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HOW THREAT ASSESSMENT COULD BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY: CASE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article tries to explain how misperception can trigger conflict between countries. The article would employ spiral model of conflict proposed by Robert Jervis as a theoretical framework to scrutinize contemporary US and Chinese contemporary competition. As a result, this paper shows how threat assessment could trigger a spiral of conflict through state's tendency to overestimate threat level and its failure to perceive that defensive behavior can be interpreted as offensive by the belligerent. Based on this analysis, the probability of conflicts can be reduced as each country tries to comprehend motivations that drive other behavior, perceptions and reactions that might arise as a result of the strategic empathy.

Keywords

Spiral Model, Misperception, US-China Relations, Threat Assesment, Strategic Empathy.

Abstrak

Tulisan ini berusaha menjelaskan bagaimana mispersepsi dapat memicu konflik antar negara. Dengan menggunakan kerangka teoritik model spiral konflik (spiral model) yang diajukan oleh Robert Jervis terhadap kasus persaingan kontemporer Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok, tulisan ini menunjukkan bagaimana penilaian ancaman (threat assesment) dapat memicu terjadinya spiral konflik melalui kecenderungan negara untuk menaksir terlalu tinggi tingkat ancaman yang dihadapinya serta kegagalannya untuk memahami bahwa perilaku defensifnya dapat diinterpretasikan sebagai ofensif oleh musuh. Berdasarkan analisa ini, secara teoritik peluang terjadinya konflik dapat dikurangi ketika setiap negara mencoba memahami motivasi yang mendorong perilaku aktor lain serta persepsi dan reaksi yang mungkin muncul akibat kebijakan negara bersangkutan (strategic empathy).

Kata Kunci

Spiral Model, Mispersepsi, Hubungan AS-RRT, Penilaian Ancaman, Empati Stratejik.

INTRODUCTION

Is war between the United States and China inevitable? Will “China threat” theory be a self-fulfilling prophecy? What is the nature of the U.S.-China relations? What are the options available, if there is any, for policy-makers in Washington and Beijing to avoid the collision between the great powers? These are arguably the most pertinent questions facing the International Relations scholars today. For “the most significant bilateral international relationship over the course of the next several decades is likely to be between the United States and the PRC” (Friedberg, 2005, p. 8). The current development suggesting the worsening relations between U.S. and China, from the

prospect of trade war to the military confrontation in the disputed waters in the South China Sea, further increase the need to explore the nature of the relationship between the two great powers.

The structural realists' postulation maintains that the anarchic, self-help international system, great powers are bound to conflict.¹ For at the top of the international power structure there is supposedly one place for the hegemon. As convincing and parsimonious as it is, the structural explanations of the U.S.-China conflictual relations and the prospect of war between them discount domestic-level variables in both countries that could potentially increase, or in that matter decrease, the prospect of conflict between the two great powers. In this respect, a closer look at the psychological dynamic between the leaders of both U.S. and China and how they (mis)perceive each other as threats, could enhance our understanding on what is really at work with regard to the great powers relations. Moreover, for policy-makers, this understanding could answer the pertinent question of whether the hegemonic clash between the U.S. and China is really inevitable.

In this paper, I try to answer the question on how state's threat assessment could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Built upon Robert Jervis's (1976) "spiral model", my answer to that question is that state's threat assessment could become a self-fulfilling prophecy through the initiation of conflict spiral. In so doing, I try to explain recent development of U.S.-China relations in terms of how both sides apply two different logics –perceiving other as hostile while believing that the other is aware of its benign intention- and how this has been leading the two states towards a conflict spiral recently.

This paper is structured as follows. In the first section I provide a brief synopsis of the "spiral model" by consulting existing literatures on the topic. I then move directly towards the application of this theoretical framework on the case of U.S.-China relations. This paper will be concluded with some short prescriptions on how U.S. and China could avoid the hegemonic clash by escaping the conflict spiral through clearer communication.

METHODOLOGY

Spiral Model

In the anarchic international system where there is no higher authority above states to govern the relations between them, states basically pose potential threat to each other. Almost all of the states possess military capabilities, although the strength is varied. In other words, states possess the means to physically harm and possibly destroy each other.² A logical consequence from such situation is the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra*

omnes, “war all against all.” This outcome fortunately does not occur because state does not consider every other state as threat; states pick out specific states as the ones who could threaten them the most.³ Indeed “decision-makers act in terms of the vulnerability they feel, which can differ from the actual situation” (Jervis, 1978).

When states assess threats, however, they tend to misperceive and miscalculate.⁴ Whilst there is no shortage of works on the misperception as a cause of war,⁵ the causal mechanism that explains how misperception can lead to the outbreak of war is still underdeveloped. Nevertheless, Robert Jervis’s “spiral model” can guide us to understand on how threat assessment involving misperception can lead the conflict between states.

In his seminal work of *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis (1976, pp. 58-113) provides two models which can explain the outbreak of war by attributing it to the role of misperceptions: deterrence and the spiral model.⁶ In “deterrence model,” war can break out when an aggressive state believes that the status quo, defending powers are weak in capability and resolve. Such believe will further increase when the defending state, believing that appeasement would lead to the prevention of conflict, concede to the demand of the aggressor. The aggressor would then push even further wishing for further concessions until it is too late for the defending state to change course and war breaks out.

In contrast to the “deterrence model,” in “spiral model” the outbreak of war is attributed to the very opposite kind of misperception. Instead of believing that appeasing aggressor would lead to a more preferable behaviour, in “spiral model” the defending state tends to overestimates the hostility of the aggressor, and *vice versa*. Being aware of the consequences of living in anarchic international system where there is no higher authority above states to enforce rules and protect the bullied, states tend equate arms with hostile intentions.⁷ Hence, when state witness other states arming, it would regard those capabilities aims to undermine its security; a hostile image is attached on the arming states. As soon as the hostile image has been attached, any further move by the arming states would be regarded as a proof for their hostile intentions. Weapons, purchased for defensive purposes, could be regarded as means to attack. This overestimation of the hostility of other states is the first logic that states apply in “spiral model.”

In most cases, however, states fail to understand that their own behaviour can be easily interpreted as hostile behaviour by others as well. This second logic tells that state’s own move to strengthen its capabilities is always peaceful and that the other states are

aware of this peaceful motive. When two states, in a dyadic relations, applying these two logics, the result is a mutual hostility that could lead to conflict.

In the next section, I try to apply the “spiral model” on the case of ongoing U.S.-China relations. In doing so, by using primary data from U.S. and China’s official publications and their officials’ statements, I try to show how both states, to a certain degree, apply the logic mentioned before. The application of the logics, or in other words the misperception both states have towards each other, has been driving them towards a conflict spiral.

DISCUSSION

Misperception in U.S.-China Relations

The rise of China as an emerging power, which started in 1980s when Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reform in the country, has brought the country an unprecedented economic growth. According to World Bank database, during the time of 1989-2013, China experienced 3.8 to 14.2% of annual growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As China’s economic grows, so does its national interests. China, in particular, needs to keep its growth steady. In order to do so, China needs to secure access to resources, energy in particular. Therefore, it appears to be a natural phenomenon when China increases its defence expenditure in line with its economic growth (Tellis, 2005).⁸ Data compiled from *The Military Balance* reveals that China’s defence expenditures, in absolute terms, has grown from \$5.86 billion in 1989 to \$391 billion in 2009. From China’s perspectives, its increase of defence budget and military modernization are, at least in the initial phages, not intended for any hostile purpose. China believes that its behaviour is justifiable and that other countries in the region and U.S. are, or should be, aware of it. In 2005 white paper entitled *China’s Peaceful Development*, it is stated China’s belief that its development is inevitably peaceful due to China’s experience of being humiliated during crisis, its historical and cultural tradition and also recent trend of globalization that allows countries to develop in a peaceful way.⁹

China, however, fails to understand that the other side of the Pacific, the status-quo power of the U.S., could possibly get the wrong impression from what China’s doing with its military. In other words, while China believes that its behaviour is benign, it also believes that other states, U.S. in particular, is aware of the peaceful intention. In fact, that is not entirely true.

China’s expansion of national interests which followed by its military modernization alarms the other side of the Pacific. An observation on U.S. official

documents reveals how U.S. is alarmed with rapid military modernization of China.¹⁰ As early as 2006, U.S. has been aware that China, among other countries, has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the U.S. In terms of military technology, U.S. is also aware that the gap with China is closing and unless U.S. could formulate counter strategies, its military advantages would soon be offset (U.S. Department of Defense, 2006, p. 29). The tone of anxiety about China's military modernization has not much changed years afterwards. In latest edition of *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (2014, p. 6), it is stated that "In the coming years, countries such as China will continue seeking to counter U.S. strengths using anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) approaches and by employing other new cyber and space control technologies. Similar notion is found in 2012 Department of Defense's document of strategic guidance in which stated that "States such as China and Iran *will* continue to pursue asymmetric means *to counter our* power projection capabilities" (Panneta & Obama, 2012).

From these publications we can also get a sense on how it is very difficult, if not entirely impossible, for states to acquire complete information regarding their adversaries' current and future intentions. This problem is worse in the case of China whose authoritarian government is not really familiar with the idea of transparency. Thus, U.S. seems to have no other choice than just equate China's increasing military capabilities with unfriendly intentions. In *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2006*, it is stated that "... the United States, its allies and partners must also hedge against the possibility that a major or emerging power could choose a hostile path in the future (U.S. Department of Defense, 2006, p. 28)." It does not require a rocket science to identify the region where there is an emerging power as well as a number of U.S. allies. In *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014*, it is stated that "... the rapid pace and comprehensive scope of China's military modernization continues, combined with a relative lack of transparency and openness from China's leaders regarding both military capabilities and intentions (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014)."

The general observations on some publications of U.S. government reveals how U.S. feels, at the very least, alarmed by the rapid military modernization of China. Once this hostile image attached, China's further military modernization is regarded as a proof to that hostile image.

This can be shown, for example, on how U.S. dubs China as developing what it calls as Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities which can be used, and believed is going to be used, to deter and counter U.S. involvement in the events of conflict in China's

periphery. Applying our theoretical framework of “spiral model,” this stage can be regarded as one when U.S. applying the first logic of overestimating the hostility of its rival, in this case, China.

Feeling threatened by the perceived-as-hostile strategic behaviour of China, U.S. starts to respond. In the midst of economic struggle and defence budget cut, U.S. tries to check the rise of China mainly through what it calls as “rebalancing” strategy which involves an intensification of alliances and basing strategies. The strategy covers U.S. basing in Darwin and Guam, the provision of advanced naval weapon systems such Patriot missiles and Aegis system to its alliances, and also diplomatic and economic initiatives such as Trans-Pacific Partnership which exclude China. Hillary Clinton’s “America’s Pacific Century,” (2011) one of the earliest record that lie down U.S. strategic pivot to Asia-Pacific, provides the stated rationale behind the strategy which is to uphold U.S. leadership commitment in the key driver area of current global politics. Interesting to note here how Clinton frames that U.S. rebalancing is not desired by U.S. only, but also by the region itself, hence justifying U.S. continuing presence. Another important note is how U.S. seems to truly believe that it has been a Pacific state. This statement can be regarded as a way U.S. tries to frame that its presence expansion in Asia-Pacific is for benign purposes.

U.S. “rebalancing” strategy, which was initially intended to preserve stability in the region, turns out generate the very opposite outcome. China considers U.S., with its “rebalancing” strategy as a revisionist power that seeks to curtail China’s political influence and harms China’s interests; as China rises, the U.S. will resist (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). This view appears to be much influenced by China’s understanding of U.S., as well as China’s view of the international system and how to behave in such system.¹¹The sense of China being threatened by U.S. strategic behaviour can also be found in China’s official documents. In 2008 edition of *China’s National Defense* (2009), U.S. military deployment realignment and its strengthened military alliances with countries like Japan are regarded as influencing the complexity of the regional security environment. That U.S. continues to sell advanced weapons systems to Taiwan is also regarded as an infringement to the “one China” policy and U.S.-China joint communiqués. These two issues have been persistently raised afterwards (China's National Defense in 2010, 2011).

2014 Shangri-La Dialogue perhaps is the perfect evidence that shows how China is feeling threatened by U.S. strategic behaviour in Asia-Pacific, and *vice versa*.

Responding to U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel that criticized China for its “destabilizing, unilateral actions” particularly in the South China Sea, Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, the Chinese military’s deputy chief of general staff said that Hagel’s speech was designed to “create trouble and make provocations” (Han, Barnes, & Page, 2014). Lt. Gen. Wang continued by saying that Hagel’s speech was “full of hegemony, full of words of *threat* and intimidation,” and part of “a provocative challenge against China.” This speech was then backed by another Chinese official, Major General Zhu Chenghu, who said in an interview, “If you take China as an enemy, China will absolutely become the enemy of the U.S. (Han, Barnes, & Page, 2014).” From this exchanges of strong words by high ranking officials from both China and U.S, we can get a sense of antagonistic, even hostility, in the relations between the two.

The sense of being threatened by U.S.’ “rebalancing” strategy leads China to intensify its military modernization. China continues to increase its defence expenditures, until today. Moreover, China intensifies the development of advanced weapons systems that provide it with capability to neutralize U.S. force in the Pacific. These capabilities, which U.S. calls as A2/AD capabilities –which in itself is U.S.’ overestimation of China’s hostility- ranges from fifth-generation fighter aircrafts, advanced intermediate and medium-range conventional ballistic missiles, long-range land-attack and anti-ship cruise missiles, counter-space weapons to offensive cyber capabilities. And as the “spiral model” postulates, U.S. has been investing considerable amount of resources to develop strategy to counter China’s counter-strategy against U.S. presence in Asia-Pacific. In other words, the conflict between U.S. and China is spiralling.

CONCLUSION

Through this short paper I have shown that state’s threat assessment could become a self-fulfilling prophecy through the initiation of conflict spiral. Using US-China relations as a case of study, it can be understood that psychological dimension, in terms of misperception of others’ hostility and how others perceive one’s own behaviour, play a significant role in causing a mutual hostility between states. In the case of U.S.-China relations, both sides to some extent see each other as a threat while believing that their own strategic behaviour as a legitimate response to the threat they are facing. This leads to the hostile tit-for-tat relations between U.S. and China.

As the faith of international system is very much determined by the strategic behaviour of great powers, the development of U.S.-China relations is perhaps the most significant feature of international relations today (Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great*

Power Politics, 2001). Whilst some argue that hegemonic clash between the two is inevitable,¹² this paper has provided a hint that U.S. and China could escape the prophecy. As the spiral of conflict is very much attributed to misperception in states' threat assessment, we can argue that more intense and clear communication can perhaps break the spiral of conflict. Both states, U.S. and China, should commit to put an effort on transmitting messages regarding their intentions as clear as possible towards each other. Or perhaps, it is time for Beijing and Washington to build a more direct channel of communication as one built by Kennedy and Khrushchev during the height of the Cold War.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5–41; Patrick James, "Structural Realism and the Causes of War," *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (1995): 181–208; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62.

² John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001). Mearsheimer is one of those who pay quite attention on the future of U.S.-China relations in which he argues that a peaceful rise of China is inevitable, and that China will try to dominate the region the way U.S. dominates Western Hemisphere. See John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006); John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to Us Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010).

³ Aside of the military capabilities, how much threat states pose can also be influenced by other factors, such as geographical proximity and hostile intentions. See Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990); "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985).

⁴ Aside of the inherent nature of international system which prevent states to acquire complete information regarding their enemies capabilities and intentions, this misperception can also be attributed to psychological dimension of the states' leaders, beliefs and values held, historical and cultural experiences and other sub-state variables. In Waltzian terms, these are the second and third images of analysis that involve nation-state and individual levels, in contrast to the deterministic third or systemic level of analysis. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, III: Waveland Press, 2010).

⁵ Among them see Jack S. Levy, "Misperceptions and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics* 36, no. 1 (1983); Arthur A. Stein, "When Perception Matters," *World Politics* 34, no. 4 (1982).

⁶ It is important to note, however, that even though Jervis terms the model as “deterrence,” it is basically the *failure* of deterrence that he postulates can cause war to breakout.

⁷ *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 62-64. See also Stein, “When Perception Matters.” Other scholars consider capabilities and intentions, and misperceptions on them, in a different way. Jack Levy, for example, develops a theoretical framework on how misperceptions on capabilities and intentions can lead to the outbreak of war. See Levy, “Misperceptions and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems.”

⁸ For an introduction of defence economics, see Ron Matthews, “Defence and the Economy: An Introduction,” in *Globalisation and Defence in the Asia-Pacific: Arms across Asia*, ed. Geoffrey Till, Emrys Chew, and Joshua Ho (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁹ “Full Text: China's Peaceful Development Road,” People's Daily, accessed 23 September 2004, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/22/eng20051222_230059.html. The notion of “inevitability” of China's peaceful development is also found in 2011 edition of the white paper. See “China's Peaceful Development,” Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, accessed 23 September 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7126562.htm

¹⁰ Publications from the Department of Defense are hopefully quite representative in showing U.S.' stance and policy towards China in security-related matters. I am aware that other departments or agencies in U.S. may have slightly different views on some specific matters. However, since this paper talks primarily about the security concerns, publications from, for example, Department of State are deliberately discounted. It is also important to note that it is the view of the U.S. government that is taken into account, without regard for the U.S. public views. For a picture of U.S. public view on China see “How Americans and Chinese View Each Other,” PewResearch Center, accessed 20 September 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/11/01/how-americans-and-chinese-view-each-other/>

¹¹ “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears.” Some scholars argue that China's strategic behaviour is influenced by factors, or combination, of international systemic pressure and China's strategic culture strands which consist of aggressive Realpolitik and non-expansive Confucian. See Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); “Soldiers, Statesmen, Strategic Culture and China's 1950 Intervention in Korea,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 8, no. 22 (1999); “China's Real Strategic Culture: A Great Wall of the Imagination,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 2 (2014); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); “Thinking About Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995); “China's New “Old Thinking”: The Concept of Limited Deterrence,” *International Security* 20, no. 3 (1995).

¹² See *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Mearsheimer, “China's Unpeaceful Rise.”; Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” 1993; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics [Electronic Resource]*. / Robert Gilpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).