PRC and its neighbors. (It is presumably not in Beijing's interest to encourage its neighbors, and America, to assume the worst. This could lead to very significant strategic developments.²²) So far, the PRC has refused to provide meaningful transparency, but I would argue that this is becoming untenable and counterproductive.

²² One of these might be nuclear weapons proliferation. *See, e.g.*, Christopher A. Ford, “Perilous Precedents: Proliferation as Policy in Alternative Nuclear Futures,” *New Paradigms Forum* website (June 30, 2012), available at <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=1343> (“Imagine, for instance, a future in which U.S. allies in some part of the world face a significant regional power on military terms that are highly disadvantageous, and yet at a time when [America's] ability to provide these allies with security in the face of such threats has been degraded [This] might describe mid-century East Asia. But at what point might future U.S. leaders face a new tension between nonproliferation values and the security imperatives of credibly deterring a would-be regional hegemon from opportunistic moves against our friends? ... Could [U.S. leaders], in good conscience, tell a threatened ally that nonproliferation is so compelling a value that it is the duty of that ally to sacrifice itself ... rather than entertain thoughts of nuclear weapons development? Would it be possible to find some approach – perhaps even an analogue to NATO's ‘nuclear sharing’ policy, now applied elsewhere – that would enable us to thread the needle between nonproliferation and deterrent credibility in a regional context that might otherwise seem at risk of being ‘decoupled’ from our strategic deterrence? Or might at some point future U.S. leaders discover what some other countries [including the PRC] also seem from time to time to have concluded over the last few decades – namely, that some proliferation may actually be attractive as a strategic policy? These are disturbing scenarios ... [and] I think it is important to ponder such possibilities precisely in order to prevent them from transpiring.”)