

# Internal Factors of the “Containment Policy of China” Perception

[ Steven Henin ]

**Abstract**—Although the United States official foreign policy with China is engagement, several in China see the United States seeking to contain China's rise. External factors such as US policy around Asia, as well as Asian-Pacific nations foreign policy with China have not eased China's suspicions. However, while the CCP does not extend its belief in this perception, its policies have helped its flourishing within China. The factors that lead to this perception are geared towards a domestic audience, as opposed to foreign policy. With the “Chinese threat” rhetoric used in the US and an increase of nationalism after 1991, the CCP has been constrained in choosing how to maintain China's international relations while also securing its own legitimacy at home.

**Keywords**—Chinese threat, containment, legitimacy nationalism, perception.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The perception about the “containment” of China has been around among the Chinese elite of all stripes since the end of the Cold War. The intensity of this perception and its effect on the Chinese State's conduct both domestically and internationally has scaled up and down the years relative to diplomatic issues and policy differences with the United States as well as those which concern matters of economic development.

Several scholars and policy analysts within the United States have debated over the use of implementing a containment strategy against China. Neo-realists<sup>1</sup> who view international relations as a zero-sum game have advocated that a rising China will challenge US interests, and therefore should adopt a containment policy to guarantee US supremacy. Other scholars that see China's rise, contend that hedging is the best policy to encourage China to play a more responsible role in the international sphere.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that China as a rising country will inherently be peaceful, yet outside influences may alter its course. The majority however advocate hedging China's rise, the United States should not seek containment, but rather engagement with China<sup>3</sup>. In

support of this hypothesis, US official policy has been to engage with China. Seeking to contain China is seen as counter-productive (Suisheng, 2014: 14).

It is not difficult to analyze US actions around China and see how a containment perception can be somewhat justified. An unprecedented amount of US military personnel moving east to counter “rising challengers” perpetuating a security dilemma (Johnston, 2011); or constant US interference with Chinese domestic affairs on what the US labels as democratic or human values (Rozman 2014); or, by interacting with China's neighbors in disputed territory and land that China defines as its sovereign territory (Whiting 1996). While external factors that lead Chinese to a fear of containment have partially been investigated, conditions within China that allow the proliferation of this narrative of containment have been analyzed separately from containment. What has led to the growing of this threat perception? Is containment for the international or domestic audience? In this article, besides legitimate sovereignty concerns, there are three main factors postulated that propel the Chinese perception threat of the US containment of China. Although at times similar in nature, playing off one another, each factor has independence that perpetuates this threat perception as seen as reality. The first is that of China's analysis of scholarly and government literature of the “Chinese threat”. The second factor is the rising tide of nationalism. The third factor is the CCP's concern over legitimacy given rising nationalism. China's response if too weak, or too strong, can elicit unwanted outcomes either internally or externally.

Current literature on China has already initiated debate on containment fear, nationalism, legitimacy, and the “Chinese threat.” Yet seldom are “containment” fears analyzed in terms of the former factors. Contrary to current literature, Chinese international policy at this time does not reflect an obvious perceived containment effort. Therefore, the perceived threat perception on both sides has been sensationalized.

## II. HISTORICAL SHIFT IN CHINA'S IDENTITY

Chinese civilizational achievements has cultivated a sense of pride among its people creating the national image of China. While China had envisioned itself as the middle kingdom of the world, China considered itself as the sole sovereign government of the world (Kissinger, 2014: 150).

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Neoliberal Institutionalism,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March 2000), p. 97–120.

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- 1 See for example Friedberg (2011), Mearsheimer (2014)
- 2 See for example Fingar (2013), Hermann (2004), Kissinger (2011), Saunders (2013)
- 3 For example see Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and

It was under these pretenses that while western powers were colonizing around Asia, China's emperor rejected engaging in equal diplomacy with Britain. After two wars, China's sense of the middle kingdom was fractured. The loss of face and the "century of humiliation" by foreign forces was ingrained in the cultural identity of China.

It was not until the late 1930's when the Japanese again invaded China that nationalism in its current nation-state form played a role in rallying the Chinese people. With the end of the civil war, Mao claimed the century of humiliation was over. While some scholars converse that China's identity had replaced culturalism with nationalism, others contend that China's identity of culturalism continues in its new form of nationalism.

As the Cold War started, it entangled the world in an ideological battle between democracy and communism. China under Mao sought to once again egress victorious over the west (Coble 2010). Determined in showing Communist China's economic ability and industrialization capability, in 1958, Mao launched the "Great Leap Forward" with the goal of breaking western dominance over China's industry. Mao claimed that China would be able to overtake Britain and the US's steel and iron industry within 15 years. Well until after Mao's death, the CCP's claims of legitimacy amongst the people laid on a narrative of ideological claims that the Communists had emerged victorious over impending threats, securing China's role in the world as the Middle Kingdom.

With US-Sino relations returning to a normalized state, Deng Xiaoping's 1979 "Open Up and Reform Policy" began to open China's market internationally. China had adapted what was known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics", or what others referred to as "capitalism with Chinese characteristics." While China saw tremendous growth during this period, doubt over the CCP's legitimacy was being questions. In 1989, China reached a crescendo with the outbreak of protests in Tiananmen Square. Citizens were openly criticizing the current political system, seeking similar political liberalization that had transformed China's economy.

By the 1990's, observers began to notice that the mantra of victory was no longer resonating with its citizens (Wang, 2008: 789). Under these guises, China began to capitulate the "resistance" slogans and instead focused on "victimization" under western hands (Gries, 2004: 79). With the "Patriotic Education Campaign" launched in 1991, the CCP targeted Chinese youth with education regarding China's humiliation (Wang, 2008: 744). Textbooks were changing to focus on the humiliation China had suffered from external forces. Playing off of nationalistic pride of a rising power, China's anti-foreign rhetoric had risen. While Mao had once declared the end of the "Century of Humiliation", current leaders and media created a national narrative that China must rise in power to once and for all shed the memory of the "century of humiliation (Coble, 2007: 403)." With memories of wars that youth had never personally experienced, the new generation has grown up more nationalistic than those in the past to secure China's elite legitimacy (Fukuyama 2007, 38).

### III. INTERNAL FACTORS PROLIFERATING CONTAINMENT PERCEPTIONS

#### A. "Chinese Threat"

With legitimate concerns of national security, state sovereignty, historical claims before being savaged by war, as well as international precedence and law on self-governance, Chinese concerns of US intentions are not as revisionist as projected by many. When disagreements of diplomatic policy occur, the perception is at times that the West is seeking to contain China. While US officials claim a policy of engagement, the US media as well as several prominent voices contend that China is a threat to the United States.

Within the United States, China's rise has brought about a plethora of debate between scholars, media and government. Uncertain of China's intentions, political analysts have contended to use history to evaluate China's potential course. Offensive realist perceptions conclude that China will attempt to maximize power, seeking to dispel United States military forces away from Asia. By looking at the size of China's military, as well as rate of development, Mearsheimer (2014) hypothesizes that the United States should contain the threat before China seeks to dethrone the US. Others see China's economic strength as signs that its economy will threaten the current international system (Malik, 2006/2007: 591). Roy (1996:760), on the other hand conceives that China's fundamental political and cultural differences jeopardize United States interests around the world.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, scholars have concluded that China's rise does not inherently pose a threat to the United States. Kissinger (2011) contends that China's rise will bring about a "reordering to the international system," yet China will not follow the path of imperial Germany. He concludes that it would be a strategic mistake to contain China like the United States contained the Soviet Union. Mandelbaum (2010), is anticipating a responsible China to share in the responsibilities of governance and global prosperity. Lieberthal theorizes that although there will be disputes and challenges facing US-Sino relations, as long as China is peaceful, the United States should seek to welcome a rising China<sup>4</sup>. In "The end of Chimerica," Ferguson and Schularick postulate that the symbiotic and interdependence between the US and China has led to both crisis and prosperity in the world market, but ultimately should continue<sup>5</sup>.

However, the vocal minority contending China as a threat has solicited media headlines republished in Chinese

4 See <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/51600/kenneth-lieberthal/a-new-china-strategy-the-challenge>

5 See "The End of Chimerica" working paper at <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/10-037.pdf>.

mediums. In addition, with access to government reports on China's growing military and its potential threat to US interests, Chinese analysts see a dichotomy between policy and debate.<sup>6</sup> Under these premises, the external debate on China's intentions have impacted the internal perceptions. Through repeated dialogue and military reports purporting China's rise and potential instability in the world, many Chinese have concluded that the United States therefore seeks to contain China.

The perception of the “Chinese threat” gives a justification for this threat perceptions inception. When fears become collective experiences “evoked by trauma, enabled by political leaders, echoed over and over by the media” the collective fear of emotions takes over from rationality (Stein, 2013: 40). After being adopted and institutionalized within Chinese society, Stein (2013) contends that threats become “culturally routine, embedded in political institutions, and acquires an almost taken-for-granted quality. Under these conditions, collective threat perceptions become highly resistant to change (8)”. While advocates of containment have admitted their proposals have been largely ignored by Washington, within China, these vocal voices are interpreted as the grand strategy within Washington's policy. Regardless of repeated attempts by Washington to convey the opposite, China perceives the US as seeking to contain China as a threat to the US hegemony (Suisheng, 2014: 6).

In addition, while the Chinese threat deals with human motivation and emotional components imperative to perceived intentions (Gries, 2001: 157), one can not simply overlook how perceptions in the US shape internal perceptions within China. Though not viewed in the same levels, some scholars suggest that it is the US creating of Chinese “identity” that creates this threat and adds to this perception (Rozman, 2014: 350). “Threat” of Chinese influence and rise to a responsible global player within US, only stoke mutual fears, justifying Beijing's concerns over sovereignty and developing.

## **B. THE ROLE OF NATIONALISM**

The rise of Chinese nationalism since the 1990's has led to an increase of its pessimistic overview of US-Sino relations (Chen, 2001). Nationalism, as defined by Gries (2011: 13) is the “behavior to restore, maintain, or advance public images of the nation” and that it “may well be the most important determinate in Chinese foreign policy” which is separate from patriotism.

Debate about China's nationalism and its effect on policy is greatly debated by scholars. Rozman (2014) argues that China's nationalism and “identity” is created by perceptions of a construction of Chinese ideology that is falsely labeled as anti-western. Some scholars argued that as China's nationalism

increases, China's policy will become more aggressive (Whiting, 1996). With nationalism entrenched in the education of it's leaders to secure power, chance of it leading into a conflict rises (Mearsheimer, 2014). Others, put forth the posture that China's nationalism is a combination of insecurity defensiveness, leading to assertive nationalism (Shambaugh, 1996: 205).

To evaluate the effects of nationalism on the perception of containment, it is necessary to identify the concepts that lead to nationalism. To create a national sentiment, one first needs to create a national identity, a national attachment, and lastly state support. To create a national identity, the state must construct an inspirational or intelligible history from based off of norms, cognitive models of the social world, and commonality among group members (Abdelal 2005). Once having a national identity, an individual attachment to the nation must be established, whether negative or positive (Dekker, 2003: 347). After identifying national identity and attachment to the state, popular support gives legitimacy to the state.

To establish a new national identity, in the 1990's, China's education policy underwent dynamic changes to embrace a more patriotic tone. Nathan and Ross (1997: 34) observe that feelings of pride and national humiliation has empowered Chinese nationalism. Whereas China had previously highlighted patriotic nationalism with slogans of victory, the CCP had adopted to replace themes with victimization (Coble, 2007: 403).

With China's new cultural identity focused on restoration of China's historical legacy, China's nationalism has been focused on pragmatic assertiveness (Suisheng Zhao, 2000). Pragmatic nationalism plays off of a nations self interest, with the ideology that China is weak today because of foreign intervention and exploitation. Establishing pragmatic nationalism to China's cultural identity, China has concierge what it deems legitimate vital interests: establishing: self reliance while modernizing, and maintaining unity.

The containment of China perception threat has encapsulates everything that pragmatic nationalism perceives as a threat. First, as Chinese nationalism is framed from a sense of anti-foreign sentiment, perceived containment efforts by Japan and the the United States conjure up historical wars and policy against China (Wang, 2005). After World War II, Chinese viewed the Japanese-US relationship to be the most instrumental in the containment strategy of China (Zhang Jingquan, 2012). With a believed containment effort, foreign powers are seen as constraining China's rise, threatening China's cultural identity. (Tian Qingli, 2014:11) China's policies are justifiable in self-reliance and maintaining harmony, an image that containment seeks to threaten.

Second, an offensive realist theory of the current hegemon seeking to constrain a rising power is interpreted as victimization of the rising power. This notion highlighted by years of nationalism portray China as the victim being constrained by the US. Within this perception, as Zhang (2014) highlights, China seeks a peaceful rise, not seeing

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6 See for example Kai Liao's “The Pentagon and the Pivot,” *Survival* (2013, p.46-52 analysis of the Pentagon's ONA seeking to contain China as a threat.

hegemony or to displace the United States, while the United States desires to contain China's rise and influence.

Third, large proponents play off of domestic nationalist calls for restoring China to its historical legacy. As part of this concept, no one issue is of more importance to China's sovereignty than the reunification of Taiwan (Shambaugh, 1996:190). US interests in selling weapons, supporting a "no independence, no united" policy, as well as diplomatic disputes in the Taiwan Strait, have all conjured up memories and identities of a China divided by war and humiliation. Wang (2013) displays this belief when he stated that the United States policy on Taiwan "has allowed the United States to continuously control Taiwan. At the same time, it uses Taiwan to contain China's peaceful rise and prevent the Chinese people from restoring China back to its former glory (60)".

Contrary to current literature that contends nationalism and "containment" fears are an indication of a confident and revisionist ideology, it is rather focused on its insecurities. With China's economy becoming salient, perceived threats of economic containment have decreased. On the other hand, with many containment fears focused on US military alliances with its neighbors, US troops in the Asian-Pacific, as well as selling weapons to Taiwan, although China's army is modernizing, it's still perceived as weak when countering US military forces. This highlights the insecurity as opposed to a confident personification regarding China's military power. As China continues self-defensive measures, if external fears are not exacerbated by an unclear US policy, containment fears in the military realm can too be relaxed.

### **C. IMPACT OF LEGITIMACY**

When perceived domestic threats combine with questions of legitimacy, a decline in governance is threatened (13). The containment of China perception plays two roles in China's elite legitimacy. If the United States is truly seeking to contain China's rise, repeated calls by government officials will give more credibility to their defensive policies. On the other hand, if the Chinese government ignores perceived threats, the people of China will begin to question whether the current CCP leaders are truly fit to lead China to its triumphal rise. If this is to be true, the CCP's policy and foreign relations would make it apparent.

With education material, CCP campaigns, as well as pop culture and online social platforms, the CCP's narrative of victimization and humiliation has continued into the 21st century (Zheng Wang, 2012: 95). As the CCP's domestic legitimacy is seen relying on the continued economic growth and increase of standards of living for the average Chinese citizen, China's leaders are confronted with several divisive issues that dominate concerns among the people<sup>7</sup>. While Xi

7 From official corruption, environmental degradation, income and wealth equity gap, unemployment, to concerns

Jinping has begun to focus on tackling some of these issues<sup>8</sup>, progress is slow, raising the stakes for calls of domestic legitimacy. Focusing on fighting corruption as a source for domestic legitimacy, political scandals and elite division will ensure a turbulent path for government officials, yet commended by the public.<sup>9</sup>

When progress or challenges arise, domestic attention is at times focused to international realms of external threats (Downs and Saunders, 1999: 114). Instances like maritime disputes in the East and South China Sea, the United States bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the EP-3 incident in Hainan, as well as other international disputes, have all required the CCP to issue direct statements when faced with questions over the capability to lead when popular sentiment boils over (Weiss, 2013: 4).

With government's legitimacy correlating to domestic support, the CCP's legitimacy rests on domestic satisfaction of raising standards of livings and China's national image. To garnish support, the CCP must strongly appeal to domestic concerns of foreign threats like that of containing China's vital interests. To do so, the CCP is contending to balance both domestic nationalism and economic growth to maintain legitimacy and growth.

The CCP's domestic narrative of foreign containment of China is constrained by three factors: international power position; international reaction; and constraints of domestic reactions (Downs and Saunders, 1999:121). In terms of international power position, the more nationalism is adopted by the public, the more assertive the general population becomes in influencing international policy.<sup>10</sup> The CCP is faced with managing economic growth while at the same time juggling nationalistic calls for a more assertive China against perceptions of foreign interference. With containment fears focused on the US military presence and pivot in the South China sea, although China's military is in the process of being modernized, it is in no position to directly challenge the United States in maritime disputes, nor does any side truly want conflict. And while China is seen as being more assertive in recent years, the actions taken are relatively benign than

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over sovereignty and the continued growth of China when China's economic pace is beginning to slow down.

8 For example, China has begun to crackdown on corruption, a source that garnished the support of the nation.  
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/interviews/2014/07/31-corruption-crackdown-factions-li>.

9 President Xi has remained popular through implementing anti-corruption policies. See  
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/08/25/343165188/despite-crackdowns-china-s-president-rides-a-wave-of-popularity>

10 See for example Vietnam's protests after China's search for oil in disputed territory  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/donaldkirk/2014/05/17/vietnam-mese-anti-china-protests-reflect-grievances-far-beyond-chinas-oil-rig/>.

what domestic observers demand, showing the CCP's continued support of international growth and image.

If China becomes as assertive as requested by a domestic audience when feeling victimized, China will jeopardize international cooperation.<sup>11</sup> Since 2009, some claim China has become more assertive in what it claims as sovereign territory in the South China sea. Due to concerns by anxious neighbors in the rhetoric of satisfying a domestic audience, the Philippines and Vietnam have requested the United States assistance in balancing against maritime disputes, giving more prudence to the vicious cycle of a perception of containment against China. Instead, China would rather the United States not get involved, dealing bilaterally with each nation<sup>12</sup>.

As Beijing continues to push a narrative of containment by foreign powers, a dual policy can be observed. On one hand, if China responds to boycotts and requests for economic sanctions, economic conditions in China will lead to a decline in output. By continuously playing to a domestic audience of foreign powers, if failing to maintain a growth rate capable of continuing China's development, the CCP's legitimacy may be called into question (Down and Saunders, 1999:142). On the other hand, when diplomatic disputes arise, if China responds with less than assertive declarations, anger can turn into anti-government sentiment. By failing to defend China's sovereignty and interests at the hands of "hegemons", hardline political or military actors might too question the legitimacy of the current CCP elites. If being overtly assertive, Beijing will likely see more adhesiveness between neighbors seeking to balance China's role in international affairs.

As of today, China has made strides to limit national protests and fears of containment from jeopardizing foreign relations with the United States (Weiss, 2013). This was apparent when in both 2001 and 2014, in different instances involving Chinese and US jets. In 2001, due to the death of the Chinese fighter pilot, national appeal was at an all time high to confront the United States. However, as Weiss (2013) points out, China limited its domestic protests in interests of fostering constructive relations with the United States. In reference to the 2014 incident, with the absence of fatalities, news articles proclaimed the United States was seeking to restrict China's military power<sup>13</sup>. Although seen more assertive in defending its actions, China's response to media reports have been relatively subdued preventing disputes from hampering

bilateral relations, showing China's growing diplomatic responsibility as a rising power.

China will continue to engage in satisfying domestic nationalistic appeals when issues arise, while at the same time strengthening diplomatic relations. However, when competing constraints continue to oppose each other, the government will have to choose between appealing to a domestic audience or concerns from foreign states. To be able to appeal to rising nationalistic tones within China, the CCP's international policy has reflected shifting domestic concerns of legitimacy. Although not officially stating that the United States and Western powers are engaged in containing China, policy and government approved news stories reflects it, showing containment is geared for a domestic audience, as opposed to official belief that the US seeks to contain China in the international realm.

Although appeals regarding containment by the government are in large part rhetoric to a domestic audience, recent behavior has indicated that China may be more willing to appeal to domestic support to sustain legitimacy, as well as safeguarding what China deems as core issues as its capabilities improve. While the CCP has allowed certain nationalist protests to occur, it has restrained others from manifesting. China allowed nationalistic protests against the United States to flourish in response to the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade, yet deterred them from initiating in response to the EP-3 incident (Weiss, 2013). If the government prohibits protests, it sacrifices its own legitimacy among its population. If the government permits demonstrations, foreign relation could be restrained. With past policy and actions taken by the CCP, the "containment threat" perception is largely used by the government for domestic consumption. When it comes to international policy and concerns, Chinese leaders have publicly focused on engagement, seeking to establish a new type of power relations with the United States as opposed to jeopardizing US-Chinese relations.

## V. CONCLUSION

The perception of China being contained has accelerated strategic mistrust between the China and the US. Through constant media publicity within the United States of whether China will be an emerging threat, some Chinese perceptions have taken this dialogue as concrete proof that the United States is seeking a policy of containment. The existing educational thrust being imparted among the younger generation that focuses on "victimization" hand in hand with a parallel track on imbuing the same with a call towards the restoration of China's national glory – officially that of peaceful development – contributes to the growing perception that US is seeking to contain or even arrest China's rise.

Instead of evaluating diplomatic affairs through pragmatic lenses, nationalism always appeals to the emotional response of the public. With perceptions of economic, military, and political "containment" restricting China's international influence, nationalism has contributed to threat perception of

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11 For example, when initially bidding on high speed train contracts, Japan was favored to receive the contract. However, after online campaigns and complaints, the CCP decided to not grant Japan the contracts. For more, see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/apr/17/china.japan>.

12 See for example [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/30/c\\_133225289.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/30/c_133225289.htm).

13 See for example <http://military.china.com/critical3/27/20140827/18741385.html> (Link in Chinese)

containment. As nationalistic rhetoric demands for more assertive policy by government elite, the CCP has been constrained by their own domestic audience in their responses to diplomatic affairs.

If China does not respond to issues on fears of containment that is being pushed, the legitimacy of the governments to sincerely lead China will be questioned. If the Chinese State – the PRC – indiscriminately panders to the hypernationalist voices in its support base, the consequent conduct of its foreign policy impacting relations, necessary as it is for sustaining the country’s long-term developmental goals, has the potential of being jeopardized.

It is of no doubt that the Chinese leaders seek to achieve what they deem as legitimate national interests. Such interests are, reunification with Taiwan, recognition over the South China Sea and restoration of China's national image. While internal factors allow the permeation of a heightened threat perception within China, strategic mistrust has increased due to both domestic and external factors. If not working together to dismiss such perceptions of both containment and a China threat within both nations, the threat of miscalculated conflict rises.

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