

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
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I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Commission at this hearing on an important and under-studied subject. The Chinese government prioritizes manipulating information more than most Americans realize and perhaps more than any other major power. My analysis indicates that Chinese elites manage to deliver a range of messages tailored to American audiences that could have the effect of encouraging us to act, or in some cases refrain from acting, in ways that serve Chinese interests at the expense of U.S. interests or broader international norms. This is the case despite the fact that China’s messages to the United States are often contradictory. Some narratives promote expanding Chinese claims to territory or other goods. Others portray China as reassuringly similar to the United States – not revanchist but pragmatic. Finally, still others reveal an underlying, aggressive Chinese nationalism. An implication is that American defense planners should pay more attention to the contradictions among various Chinese national security policy statements; we should also note and analyze any differences between messages conveyed to domestic Chinese versus foreign audiences. If we do, we discover a disturbing overall trend toward revising the current status quo in ways that would compromise the sovereignty and freedom of action of other states, including democratic American friends and allies. Finally, Chinese assertions of expanding claims are often designed to test our responses, so how we react matters.

My testimony focuses on Chinese national security policy narratives that are specifically directed at Americans. China’s propaganda – or, “information management” – officials craft different narratives for domestic and foreign audiences, respectively.² The information management apparatus is well-funded and occupies an elite position within the Chinese party-state. It has authority to dictate media coverage priorities within China and to coordinate with the Chinese policy experts who speak frequently to foreign media outlets and intellectuals. In addition, the propaganda overseers take advantage of technological tools that enable, for instance, selective denial of access to websites within China. Finally, they benefit from the language barrier that prevents many Chinese people from reading

¹ The author thanks Nathan Picarsic and Seth Warren from LTSG for research assistance.

² Scholars such as Anne-Marie Brady and David Shambaugh have written extensively about the institutions within China responsible for managing the information that domestic and foreign audiences receive. The China Digital Times website, cited in footnote 3 below, now regularly publishes documents leaked from Chinese propaganda authorities.

news from other countries.³ We should consider what Chinese authorities are trying to achieve whenever there are disjunctions between what is said at home and abroad on national security policy.

This testimony begins with a suggestive hypothetical and proceeds to a discussion of three persistent themes of Chinese foreign-directed national security policy narratives. The three themes, identified through a survey of relevant Chinese statements over the past two decades, are: *probing assertiveness*, *reassuring similarity*, and *nationalist cultural difference*. For each theme, a range of examples is offered, along with an analysis of the theme's origin and its impact. The testimony concludes with an assessment of the broader pattern and evolution of Chinese foreign-directed national security policy narratives over the past two decades. On this basis, the conclusion also offers potential implications for American policy. Namely, the United States should recognize and respond to China's emerging challenge to the current order in terms of both other states' territory and their sovereign freedom of action.

A Suggestive Hypothetical: If WikiLeaks Struck China...

Imagine how China would react if it suffered a WikiLeaks attack that exposed its diplomatic cables. Instead of acknowledging the breach and launching an extended debate over Julian Assange's susceptibility to prosecution, the members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would likely be most concerned with stanching the flow of precious, secret materials. We can infer this from the emphasis on controlling information in China's strategic tradition and in the operations of the CCP from Mao to the present. In the real world, Chinese political elites have reacted to WikiLeaks by suppressing all China-related content at home.⁴ The list of topics about which the CPP sees fit, or finds it necessary, to conceal basic data from both the Chinese people and the outside world ranges from the decision-making processes of the Politburo Standing Committee and the size of China's domestic security budget to the propaganda directives imposed on all Chinese media outlets and the criteria for selecting China's top leaders.⁵

³ Despite a highly active censorship apparatus, internet-savvy Chinese people seem increasingly able to gain access to information from foreign sources, which could erode the Chinese Communist Party leadership's ability to push different lines abroad and at home. Similarly, perhaps as more Americans learn Chinese, we will be increasingly likely to compare the lines that are propagated by Chinese officials in Chinese domestic media outlets with their statements for foreign media.

⁴ On censorship of WikiLeaks-related news in China see Katherine Hill, "China censors itself in WikiLeaks," *Financial Times* beyondbrics blog (30 Nov. 2010): <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2010/11/30/china-censors-its-own-wikileaks-presence/>; see also: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2010/12/latest-directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth-november-29-december-6-2010> and <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/02/latest-directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth-february-17-21-2011/>.

⁵ An illuminating discussion of Chinese officials' concern to preventing leaks can be found in Perry Link, "Waiting for WikiLeaks: Beijing's Seven Secrets," NYR Blog, 19 Aug. 2010:

If WikiLeaks attacked China, then, political elites would be keen to use their information management tools to prevent the Chinese population from gaining access to the leaked information. At the same time, the propaganda apparatus might disseminate something like the following messages abroad:

- The cables that have appeared include many forgeries. In order to protect national security, the Chinese government will not identify which cables are authentic.
- Information theft is an international problem. China, like all nations, must act to protect itself against violations of its right to secure information.
- The perpetrators of this attack, Julian Assange and his associates, tools of human rights-obsessed Western governments, are enemies of China.
- In an environment of heightened information security risks, new measures are necessary. The Chinese government is considering requiring all personnel from Western firms operating within China to submit to Chinese security officers the personal login and password data for any information systems that they use. Similar requirements would be applied to Western students and Westerners working for Chinese firms in China.

Note that these messages are not particularly consistent with one another. Again, in the real world, China has broadcast contradictory messages about WikiLeaks to foreign audiences – on the one hand attacking Assange and on the other criticizing the United States for condemning him.⁶

In the absence of a concern with consistency, the hypothesized messages above could accomplish a range of ends. The first message would be intended to raise doubts about the integrity of the leaked materials, potentially limiting their exposure. Even as they released this message, Chinese officials could secretly authorize the creation of conflicting accounts of which cables were real, and these accounts could mysteriously fall into foreign media hands. The themes of the other hypothesized messages are in keeping with the pattern of Chinese foreign-directed national security policy narratives covered in the rest of this testimony:

Probing assertiveness: The putative new security policy would exploit the situation to push for valuable additional information about foreign nationals in China. By stating that the policy is under review, Chinese decision-makers are putting out a feeler that will help them gauge whether they can get away with such a move.

<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/aug/19/waiting-wikileaks-beijings-seven-secrets/>.

⁶ See, for example, Song Shengxia, "Clinton threatens WikiLeaks prosecutions," *Global Times* (1 Dec. 2010): <http://world.globaltimes.cn/americas/2010-12/597900.html>.

Reassuring similarity: Characterizing information theft as a global problem and information security as a right of all states has the effect of situating China as a fellow victim, in a position comparable to that of the United States. The statement effectively downplays the striking differences between the United States and China where information management is concerned.

Nationalist cultural difference: In the face of the evidence that attacking the United States was WikiLeaks' first priority, Americans would be surprised to hear Assange and his associates described as inimical tools of Western governments. We would have to ascribe the statement to a paranoid strain of Chinese nationalism. A plausible American reaction would be to try to reassure China by any feasible means. We would thus be on the defensive, primed to offer concessions.

To be sure, the aggressive nationalism on display in the statement about enemies of China stands in tension with the reassuring quality of the statement about information security as a universal concern. But as we will now see from a discussion of real-world examples, contradictory themes have been a hallmark of Chinese foreign-directed national security policy narratives over the last two decades.

Theme One: Probing Assertiveness

Probing assertiveness encapsulates a pattern of Chinese efforts to advance new national security policy lines that, if successful, would allow China to exceed existing limits on its territory or behavior. Chinese statements of this kind tend to appear in foreign-directed channels before they appear in domestic Chinese media outlets. Representatives of China have recently extended sovereignty claims over disputed areas of the East and South China Seas in ways that have struck international observers as particularly “assertive.”⁷ At least one foreign-directed statement even characterized the whole South China Sea as a “core interest” of China’s. The world is now responding to this assertion, and Chinese elites may be surprised by the backlash. If they had not pushed this line and raised threat perception levels, China may have been more likely to make substantive gains. On the other hand, they have laid down a marker, and their preferences are now known.

A review of the past two decades suggests that the latest acts of assertiveness are only the most recent additions to a long record of incidents. Perhaps surprisingly, statements by Americans about China have often appeared to inspire Chinese *probing assertiveness* narratives. To take a prominent example from the 1990s, when China was firing missiles over the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996, Chinese officials repeatedly told American interlocutors that the United States was trying to “hold down” or “contain” China.⁸ They cited commentary in American “hegemonist” media outlets such as *Time Magazine*, the

⁷ Michael D. Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 32 (May 2010).

⁸ Robert G. Sutter, Congressional Research Service Issue Brief, “China Policy: Crisis Over Taiwan, 1995 – A Post-Mortem,” 5 Dec. 1995.

Washington Post, and the *New York Times* to make their case, even though these publications clearly did not reflect official policy. In this instance, the deployment of two U.S. carrier battle groups to the region seems to have curtailed the assertiveness. At the same time, the episode may have discouraged Americans skeptical of China's intentions from expressing their views in public forums lest such arguments provoke another round of brinkmanship.

Other examples show how the *probing assertiveness* theme has paid dividends for China in the military sphere. Beijing has been able to justify investment in power projection capabilities suitable for military endeavors beyond a crisis in the Taiwan Strait under the banner of a "Malacca dilemma," or energy security requirements. The term "Malacca Dilemma" was first used by Hu Jintao, the newly appointed head of the CCP, in 2003 and was subsequently explained in Chinese sources as resulting from the fact that whichever nation controls the Strait of Malacca has a "stranglehold" on the energy resources available to East Asia. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former secretary of state and persistent advocate of closer relations with China,⁹ made this very point in a book called *The Grand Chessboard* published in 1997, the year of one of Brzezinski's many trips to Beijing, from which he returned to opine that the United States should not see China as a long-term threat. Again, it seems likely that an American statement served as at least partial inspiration for the Chinese narrative. A similar dynamic applies to the new Chinese concern with the need for capabilities suitable for noncombatant evacuation operations from locations that turn out to be dangerous, and to speculation about Chinese overseas bases in the Middle East.¹⁰ It is hard to know whether Americans thought of these issues before they occurred to Chinese analysts, but American defense analysts seem to have raised them before Chinese officials spoke of them in foreign-directed media outlets.

When Chinese officials, military officers, or public intellectuals echo the sentiments of American observers of China, they are often addressing legitimate requirements of China's emerging situation – e.g., the need to be able to evacuate far-flung Chinese nationals. At the same time, Americans are in the habit of speculating freely and openly about a range of potential future possibilities. This is not the same as legitimating Chinese assertiveness. China's new capabilities will impede our ability to meet their aggressive probes with firm responses. Serious American defense planning is warranted, and it may be past time to think more strategically about our expressed expectations of future Chinese forces.

Theme Two: Reassuring Similarity

Reassuring similarity encapsulates a pattern of Chinese efforts to cast the Chinese political system as equivalent to, or on the road to becoming equivalent to, the American political system. Hostile behavior can then be blamed on bureaucratic competition or on an independent, internal rogue Chinese actor, while China's status as an under-developed but

⁹ James Mann, *About Face* (New York: Vintage, 2000) pp. 80, 84-86, *passim*.

¹⁰ See Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, "Looking After China's Own: Pressure to Protect PRC Citizens Working Overseas Likely to Rise," *China Signpost* (17 Aug. 2010): available at <http://www.andrewerickson.com>.

well-intentioned state is emphasized. Overall, this theme has a disarming effect on foreign critics. Recent *reassuring similarity* narratives have tended to appear exclusively in foreign-directed media channels.

In the 1990s, Chinese discussions of experiments with village and township elections conveyed the *reassuring similarity* theme; more recently, the emphasis has turned to “intra-party democracy.” By trumpeting the intent to democratize, eventually, Chinese elites have been able to endear themselves to Western audiences. Patience, not anger or fear, is counseled when China engages in crackdowns or other repressive behavior. But where experimentation with local-level elections was packaged as a step toward democracy in the 1990s, sometime in the 2000s, this narrative shifted. Now, the only talk of democracy is of the intra-party variety, an innovation to improve the efficiency of the current Chinese political system, not to reform it.

Sometime in the early to mid-2000s, the *reassuring similarity* theme of democratization faded and was replaced by a set of themes involving such familiar Western scourges as bureaucratic stove-piping and rivalry among different government or military service branches. Thus, after the January 2007 Chinese anti-satellite test (ASAT), Chinese authorities eventually attributed their silence in the face of an unexpected international uproar to a failure of coordination among different Chinese ministries.¹¹ This explanation was only delivered in foreign-directed media channels and did not appear in domestic, Chinese-language outlets.

More recently, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was told that the first flight test of China’s new advanced J-20 fighter, which occurred while he was in Beijing in January 2011, was conducted without Hu Jintao’s knowledge. If Hu had not protested ignorance, Secretary Gates might easily have interpreted the event as a snub or a threat. Hu thus deflected American anger by invoking a bureaucratic or “civil-military” breakdown of communication. Again, domestic Chinese media sources did not cover Hu’s line to Secretary Gates about being caught unaware. The lone exception is a Chinese online web portal that featured an article discussing whether Hu could possibly not have known about the test. Its conclusion was, “As Chinese Communist Party General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, it seems hard to imagine that Hu would have not known about the test.”¹² In addition, contributors to various Chinese online bulletin boards discussed Western media coverage of Hu’s explanation, including speculation in the United States that Hu’s power might be waning. The bulletin board comments dismissed such interpretations as evidence of American naivete; some went so far as to hypothesize that Americans could not actually believe such a thing, so we must have made the story up in a clumsy effort to foment division within the class of Chinese political-military elites.¹³

¹¹ “Chinese deny participation in outer space arms race,” *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 19 Jan. 2007.

¹² See <http://www.warchina.com/news/ent/2011-01-27/126416.html>.

¹³ There was also a strain of commentary in support of a rumor that Hu’s presumptive successor Xi Jinping dictated the timing of the test flight, however.

The sentiment on Chinese bulletin boards underscores the eagerness of Americans to flesh out Hu's statement and interpret it according to U.S. standards. In the United States, the President might not be briefed on the timing of the testing of a new military platform. But in the Chinese case, the fact that other senior Politburo members had visited the plane on the runway in the run-up to the test, which was widely anticipated and a major national event, would seem to belie Hu's claim. We risk fundamental misunderstanding when we succumb to the American temptation to assume that other countries are like the United States or on the way to becoming like the United States.

Theme Three: Nationalist Cultural Difference

This final theme encapsulates the experiences of the many foreigners who have been told, "You have hurt the feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese people."¹⁴ Peculiar to American ears, the line is an example of an appeal to the theme of Chinese *nationalist cultural difference*. It is a way of saying, "We Chinese have our own ways of acting properly, and you have transgressed." This theme has a venerable history. For decades, when representatives of China in the United States have been provoked to deliver angry tirades on the subject of Taiwan, they have done so in a way that maximizes our sense of the differences between the Chinese and American worldviews. Perhaps the latest well-known example came in January 2010 when the Obama administration introduced a largely defensive arms sales package for Taiwan. A Chinese embassy official was keen to register his "indignation" quickly and in no uncertain terms with a *New York Times* reporter,¹⁵ while other Chinese officials threatened to impose sanctions on U.S. defense firms and emphasized that the sale would reduce Chinese cooperation with the United States on "relevant and important international and regional issues."¹⁶ From an American perspective, given the context and the contents of the arms package, this was an overwrought reaction.

Other recent expressions of the *nationalist cultural difference* theme include:

- the colorful attack on China's critics delivered by Hu Jintao's likely successor Xi Jinping in Mexico in February 2009;

This rumor was printed in a Korean newspaper story that was widely posted on Chinese websites: http://chn.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/01/14/20110114000003.html.

¹⁴ Evan Osnos, "Why Is China Harassing Foreign Reporters?" *New Yorker*, 7 March 2011, available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2011/03/china-is-not-egypt-so-why-is-it-harassing-reporters.html>.

¹⁵ Helene Cooper, "U.S. Approval of Taiwan Arms Sale Angers China," *The New York Times*, 29 Jan. 2010.

¹⁶ See Bonnie Glaser and David Szerlip, "U.S.-China Relations: The Honeymoon Ends," *Comparative Connections* (April 2010): http://csis.org/files/publication/1001qus_china.pdf.

- the snubs that U.S. President Barack Obama received from a relatively low-level Chinese official at the international climate conference in Copenhagen in December 2009;
- the drunken anti-American rant that Chinese diplomat Sha Zhukang delivered at a United Nations dinner in September 2010; and
- a Chinese pianist's performance at a January 2011 White House state dinner of a well-known song from an anti-American Chinese Korean War movie.¹⁷

None of the high-ranking offenders on the above list has been demoted. One or two of these episodes may have been spontaneous, but it seems more likely that China's elite information management apparatus played a coordinating role. If so, the aim could only be to impress foreigners with the depth of Chinese nationalism and cultural chauvinism. Chinese officials loudly proclaim their peaceful intentions and China's record of peace even as they threaten those who would contest its pursuit of its interests – from repression at home to control over disputed territory and attempts to intimidate other claimants. The record shows that rulers of China have resorted to the use of force frequently while attempting to project a pacifist image.¹⁸ For a major power that is increasing its defense spending, the gap between image and reality, then, is unnerving. In a game of chicken, it is desirable to be seen as crazy. Thus, this third theme could be a wake-up call to those who would lazily assume that China is just like the United States. It could also be a trump card if one of China's *probing assertiveness* feelers is rejected but China finds it necessary to assert itself militarily nonetheless.

¹⁷ Malcolm Moore, "China's 'next leader' in hardline rant," *The Telegraph*, 16 Feb. 2009: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/4637039/Chinas-next-leader-in-hardline-rant.html>; Mark Lynas, "How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room," *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 2009: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/22/copenhagen-climate-change-mark-lynas>; John Lee, "How China Stiffed the World in Copenhagen," *foreignpolicy.com*, 21 Dec. 2009: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/21/how_china_stiffed_the_world_in_copenhagen; Peter Foster, "China's UN diplomat in drunken rant against Americans," *The Telegraph*, 9 Sep. 2010: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/7991414/Chinas-UN-diplomat-in-drunken-rant-against-Americans.html>; Matthew Robertson, "Chinese Pianist Plays Propaganda Tune at White House," *Epoch Times*, 22 Jan. 2011: <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/49822/>.

¹⁸ See Iain Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour 1949-1992: A First Cut at the Data," *China Quarterly* (March 1998), and Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton U P, 1995), respectively.

Conclusion

Overall, my findings include:

- The Chinese national security policy narratives that appear in the United States are often tailored by the Chinese government for American audiences.
- *Probing assertiveness* narratives promote expanding Chinese claims; *reassuring similarity* narratives portray China as like the United States and therefore not threatening; finally, *nationalist cultural difference* narratives reveal an underlying, aggressive Chinese nationalism.
- Together, they could have the effect of encouraging us to act, or in some cases refrain from acting, in ways that serve Chinese interests at the expense of U.S. interests or broader international norms.

An implication is that American defense planners should pay more attention to the contradictions among various Chinese national security policy statements and to the gaps between the narratives tailored for Americans and those that are conveyed to the domestic Chinese population. Finally, Chinese assertions of expanding claims are often designed to test our responses, so how we react matters. As China continues its military build-up and efforts to acquire influence in other parts of Asia, the Middle East, and beyond, its challenges to the existing order will be more difficult to discourage. Deploying two carrier battle groups as we did in 1996 is unlikely to be sufficient to signal American resolve. More thought, and possibly a different allocation of U.S. defense resources, is therefore necessary.