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February 2023



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ASIA PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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A fundamental and underappreciated challenge in the China-US relationship today is that the two sides face a serious and growing perception gap. They have divergent understandings on a wide range of basic factual issues, which then leads to divergent perspectives about each other's policy goals and strategic intent. This perception gap has become significant enough that the two sides appear genuinely no longer able to understand each other. They increasingly talk past rather than with each other, leaving both sides more and more disillusioned about the value of dialogue.

This perception gap represents a much deeper problem than disinformation or propaganda that most international analysts often talk about. Disinformation and propaganda indicate the deliberate spread of falsehoods when oneself knows they are untrue. A perception gap, on the other hand, describes a situation wherein both sides genuinely believe in the truthfulness of one's own public discourse but think the other side is knowingly spreading falsehoods.

One recent example of this perception gap is over the issue of US-funded biolabs in Ukraine and other countries. According to publicly available research by Chinese experts and the author's private conversations with them,¹ the vast majority of Chinese, including Chinese policy elites, appear to genuinely believe that the United States has been conducting biological weapons-related illegal research at the biolabs, which, if true, would be a serious violation of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). At the same time, the vast majority of Americans genuinely believe such allegations are deliberate disinformation created by Russia and spread by China. Most US policy experts find it very hard to believe the United States has conducted prohibited biological weapons research since the BWC entered into force in 1975.

This is just one small example. The China-US perception gap is an increasingly prominent phenomenon in almost all aspects of the bilateral relationship. The two sides have disagreed over important factual issues since the founding of the People's Republic of China – such as the question of who started the Korean War – to more recent events – such as whether the United States deliberately provoked Russia to start the Ukraine war. They disagree about the nature of domestic issues in China – such as what happened in Xinjiang's reeducation

¹ See, for example, *This is China, No. 143: The Suspicious American Biological Laboratory* (《这就是中国》第143期：疑云重重的美国生物实验室), 23 May 2022, <http://www.cifu.fudan.edu.cn/c8/48/c412a444488/page.htm>

camps – and international issues in the world – such as whether the United States used China as a scapegoat to cover up the possibility that Covid-19 might have originated from US military research institutes.²

This perception gap exists between the two populations at the societal level, as the general public in both countries have absorbed different news and information for decades, leading them to live in parallel universes today with very divergent understandings of how today's world looks and how it came about. This perception gap also exists between the two countries' policy experts and elites. They grew up within and live under the influence of the same information environment as their fellow citizens. In the above example, the author's private conversations reveal that the vast majority of Chinese security policy experts, including those working on weapons of mass destruction policies, appear to have the same view as the Chinese public about perceived US illegal activities in US biolabs across the world. Even the top Chinese leaders cannot escape the influence of the mainstream Chinese views. Although they have access to top secret intelligence, senior political leaders are always surrounded by advisors, analysts, and experts whose views are often deeply influenced by the domestic mainstream discourse. Senior leaders do not seem aware that the domestic information management system designed by them or their predecessors to shape the thinking and opinions of ordinary people can eventually come back to influence the top leaders' perception and perspectives, too.

Impact on bilateral relations

The negative impact of this systemic perception gap on the bilateral relationship cannot be overstated. In the above example, convinced of the US' wrongdoings in the biolabs, China sees US rejection of these accusations as an attempt to cover up crimes committed under the nose of the international community. Beijing also views US opposition against launching international investigations as further proof of US hypocrisy and double standards toward international rules, whereas Washington sees China's promotion of such disinformation and calls for international investigations as ridiculous and demonstrating severe ill intent. Such observations lead the Chinese to conclude that the United States rarely respects legal or moral principles in the pursuit of geopolitical interests and to US frustration that China's deliberate lies indicate no interest in improving relations and instead demonstrate the untrustworthy nature of the Beijing government. In other words, the perception gap leads to extremely negative readings about each other's behavioral patterns, inner characteristics, and basic credibility and integrity, thus undermining interest in further engagement.

² See, for example, Jia, Pingfan (贾平凡). "What Exactly Did the US Overseas Biolabs Do? (美国海外生物实验室到底干了什么?)," *People's Daily (Overseas Edition)* (人民日报海外版), 26 March 2022 http://news.china.com.cn/2022-03/26/content_78132074.htm

It has become a mainstream view in China that the nature of US and Chinese strategic culture is fundamentally different: US strategic culture is inherently hegemonic, it is argued, whereas the nonviolent genes in China's pacifist culture make China incapable of committing violence or wrongdoing. Mr. Xi Jinping, for example, repeatedly claims there are no aggressive genes in Chinese culture and attributes tensions in the bilateral relationship completely to US hegemonism.³ Convinced of the imperious culture of the United States and of the harmonious culture of China, Chinese leaders, experts, and the general public increasingly believe that the US and Chinese systems inevitably work differently, which they believe creates tensions and makes reconciliation difficult.

As an example, one mainstream Chinese view is that the US military-industrial complex – under the influence of US hegemonic culture – has played a particularly negative role in promoting a militaristic foreign policy. At the same time, however, the Chinese believe China's military-industrial complex is a pure force for good and a pillar of peace, and does not have embedded self-interests that shape its role in internal policy debates as is the case in the United States. Even though China's armed forces and defense industries are much less transparent and face much fewer domestic checks and balances than in the case of the US, China harbours a strong belief that the US military-industrial complex causes war because it is greedy, whereas the Chinese military-industrial complex contributes to peace because of its self-sacrificing and peace-loving nature.⁴

Understanding these views is important, as they directly affect the bilateral relationship. When China attributes rising tensions between the two sides to unmodifiable internal features of the other's culture or social institutions, this serves to reduce confidence or hope in resolving bilateral disputes through dialogue or persuasion. Rather, a growing Chinese consensus holds that the only way out is for China to outcompete the United States by developing such formidable power that Washington has to acknowledge and respect it. These views have fed China's growing power-centric mindset and incentivised China's comprehensive military modernisation. In the case of the United States, its concern about the impact of China's increasingly authoritarian political system on its foreign and security policy has produced a similar effect, making Washington increasingly disillusioned about the prospect of resolving disputes through dialogue and more convinced of the need to strengthen its hard power.

³ “Xi Jinping Holds Video Meeting with US President Joe Biden (习近平同美国总统拜登举行视频会晤),” *Xinhua News Agency*, 16 November 2021, http://www.news.cn/2021-11/16/c_1128068890.htm

⁴ See, for example, PLA - Peace Loving Army, 3 September 2022, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_19749682; Jia, Pingfan (贾平凡), “The Military-Industrial Complex: A ‘Monster’ with a Penchant for ‘Cooking’ War (军工复合体：一头嗜好‘烹制’战争的‘怪兽’),” *People's Daily (Overseas Edition)* (人民日报海外版), 16 April 2022, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0416/c1011-32400752.html>

This creates a real challenge for the two sides to effectively contain and manage their military competition and confrontation.

The connection between the present and history

Admittedly, even in a closely-managed information environment like China's, some people are more informed than others. In the above example of allegations concerning US biolabs, a small number of Chinese experts, officials, and media workers seem to think that China may be "overstating" the facts about US biolabs. That said, they also believe that the US-led Western countries have been the real masters in the world in terms of using disinformation to undermine their enemies in recent decades, and that China is simply taking a page from their playbook. Because they believe that China is justified in using "unorthodox" measures such as disinformation operations against a roguish enemy, these few policy elites, despite their different readings of the facts compared with the majority view, don't often make efforts to clarify the facts and challenge popular perceptions.

The existing perception gap between the two sides concerning each other's behaviours and intent also has roots in conflicting interpretations about each other's historical track record. China's understanding about whether or not the United States has historically honoured international rules and moral principles significantly shapes whether China views the United States as a decent and reasonable partner today. Unfortunately, the two sides have divergent interpretations of essential factual issues in almost all key historical disputes, ranging from the Korean War in the early 1950s to the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and from the EP-3 incident in 2001 to the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic today.⁵ For a large part, today's perception gap is a result of the accumulation of these previous disagreements over facts and attributions of wrongdoing. With each new disagreement that arises, the gap deepens and power-centric mindsets are strengthened. This is also why it becomes increasingly hard for them to agree on the causes of today's disputes, as newer disputes often have their roots in older ones and are always intertwined within broader historical grievances and the overall perception gap.

That said, the United States and Soviet Union were arguably in a similar situation during the Cold War, with a deep information and perception gap existing between the two. Washington and Moscow made efforts to jointly address some of the fundamental issues identified above, if not the issue of the perception gap directly. During the Helsinki Process, the two blocs took steps to tackle their deep divisions, including negotiating on the thorny and sensitive issues of sovereign

⁵ On 1 April 2001, a US navy's EP-3 surveillance plane collided with a Chinese F-8 fighter jet over the South China Sea when the US plane was flying approximately 110 km away from the Chinese Hainan island. The Chinese jet attempted to dispel the US plane before the fatal collision. The Chinese pilot was never found and the US plane made a successful emergency landing on Hainan after incurring damage.

A willingness to reflect on how one's own policies contribute to the perception gap is crucial to start addressing the challenge. A unitary domestic public opinion environment is the perfect hotbed for reinforcing self-righteous perspectives on history and current events. A lack of domestic policy debate and of institutionalised checks and balances is also a recipe for creating internal echo chambers. It is up to each country to address these internal challenges.

and human rights and fundamental freedoms. The two countries also successfully negotiated the Basic Principles of Relations Agreement in 1972, in which they arrived at a common set of principles to regulate both countries' behaviours and guide their bilateral relations. American and Chinese experts can jointly examine the actual effect of such agreements in potentially mitigating their deep divisions in the following decades and to explore lessons applicable to today's China-US relationship.⁶ At the government level, Chinese leaders have long advocated for a top-down approach toward improving bilateral relations – to agree on basic and high-level principles first before cooperating on working-level issues. Washington can send a positive signal to Beijing by showing a willingness to explore this approach and propose a high-level dialogue to address the deep divisions between them. As part of this dialogue, the two countries can share their views on the problem of information and perception gaps and seek to reach common understandings on basic principles to contain the perception gap and its negative consequences.

Looking forward

The stakes are too high to not make every effort to understand and address the perception gap between Washington and Beijing today. To some degree, the Ukraine war is a result of the deep perception gap between Russia and Western countries, as the majority of the Russian public and policy elites appear to be largely sympathetic, if not explicitly supportive, of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. Though the rift between Russia and the West is wide, the China-US perception gap appears even wider and could lead to more consequential outcomes than the Ukraine war. The Taiwan Strait is one of the flashpoints where this perception gap could manifest itself through a catastrophic war. Even if no major military conflict breaks out in the near- to mid-term, the perception gap will remain a very long-term problem for the bilateral relationship, as it will take decades – even generations – for people's worldviews and mindsets to considerably change and for the perception gap to narrow.

Even if this problem is impossible to resolve in the foreseeable future, it would still be very helpful for the two sides to fully recognise the existence and severity of the perception gap. To acknowledge that the perception gap is a reality and that it causes serious problems – including undermining one's own key national interests – is the first step toward developing an adequate understanding of the key underlying challenges in the relationship. We have not come close to achieving this first step so far.

⁶ Some European scholars have explored the implications of the Euro-Atlantic experiences for the Asia Pacific region, such as James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen, "Toward an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, Asia Pacific Leadership Network and the Nautilus Institute," 12 August 2021, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/toward-an-organization-for-security-and-cooperation-in-northeast-asia>

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In this regard, policy experts, scholars, media workers, and public opinion leaders in the United States, China, and other countries may have a particularly important role to play. They are key influencers of government policy and public opinion, but they also face growing political pressure to go along with or even amplify mainstream discourse, sometimes allowing inaccurate information or skewed interpretations of events to spread and affect the thinking of senior government officials and the general public. For the collective good of peace and stability, it is time to explore common principles or norms of responsible behaviour by expert communities. Substantive discussions should also start among policy specialists about how to maintain an epistemic community of experts across national borders. With the growing perception that we are indeed entering a new type of Cold War, the expert communities have a special responsibility to contain rather than contribute to the China-US perception gap and to strive toward saving the regional population from unnecessary major power conflicts.

The APLN China-US-Asia Dialogue

The relationship between China and the United States has deteriorated significantly with the potential to worsen still. The security dilemma that this generates is fuelling fear, mistrust, and arms racing, impacting countries across the Asia-Pacific and globally. Potential repercussions include military confrontation and the possibility of nuclear escalation while undermining attempts at global cooperation on a range of 21st-century challenges.

Through a series of scholarly exchanges and publications, APLN's China-US-Asia Dialogue evaluates what steps are necessary to improve understanding, reduce misperceptions, de-escalate risks and tensions, and build trust. The project is aimed at devising pragmatic policy recommendations for decision-makers and policy communities across the Asia-Pacific, and Washington and Beijing in particular.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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