



“Alternative” Strategic Perceptions in U.S.-China Relations

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Contents

Introduction	5
U.S. Asia-Pacific Rebalance	6
Korean Peninsula Issues	7
Deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense System to South Korea	8
U.S. Reconnaissance Operations in the Asia-Pacific Region	10
East China Sea Disputes	11
South China Sea Disputes	12
Cross-Strait Relations	14
Cybersecurity	15
Conclusion	16
Endnotes	17

Introduction

In the first hundred days of his tenure in the White House, President Donald Trump has had to devote considerable attention to the United States' single most consequential bilateral partner: China.

The longstanding issue of North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them—and China's role in Korean peninsula diplomacy around this issue—is back on the front burner of the White House, the U.S. foreign affairs community and the world. Longstanding tensions in the South China Sea persist. U.S.-China trade—a major issue for then-candidate Trump on the campaign trail—is now undergoing a 100-day review at the behest of the U.S. and Chinese presidents, who recently met in an important first summit at Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

The issues currently on the U.S.-China agenda share several commonalities. They are top-tier issues that garner presidential attention in both the United States and China. They are contentious, in the U.S.-China context, to the point of raising the prospect of direct conflict (e.g., a hot war or a “trade war”) between the United States and China. And, they represent enduring, and seemingly intractable, challenges that have seen relatively little movement forward—and in some cases, some movement backward—in recent years.

These issues also share another less obvious commonality: they are issues where the U.S.-China perceptual divide is as much a part of the problem as the actual interests or policies in question. On almost every major issue relating to security within the Northeast Asian theater—the arena in which U.S. and Chinese interests tend to intersect, and collide,

most prolifically—sharply diverging strategic perceptions are a key element, perhaps the defining element, of the divergence in policy postures between the United States and China. The broad construct of “alternative facts” (and narratives and realities), frequently discussed in the U.S. domestic political context in recent months, is also at work in U.S.-China relations. The United States and China apply starkly different perceptual lenses to virtually most of the contentious issues on their docket, often leading to very different understandings of what even the facts themselves are. These distinct lenses and the opposing perceptions they generate, in turn, contribute to bilateral misunderstanding, mistrust and broad mutual strategic suspicion.

In the tables in this report, the EastWest Institute's Asia-Pacific team lays out the differing strategic perceptions of the United States and China with respect to some of the most topical and challenging issues on the U.S.-China agenda today (with a focus mostly on North-east Asian security issues¹) including: the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific²; the stability of the Korean peninsula and, specifically, the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system to South Korea; U.S. reconnaissance operations in the Asia-Pacific region; territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas; and cross-Strait relations. We also address the more cross-cutting issue of cybersecurity.

By surfacing and addressing head-on the relevant diverging strategic perceptions, we seek to foster U.S.-China dialogue that is more open, constructive, fruitful and conducive to a bilateral relationship of greater “strategic honesty” and mutual trust.

U.S. Asia-Pacific Rebalance

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
<p data-bbox="405 363 632 392">Strategic Intention</p> <p data-bbox="405 430 871 600">The rebalance is a redistribution of the United States' resources for the purpose of enhancing U.S. engagement and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region; the rebalance focuses on upholding U.S. principles and not on "countering China."³</p> <p data-bbox="405 629 871 774">The rebalance is a reassurance to U.S. allies and other Asian countries that felt uncertain about the strength of the United States' commitment to engagement in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴</p>	<p data-bbox="917 363 1145 392">Strategic Intention</p> <p data-bbox="917 430 1379 484">The rebalance is an attempt by the United States to contain China.⁵</p> <p data-bbox="917 629 1379 716">The rebalance is a strategy to build a pro-United States, "anti-China alliance" in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶</p>
<p data-bbox="405 813 733 867">Strengthened U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific</p> <p data-bbox="405 906 871 1022">The strengthened U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific is intended to deter provocations and ensure peace and stability in the region.⁷</p>	<p data-bbox="917 813 1248 867">Strengthened U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific</p> <p data-bbox="917 906 1379 1022">The strengthened U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific is a provocation in and of itself and a move to contain China, thus decreasing stability in the region.⁸</p>

Korean Peninsula Issues

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
U.S. Objectives	U.S. Objectives
<p>The primary objective of the United States is a denuclearized and stable Korean Peninsula, not the collapse of the Kim regime. The United States seeks to change North Korean behavior, not necessarily to change the North Korean regime.⁹</p>	<p>The primary objective of the United States is the overthrow of the Kim regime. The United States actively pursues policies designed to hasten the collapse of North Korea.¹⁰</p>
Fault and Responsibility for the Instability	Fault and Responsibility for the Instability
<p>Between the United States and China, China bears more responsibility for the current instability on the Korean Peninsula, as China has not yet exercised its significant influence and leverage over North Korea, which would benefit its own interests as well as those of the international community.^{11,12}</p>	<p>Between the United States and China, the U.S. bears more responsibility for the current instability on the Korean Peninsula, as it is U.S. behavior towards North Korea that perpetuates a cycle of provocation, obstructing the path to a peaceful, diplomatic resolution.¹³</p>
Effectiveness of Sanctions¹⁴	Effectiveness of Sanctions¹⁷
<p>Relative to other options, sanctions are the most effective response to North Korean provocations and are having at least some impact on its behavior.¹⁵ However, the international community will only be able to rein in North Korea with China's full cooperation on sanctions.¹⁶</p>	<p>Sanctions are not the most effective response to North Korean provocations, as they only serve to further isolate and embolden North Korea. China cannot implement sanctions to the extent the United States would like, especially as certain sanctions might nullify any existing influence that it holds over North Korea.^{18,19}</p>
The "Carrot and Stick" Approach	The "Carrot and Stick" Approach
<p>Dialogue with North Korea has been shown to be an ineffective path to resolving the issue. The United States must take a resolute, hardline approach—with all options on the table—in response to North Korea's provocations.^{20,21}</p> <p>It is incumbent on North Korea to take the first steps towards a resolution by abandoning its nuclear ambitions. North Korea must be made to recognize its international obligations and the importance of denuclearization.²²</p>	<p>Dialogue via the Six Party Talks is the most effective option for resolving the issue. The hardline posturing of the United States only further provokes North Korea, leading to an endless cycle of action and reaction.^{23,24}</p> <p>It is incumbent on the United States to take the first steps towards a resolution by extending the olive branch to North Korea, opening dialogue and easing North Korean insecurities caused by the U.S.²⁵</p>

Deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense System to South Korea

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
<p data-bbox="405 421 709 450">Rationale for Deployment</p> <p data-bbox="405 484 874 716">The deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea is not intended to contain China.²⁶ THAAD is a defensive instrument that has been deployed with the sole purpose of protecting the region from North Korean missiles, not those originating from any other state.^{27, 28, 29}</p> <p data-bbox="405 749 874 1035">THAAD is necessary to defend South Korean territory and U.S. military forces stationed there from North Korean missile attacks. If North Korea continues its aggressive provocations and development of nuclear weapons, the United States and South Korea will need to continue strengthening their security capabilities by deploying new missile defense systems, such as THAAD.³⁰</p>	<p data-bbox="919 421 1224 450">Rationale for Deployment</p> <p data-bbox="919 484 1382 687">The deployment of THAAD to South Korea is a component of the U.S. grand strategy to contain China.³¹ Although the United States claims THAAD has been deployed only to defend against North Korean aggression, the real purpose of its deployment is to contain China.^{32, 33, 34}</p> <p data-bbox="919 749 1382 977">The deployment of THAAD is unnecessary, since U.S. and South Korean missile defense systems in place prior to the installation of THAAD already had the capability to intercept North Korean missiles.³⁵ As such, the deployment of THAAD goes far beyond the defense needs of the Korean Peninsula.³⁶</p>
<p data-bbox="405 1072 833 1101">Effect on Chinese Security Interests</p> <p data-bbox="405 1136 867 1222">The deployment of THAAD to South Korea neither impairs nor intends to harm China's strategic security interests.^{37, 38}</p> <p data-bbox="405 1280 867 1715">THAAD is not and will not be used to spy on China. The system's extensive radar range is necessary for tracking North Korean missiles that may have a range as far as Alaska.³⁹ Although the system has the capability to partially cover Chinese territory, it is configured only to "terminal" mode, ready to intercept missiles fired, that limits it to a shorter, more pointed range. The United States would not set THAAD even momentarily to "look" mode and point it at China, as this configuration would make the system unable to intercept North Korean missiles and thereby defeat the purpose of its deployment.⁴⁰</p>	<p data-bbox="919 1072 1347 1101">Effect on Chinese Security Interests</p> <p data-bbox="919 1136 1382 1251">The deployment of THAAD to South Korea undermines Chinese core interests and poses a "strategic security threat" to China.^{41, 42, 43, 44}</p> <p data-bbox="919 1280 1382 1512">THAAD will be used to spy on China. Based on its extensive radar range, encompassing much of northern and eastern Chinese airspace, the United States can—and likely will—utilize THAAD's extended "look" mode radar range of 1,200 miles to spy on China and collect sensitive radar data on its military and nuclear installations.⁴⁵</p>

U.S. Perceptions

Effect on Nuclear Proliferation

The deployment of THAAD to South Korea promotes stability on the Korean Peninsula by providing an extended defensive deterrent against North Korean aggression. Additionally, in bringing South Korea under the U.S. nuclear and missile defense umbrella, the United States prevents South Korea from needing to develop its own nuclear deterrent capabilities.⁴⁶

Chinese Perceptions

Effect on Nuclear Proliferation

The deployment of THAAD to South Korea will not contribute to stability on the Korean Peninsula and will not help further the resolution of the nuclear issue.⁴⁷ THAAD only enhances North Korea's drive to strengthen its own military capabilities—including nuclear—to defend itself against the United States.⁴⁸

U.S. Reconnaissance Operations in the Asia-Pacific Region

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
<p>Legality</p> <p>U.S. reconnaissance operations in the Asia-Pacific region are carried out in accordance with international law. These reconnaissance and surveillance operations constitute normal freedom of navigation operations, which are allowed in exclusive economic zones (EEZs) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴⁹</p>	<p>Legality</p> <p>U.S. reconnaissance operations in the Asia-Pacific region are not carried out in accordance with international law. The United States frequently conducts “close-in” reconnaissance operations in Chinese coastal waters and airspace.^{50, 51} As such, these operations infringe on China’s security interests and, thus, cannot fall under the protections of “freedom of navigation.”⁵²</p>
<p>Frequency⁵³</p> <p>China greatly overestimates the frequency of U.S. reconnaissance operations near Chinese territory. The number of flights China claims the United States undertakes in a year is not feasible.⁵⁴</p>	<p>Frequency⁵⁵</p> <p>The United States conducts as many as 500 reconnaissance flights near Chinese territory each year, which is excessive.⁵⁶</p>
<p>Transparency</p> <p>U.S. reconnaissance operations are undertaken in a transparent manner. The United States provides advanced notifications to the requisite Chinese authorities when necessary.⁵⁷</p> <p>During encounters with U.S. reconnaissance aircrafts, Chinese fighter jets have repeatedly operated in an unsafe and reckless manner.^{58, 59}</p>	<p>Transparency</p> <p>U.S. reconnaissance operations are not undertaken in a transparent manner. The United States does not provide the Chinese with advance notification of its operations.⁶⁰</p> <p>During encounters with U.S. reconnaissance aircrafts, Chinese fighter jets always operate in a professional and safe manner.⁶¹ China provides adequate warning prior to tracking and monitoring U.S. reconnaissance planes and naval vessels.</p>

East China Sea Disputes

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
<p data-bbox="150 407 448 436">Role of the United States</p> <p data-bbox="150 475 614 558">U.S. actions regarding the dispute over the ultimate sovereignty of the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands are neutral.⁶²</p> <p data-bbox="150 678 602 790">The United States is within its rights to include the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands under Article V of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.⁶³</p>	<p data-bbox="663 407 960 436">Role of the United States</p> <p data-bbox="663 475 1102 645">The United States is not acting as a neutral party in the dispute over sovereignty of the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands. U.S. actions, historically and presently, very clearly demonstrate its favor for Japan's claims.⁶⁴</p> <p data-bbox="663 678 1130 906">The United States does not have the right to include the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The United States' transfer of administration of the islands to Japan was illegal, and as such, Japan's claims of sovereignty over the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands are invalid.⁶⁵</p>
<p data-bbox="150 942 304 971">Provocations</p> <p data-bbox="150 1010 602 1209">China changed the status quo and destabilized the situation in the East China Sea through its aggressive military posturing, its air and naval incursions into Japan-administered territory and its unilateral development of natural resources in the East China Sea.⁶⁶</p> <p data-bbox="150 1244 599 1383">China's establishment of the "East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone" (ADIZ) in November 2013 was a provocative, unilateral move to change the status quo.⁶⁷</p> <p data-bbox="150 1443 606 1586">China's ADIZ does not follow international standards. It seeks to apply ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft in the East China Sea even though such aircraft do not intend to enter Chinese national airspace.⁶⁸</p> <p data-bbox="150 1619 612 1731">The United States' ongoing military support for Japan is necessary to deter Chinese provocations and to safeguard peace and stability in the East China Sea.⁶⁹</p>	<p data-bbox="663 942 817 971">Provocations</p> <p data-bbox="663 1010 1125 1122">Japan changed the status quo in the East China Sea through its unilateral nationalization of the islands, causing the situation to deteriorate.⁷⁰</p> <p data-bbox="663 1244 1121 1414">China's establishment of an ADIZ over the East China Sea was a necessary reaction and defensive measure to protect China's national security from aggressive Japanese actions that changed the status quo.⁷¹</p> <p data-bbox="663 1443 1125 1555">China's ADIZ in the East China Sea follows the same international practices applied by the United States, Japan and Canada in establishing their own ADIZs.^{72, 73}</p> <p data-bbox="663 1619 1118 1731">The United States' ongoing military support for Japan enables Japan's provocative behavior, which endangers peace and stability in the East China Sea.⁷⁴</p>

South China Sea Disputes⁷⁵

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
China's Nine-Dash Line	China's Nine-Dash Line
<p>China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, delineated by the nine-dash line, are ill-defined and ambiguous.</p>	<p>China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have historical backing and are indisputably clear.</p>
History versus Law	History versus Law
<p>On sovereignty issues, ratified international law outweighs any historical considerations. All South China Sea territorial disputes are within the jurisdiction of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).</p>	<p>History trumps contemporary international law. Any territorial disputes in the South China Sea are exempt from UNCLOS jurisdiction.</p>
Instigator	Instigator
<p>China instigated tension in the South China Sea region with its assertive and aggressive actions to project its growing military power; bolster and strengthen its claims and access to resources in the South China Sea; create "strategic depth;" intimidate its smaller neighbors; and check the United States' efforts to operate militarily in the area.</p> <p>The United States' statements and actions in this dispute have been wholly reactionary—and in direct response and proportionate—to China's provocations.</p>	<p>The United States upset the balance in the South China Sea with its escalatory statements and actions, including freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), intended to contain China; limit China's abilities to project power; bolster the United States' hegemony; and tilt U.S. allies and partners in the region against China.</p> <p>China has been merely reacting to the United States' provocative and destabilizing pronouncements and actions.</p>
Role of the Philippines and Vietnam	Role of the Philippines and Vietnam
<p>The Philippines and Vietnam are victims that have been bullied by their fellow claimant, China, which is the principal destabilizing force in the South China Sea.</p> <p>The United States has not unduly prioritized its relationships with the Philippines and Vietnam. It is possible for the U.S. to foster relationships with both countries while engaging bilaterally with China.</p>	<p>The Philippines and Vietnam are aggressors that upset the status quo in the South China Sea and manipulated the choices and behavior of the United States to their advantage.</p> <p>The United States has placed greater importance on its relationships with the Philippines and Vietnam, minor stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region, at the expense of the U.S. relationship with China, which is a major regional and global actor.</p>

U.S. Perceptions

Permanent Court of Arbitration July 12 Ruling

The Philippines was entirely within its rights to bring a case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), and the PCA had jurisdiction over the matters raised in the case. Additionally, the PCA award is valid and legitimate and is a “legally binding tribunal decision.”

Chinese Perceptions

Permanent Court of Arbitration July 12 Ruling

The Philippines was not within its rights to bring a case before the PCA, and the PCA had no proper jurisdiction to hear the case. Additionally, the PCA decision is “null and void and [of] no binding force.”

Cross-Strait Relations

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
August 17, 1982 Joint Communiqué	August 17, 1982 Joint Communiqué
The United States is not in violation of the August 17, 1982 Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. ⁷⁶	The United States is in violation of the August 17, 1982 Joint Communiqué. ⁷⁷
U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan	U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan
U.S. arms sales to Taiwan contribute to maintaining cross-Strait and regional peace and stability. ⁷⁸	U.S. arms sales to Taiwan undermine cross-Strait and regional peace and stability. ⁷⁹
"One Country, Two Systems" Model	"One Country, Two Systems" Model
<p>The "one country, two systems" model is not a viable solution to the Taiwan issue, given the differences in the political and social systems of mainland China and Taiwan.⁸⁰</p> <p>Additionally, China's implementation of "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong has led the people of Taiwan to doubt that China will respect Taiwan's existing democratic institutions.^{81, 82}</p>	<p>China's "one country, two systems" proposal is an ideal solution for Taiwan that meets China's goal of reunification as well as addresses the reality of the situation in Taiwan.⁸³</p> <p>The successful implementation of "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong demonstrates its viability as an ideal model for Taiwan's future.⁸⁴</p>
Winning Taiwan's "Hearts and Minds"	Winning Taiwan's "Hearts and Minds"
As more time passes and political and social differences between people on the two sides of the Strait widen, it will become more and more difficult for China to win the "hearts and minds" of the people in Taiwan, who are increasingly finding reunification with the mainland to be undesirable. ⁸⁵	As more time passes and the gap in economic development between the two sides of the Strait narrows, it will become easier for China to win the "hearts and minds" of the people in Taiwan, who will then naturally desire reunification with the mainland. ⁸⁶

Cybersecurity

U.S. Perceptions	Chinese Perceptions
<p data-bbox="150 363 435 392">Cyberspace Governance</p> <p data-bbox="150 430 617 542">States are merely one of many actors, working alongside companies and civil society, that govern cyberspace as a global commons.⁸⁷</p> <p data-bbox="150 575 606 745">China plays an obstructionist role in international cyberspace policy development, as it pushes its vision of a more state-centric and restrictive cyberspace. For instance, Chinese censorship policy is a barrier to international trade.⁸⁸</p>	<p data-bbox="662 363 947 392">Cyberspace Governance</p> <p data-bbox="662 430 1110 484">The ultimate authority to govern cyberspace and set rules lies with each state.⁸⁹</p> <p data-bbox="662 542 1130 716">The United States plays an obstructionist role in international cyberspace policy development, as it restricts access to resources and the rights of developing countries—especially China—in order to preserve U.S. hegemony in cyberspace.^{90, 91}</p>
<p data-bbox="150 784 348 813">Cyber Espionage</p> <p data-bbox="150 852 606 964">The Chinese state was behind or tacitly supported attacks against the United States to exploit commercial and security secrets benefitting Chinese firms.⁹²</p> <p data-bbox="150 1022 554 1107">Chinese actors are the world's most relentless culprits of economic cyber espionage.⁹³</p>	<p data-bbox="662 784 862 813">Cyber Espionage</p> <p data-bbox="662 852 1118 991">The Chinese state was not involved in and will never knowingly support economic espionage. As such, it should not be held accountable for the actions of criminals who “happened to be in China.”⁹⁴</p> <p data-bbox="662 1022 1130 1107">China is the world's biggest victim of cyber attacks—most of which originate in the United States.⁹⁵</p>

“Alternative” Strategic Perceptions in U.S.-China Relations

Conclusion

The United States and China view many of the issues on the current bilateral agenda in starkly different terms. These differing perceptions inform and exacerbate actual policy differences on a host of issues between the two countries, including those referenced in this report, and fuel mistrust. This mistrust, in turn, further bears on the two nations’ perceptual lenses, resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle of mutual strategic suspicion. The only way to alter this dynamic is to cast light on the diverging perceptions of the two countries and bring those perceptions into the fabric of bilateral discourse more explicitly and honestly. Understanding each other’s perceptions will not by itself solve the problems in U.S.-China relations, but doing so can create the basis for a more honest, substantive, constructive, fruitful and mutually beneficial dialogue. That is a good place to start.

Endnotes

1. This report focuses specifically on issues that meet three criteria. First, the issue currently features prominently in the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. Thus, issues that are usually addressed in multilateral forums rather than in U.S.-China bilateral settings, such as climate change and counterterrorism, are not covered. Second, disagreements on the issue generate significant tension between the two countries. Third, those tensions have deleterious effects on the overall relationship and have the potential to lead to some type of war or hot conflict. Therefore, topics such as human rights are not included in the report, as disagreements on this topic—albeit contentious—are unlikely to lead to actual conflict.
2. Although the Asia-Pacific “rebalance” was a strategy established by the Obama administration that may or may not be continued by the Trump administration, the authors of this report still felt it important to cover this issue. First, tensions in the bilateral relationship resulting from the differing strategic perceptions over the rebalance persist and likely will for some time to come. Second, in the same way that the rebalance itself has served as an over-arching principle guiding the specifics of U.S. posture and policy towards China and the Asia-Pacific, the differences in how the two countries view the rebalance also influence their perceptions of the more specific issues covered in this report.
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