

Discursively Constructing a Space Threat: 'China Threat' & U.S. Security

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CALEB POMEROY, JUN 6 2015

Discursively Constructing a Space Threat: Is China's Reemergence a Threat to U.S. Security Interests?

In 2001, the Rumsfeld Commission warned of the threat of a possible "space Pearl Harbor," outlining the U.S. as the most space-dependent country in the world and suggesting that the U.S. Department of Defense establish an "Under Secretary of Defense for Space, Intelligence, and Information" (Rumsfeld Commission, 2001, pp. 8, 32-33). In 2003, China launched its first astronaut into orbit and, in 2007, tested an anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) that destroyed a decommissioned Fengyun-1C weather satellite and caused the most severe orbital debris cloud in space flight history (CRS, 2014). In January of 2014, General William Shelton, commander of the U.S. Air Force Space Command, explained that while electronic jammers and laser attacks could reduce satellite capabilities, "direct attack weapons, like the Chinese anti-satellite system, can destroy [U.S.] space systems" ("U.S. military satellites," 2014, para. 5). General Shelton reiterated that mankind has consistently created conflict in every medium at its disposal, from land to sea, undersea to air, and now cyber and outer space.

There are few instances in history where an emerging power did not enter conflict with an existing power (Karabell, 2013). As China reemerges as an international power, it is natural to question whether or not the U.S. and China will engage in conflict. However, asking if China's reemergence is a threat to U.S. security interests may not be the best way to approach this issue. In fact, even defining U.S. security interests could cause an inherent threat to those supposed interests. This essay will argue that defining U.S. security interests can threaten the U.S., and this question's discursive construction increases the risk of a U.S.-China conflict. A wide range of case studies could be used to illustrate these arguments to approach the question of U.S.-China conflict; this essay will look at the contemporary issue of space security as it is currently receiving historically high levels of attention in Beijing and Washington.

Defining U.S. Security Interests Can Threaten the U.S.

Defining a set of U.S. security interests can bias U.S. perception of Chinese activities. Once the U.S. outlines specific security interests, Chinese activities are interpreted and evaluated by the U.S. relative to those outlined interests. A lucid example of this has unfolded over the past decade; the summary of the Congressional Research Service's 2014 report entitled *Threats to U.S. National Security Interests in Space: Orbital Debris Mitigation and Removal* explains that the growing population of space debris "threatens U.S. national security interests in space, both governmental (military, intelligence, and civil) and commercial." The U.S. criticized the 2007 Chinese ASAT test; National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe states that the "U.S. believes China's development and testing of such weapons is inconsistent with the spirit of cooperation that both countries aspire to in the civil space area" (Kaufman & Linzer, 2007, para. 4). With U.S. satellite assets defined as a security interest, it was only natural that many American analysts interpreted this test as a deliberate step made by the Chinese towards a counterspace capability to offset U.S. conventional military superiority as well as an attempt to force the U.S. into space arms treaty negotiations. However, Gregory Kulacki and Jeffrey Lewis (2008) conducted interviews with Chinese officials who were close to the anti-satellite program and found American commentators tended to place too much importance on the U.S. as a driver in China's test. This ASAT test, coupled with NASA Administrator Michael Griffin being denied access to the

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Shenzhou launch facility in 2006, caused the U.S. to sever cooperative ties with the Chinese National Space Agency. Griffin, in turn, had to resort to claiming the prospect of competition with China to obtain U.S. Congressional support for NASA's cooperative initiatives (Kulacki and Lewis, 2008). Therefore, the U.S. defining security interests, such as its satellite assets, encourages the U.S.'s interpretation of China's actions, such as the 2007 ASAT test, as a threat. In this example, the result was a further distancing of Washington from Beijing and a severing of space ties between two of the most space active nations in the world.

Defining a set of U.S. security interests can bias the space security conversation towards the U.S.; China's actions would be interpreted relative to the U.S.'s supposed security interests, constructing China as the aggressor. For example, with satellite assets outlined as a security interest, the U.S. interprets China's 2007 ASAT test as threatening to that interest. Yet, space debris in low Earth orbit threatens all nations with orbital satellite assets—not just the U.S. In fact, the 2007 ASAT test caused debris that damaged a Russian satellite six years later (CRS, 2014). Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal (2009) stress the importance of the U.S. working with the international community when approaching Chinese security issues, as opposed to framing the issue as U.S.-China specific. They suggest the Obama administration “sit down with Japan, the European Union, and other key allies to begin coordinating their policies towards China” to enjoy more policy success, emphasizing that many countries have realized their relationship with Beijing cannot be bilaterally negotiated (Economy & Segal, 2009, p. 20). An issue like satellite debris cannot be negotiated bilaterally, and the U.S. defining its satellite assets as a security interest can bias the security conversation towards the U.S., making it more likely that China be constructed as an aggressor. If the security conversation is framed as Chinese aggression towards U.S. security interests, the U.S. can monopolize an international issue, like satellite debris.

This Question's Discursive Construction Increases the Risk of Conflict

The question of whether or not China's reemergence is threatening to U.S. security interests is discursively constructed to threaten the U.S. The possible answers to this question lead to conflict; answering that China is threatening could lead to a security dilemma—a situation where the U.S.'s attempts to heighten its own security could evoke similar defensive responses from China, increasing the risk of conflict (Glaser, 1997). Defense analysts cite China's emerging threat in space as a primary reason for the U.S. to weaponize space. However, Hui Zhang of Harvard's Kennedy School (2008, p. 31) asserts “U.S. space weaponization plans will have disastrous consequences for international security and the peaceful use of outer space.” She concludes that this would evoke appropriate defense measures by China, which could lead to a space arms race (Zhang, 2008, p. 40). Given this question's discursive construction, answering that China is a threat to U.S. security interests could cause a security dilemma that heightens the risk of conflict.

On the other hand, if one answers that China is *not* a threat, the U.S. risks becoming ambivalent and could face an increasing perceived threat from China. U.S. Air Force General William Shelton explains that U.S. military satellites are effectively defenseless, and an attack would severely limit the U.S.'s civil, commercial, and military capabilities (“U.S. military satellites,” 2014). A report on the People's Liberation Army's space strategy published by the American Enterprise Institute (Wortzel, 2007) concludes that evidence exists that the PLA is preparing as though they might have to militarily engage the U.S. in space, citing weapons tests, legal justifications, and PLA literature as evidence. The report argues that justifications exist for the U.S. to develop space weapons systems, whether for defensive measures or offensive capabilities in future space conflicts. If the U.S. becomes ambivalent while China develops space arms, a U.S. perception of a China threat in space could increase as China becomes better armed relative to the U.S. Yet, as Zhang (2008) argues, arming space will likely evoke a military response from China. Therefore, even answering this essay's question of a possible China threat in the affirmative or negative increases the risk of conflict.

This question's discursive construction forces the use of the terms “U.S.” and “China,” creating a “Self” and “Other” paradigm which places the two states in opposition; the debate over whether or not China is a threat to U.S. security interests is often expressed in the U.S. by using the language of America as “us” and China as “them.” Jisheng Sun (2014) argues that previously, when China was considered an ideological partner, such as under the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kai-shek, U.S. policymakers used the term “we” to describe the two states. When referring to

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China's rise today, China is often referred to as the "Other," in comparison to the "Self" of the U.S. The "Other" portrays the "U.S.-imposed ideological dichotomy between itself and China, identifying the latter as different and even contradictory to the U.S." (Sun, 2014, p. 87). The policy discourse of the "Self" and "Other" simplifies and polarizes and can increase the speed and intensity of security dilemma dynamics between the U.S. and China (Johnston, 2013). This language creates American unipolarity where China's threat reputation leads to out-group status, which in turn fuels perceptions of China as threatening. Intensifying threat perception increases a possible security dilemma, and security-conscious Chinese political elites are acutely aware of the security costs of dangerous foreign attributions to China's character (Deng, 2006, p. 187). The "Self" versus "Other" paradigm distances Washington from Beijing and discursively places the two states in opposition.

This question's use of the word "threat" can increase U.S. perceptions of a Chinese threat. Threatening versus nonthreatening language forces one to view space actions through a threatening versus nonthreatening lens. For example, an emerging amount of literature focuses on the "China threat theory." Yong Deng (2006) argues that the "China threat theory" is foreign attributions to China as being harmful and destabilizing in international relations. Some analysts argue the theory helps defense industry insiders keep power and prestige gained during the Cold War by creating an existential threat supposedly facing the U.S. (Tiezzi, 2014). Though Beijing has disregarded this as Cold War-style power politics while reassuring the international community of its peaceful intentions, the risk still exists that the U.S. may genuinely feel threatened by China's actions (Deng, 2006). However, one reason may be the use of threat language and the subsequent understanding of actions as threatening or nonthreatening. This is problematic, because it risks creating a discursively constructed security dilemma that increases the likelihood of space weaponization (Peoples, 2008). While space weapons are only in their infancy in terms of development and deployment, the "space policy discourse of several states is already predicated, to a greater or lesser extent, on the general probability of space weaponization, and this in turn risks premature preclusion of alternative outcomes" (Peoples, 2008, p. 503). The existence of U.S. perceptions of a China threat that arises from its use of threatening versus nonthreatening terminology leads the U.S. to perceive China's increasing space power as threatening, even if it is not China's intention (Gross Stein, 2013). Therefore, this question's use of threat terminology can increase the likelihood that the U.S. will perceive a threat.

Conclusion

Whether or not the U.S. and China will engage in conflict is an important question to ask. However, asking if China's reemergence is a threat to U.S. security interests may not be the best way to approach this issue. This essay uses the contemporary debate surrounding space security to first argue that defining U.S. security interests is inherently threatening to the U.S., because defining a set of U.S. security interests biases the U.S.'s interpretation of Chinese activities, and defining a set of U.S. security interests can bias the security conversation towards the U.S. Second, this essay argues this question's discursive construction and its possible answers increase the risk of a U.S.-China conflict. The terms "U.S." and "China" create a "Self" and "Other" paradigm that places the two states in opposition, and threatening versus nonthreatening language increases the likelihood that the U.S. will perceive China as threatening. The Beijing-Washington security relationship is sensitive, and this essay serves as a reminder of the importance of equally sensitive language.

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