

How China Uses Discourse to Erode US Dominance

By Jabin T. Jacob

One consequence of the apparent chaos and uncertainty surrounding US foreign policy under the second Trump administration is that Beijing is consciously accelerating its narrative-building around the decline of America and the rise of China, notably directed at its Asian neighbors who have been loath to choose sides.

This Chinese discourse is evident not only in government circles, but also in the language used by Chinese academics and think-tankers at conferences around the world, writes Jabin T. Jacob.

EXCEPT FOR INDIA, most countries in Asia have long thought their economic future lies in closer ties to China but that their security is guaranteed best by the United States. This was the central paradigm of Asian geopolitics as China became the largest trading partner of almost every country in the region while the US remained the preferred security partner. That was until the arrival of Xi Jinping as general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and president of China and of Donald Trump as the US president.

Xi has far greater ambitions for China than merely being an economic partner to many countries — he also wants China to have the political and diplomatic heft and influence that comes with economic might. This has major implications for both Chinese foreign policy and for those countries that have to deal with China. Under the CPC, Beijing sees itself in an existential competition with Washington and thus, despite diplomatic rhetoric involving “win-win” solutions, China necessarily adopts a zero-sum approach to international politics. This means China is increasingly not allowing smaller countries to pick and choose their areas of co-operation between the US and China. Rather, much like the US, the Chinese are adopting an approach that says “if you are not with us, you are against us.”

The Chinese are, however, not leaving the task of changing how their neighbors approach the US to mere economic influence or military coercion. Given the material gap that still exists between Chinese and US power, narrative-shaping is becoming a tool of Chinese foreign policy, an exercise in what the Chinese call “dis-

course power.” In what is a whole-of-system approach, it is not just China’s diplomats and politicians who push this narrative but also China’s academics and think-tank analysts at conferences abroad. Attending these conferences offers a ring-side view into how Chinese scholars often use conference stages to convey their government’s key talking points or priorities at any given point in time.

The US is clearly and explicitly a target of Chinese foreign policy. While this is nothing new, US willingness to openly declare China a “strategic competitor” during the first Trump administration appears to have freed up the Chinese to do the same with respect to the US. With the US, particularly since the return of Trump to power, there is an effort to play up America’s internal weaknesses, and the transactionalism and sometimes incoherence of Washington’s current approach to the world. Meanwhile, China expects its neighbors and other countries to acknowledge its economic, diplomatic and military superiority. Chinese discourse deploys both persuasion and threats, aiming to push allies and partners of the US into more neutral territory and others to side more confidently with China.

DISCOURSE AS A WEAPON

When Xi Jinping refers to “once-in-a-century changes taking place in the world,” he is indicating not confusion about why this is happening but he is telling China to use these changes to its own advantage, while asking its external interlocutors to side with China as the better bet, the more reliable partner and the one most likely to succeed. The Chinese are aware that there is a great deal of confusion, even anger, among countries — including US allies and partners — about what the US is doing and why, and that this is an opportunity for China to shape the narrative in its favor.

The US is inevitably and increasingly an open

target at conferences involving Chinese participants, indicating greater Chinese confidence that the US is in decline and/or that China has support in the room against the US. However, more than simply criticism of the US, Chinese participants are confidently putting forward the line that China is benefiting from American actions. The Trump administration’s economic and trade policies toward Asia-Pacific countries, its military actions in Venezuela and Iran, and security policies toward Asia-Pacific allies all “have expanded China’s strategic space in the region.” It “has also contributed to the greater confidence reflected in China’s Asia-Pacific security policy.”

But the Chinese do not just wait for things to happen, they also build a narrative that can respond to threats and challenges. For instance, they can insist simply that many terms in international politics have become irrelevant since the arrival of Trump. Among these are such expressions as “balance of power,” “decoupling” and “derisking.” The Chinese are in a hurry to remove phrases from the lexicon that carry the implication of targeting China. In particular, the Chinese do not see the fine distinction that those like the Europeans make between decoupling and derisking; they assess, correctly, that the impact on China would be the same.

Alongside this, the Chinese implicitly suggest that no major player such as the EU, ASEAN or India is in any position to decouple or derisk from China given the state of economic dependency on China. While the Chinese economy also has its dependencies, the Chinese have increasingly taken to displaying confidence that they have the upper hand no matter if the timeframe is short, medium or long term. Whether this is actually the case can be debated but the Chinese appear to realize that this is an important inflexion point — the US is weakening but not entirely weak, China is growing in strength but

is not quite there yet and the rest of the world is getting into position to choose sides. Under these circumstances, as much as material power might be important, the ability to shape or direct the discourse matters perhaps even more.

The Chinese then aim to display not just increased confidence but also a degree of indifference to what the US does. Both of these approaches were on display during Trump's visit to China in May. As one Chinese scholar put it, "psychologically, China has already decoupled from the US," even as she quickly added that "China does not want to decouple but it is ready if required." Both are, perhaps, overstatements but it underscores how keen the Chinese are to look like they have the measure of the US.

At the same time, the Chinese are unpersuaded by statements from American academics or the rhetoric of US politicians preferring to focus on concrete American documents such as the 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS). Chinese participants at conferences make their primary interventions based on prepared texts. Thus, they note a change in Trump's approach to China in his second term — he had not issued a specific Indo-Pacific policy, for example, and was engaged in "transactional realism" focused much more on homeland security and the Western hemisphere. Even though the US believed itself to be engaged in strategic competition with China, according to Chinese academics this seems to have receded into the background, as subsequent events have shown.

The effort is to portray the challenge from the US in different terms from those the Americans themselves would use. The 2025 NSS, for example, is seen as "less explicitly ideological" and as showcasing a degree of "strategic rebalancing" or "strategic contraction." The second Trump administration's tone on China is perceived to have become softer than that of the first adminis-

tration and focused more on business exchanges and high-tech competition — meaning there is a move away from explicit military competition. This implies that China has greater leeway with its own security or military build-up in its neighborhood, including Taiwan. But there is also the implication that the focus on economics is something the Chinese think they can manage or lead.

Chinese thinking also points to internal inconsistencies in the American national security document. In this view, Trump's actions may broadly align with the document's declared goals, but his personal style and proclivities seem to dominate and potentially ignore the document's objectives. In other words, the Chinese side seems to believe the Americans do not have a coherent framework for dealing with China and — in a big step up from the first Trump administration — believe that US-China "interactions remain manageable." This has also allowed China to have greater confidence to push old talking points, saying the US must accept G2 as a "co-ordination mechanism" with China as well as the underlying threat that a war between China and the US would be a world war.

While Xi might have told Trump during their meeting in Beijing that just as the latter wanted to make America great again, he too was "committed to leading the Chinese people to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," the narrative of American decline is something the Chinese play up. Internal American political discord is frequently highlighted, especially in the wake of Trump's Iran intervention. Chinese interlocutors have taken to putting down the Americans from a civilizational perspective, noting that China "as a nation with thousands of years of history ... can say that everything has happened before," implying that the Chinese have greater ability and more strategic patience to deal with challenges than the Americans do.

The Chinese do not just wait for things to happen, they also build a narrative that can respond to threats and challenges. For instance, they can insist simply that many terms in international politics have become irrelevant since the arrival of Trump. Among these are such expressions as 'balance of power,' 'decoupling' and 'derisking.'

The Chinese are in a hurry to remove phrases from the lexicon that carry the implication of targeting China.

PERSUASION AND REGIONAL RED LINES

While China professes to stress bilateral relationships rather than alliance formations, in effect, the sum of its bilateral ties performs the role of an alliance except that under the broad, non-institutionalized groupings or initiatives that China has launched in the past decade plus — the Belt and Road Initiative and four global initiatives — China retains the ability to prevent countries from ganging up or negotiating collectively with China. Under economic pressure, an individual country is gradually pushed or coaxed into scaling up its relationship with China, leading toward greater convergence on political issues and, eventually, on security issues also. The political or diplomatic convergence is most immediately seen on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang but has also become increasingly evident on other issues such as support for Chinese positions on the Covid-19 pandemic and other disagreements with the US.

In terms of security partnerships, China's approach allows it to determine the pace and scale of support. While the US has expended much treasure and military materiel in Israel's defense, China does not let Iran set the terms of their "comprehensive strategic partnership" — it has supported the latter in the conflict with the US with military hardware, technology and diplomatic support, but in a way that has not prevented Beijing from continuing engagements with the Gulf countries or the US. Meanwhile, its security links with Pakistan are such that it is always in the loop as the Pakistani military establishment plays mediator between Washington and Tehran.

Even as the US under Trump has gone about making life more difficult for its allies and partners, China under Xi has sought to develop a network of partners and quasi-allies. Beijing has established "2+2" dialogue mechanisms involv-

ing foreign and defense ministers with several countries, but it now has a “3+3” ministerial dialogue mechanism that brings together foreign affairs, defense, and public security or internal affairs, first with Vietnam and another one planned with Cambodia. These arrangements mark the increasing institutionalization and normalization of China’s security and diplomatic capacities with Southeast Asian countries for now but the approach can be expected to move further afield over time. Great powers, the US included, are known to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, but the 3+3 mechanism goes beyond traditional political and military domains to encompass law enforcement and security, indicating a new institutionalized form in which China can — and most likely will — bring pressure to bear in formal settings behind closed doors. This is external intervention that will not look like it because China can get weaker powers to agree to it. China understands that as it grows in power, it will necessarily need to intervene or crack the whip with neighbors and other countries — but it is finding more sophisticated ways to do so. China’s Global Security Initiative is part of this approach.

On the South China Sea, China’s 2025 Central Conference on Work Relating to Neighboring Countries claims to emphasize “four principles” — resolving disputes through negotiation and consultation, managing differences through rules and mechanisms, achieving win-win outcomes through mutually beneficial co-operation, and opposing interference by external forces. Nevertheless, contradictions remain, including, most actively, between China and the Philippines, and Chinese delegates at conferences seem to never have an answer to specific questions about why China has dragged its feet on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea with ASEAN. Here, they attempt to sidestep the issue, saying

that the South China Sea is “too complicated” or it would take “too long” to explain.

This does not, however, prevent the Chinese from actively and repeatedly calling on Southeast Asian participants at conferences to “avoid sensitive issues” and to have the “courage” to listen to their “own voices.” To the last, the Chinese make a point of saying countries should listen “neither to the US nor to China” but play the role of “middle powers” and “balance without choosing sides.” This approach is also taken to conference rooms in other parts of the world, notably in meetings with the Europeans and the Indians but it is clearly self-serving. Equal treatment of the US and China would only serve China’s interests more as the weaker of the two powers. In the specific case of the South China Sea, it is an approach aimed at preventing or weakening coalition building against China. Similarly, even as the Chinese are constantly asking their audiences to “avoid politicizing” issues, they push for a “non-Western” approach or solution to Asia’s and the world’s problems, thus in effect taking a political position themselves. The Chinese push the “Asian way” of “sharing weal and woe,” ignoring the fact that while they have certainly contributed to weal, they have also been responsible for woe on the Asian continent and in its waters.

Meanwhile, the Chinese were deeply angered by the November 2025 statement in the Diet by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi that a “Taiwan contingency” was for her country a “survival-threatening situation” allowing it to exercise the right of collective self-defense and to use military force, even if Japan itself were not under direct attack. Chinese interlocutors view their government’s “strong countermeasures” as designed to “draw a clear red line... to prevent the situation from further deteriorating” and to serve as a “powerful deterrent against external interference” in the Taiwan question, with the

“ultimate goal of maintaining stability and peace across the Taiwan Strait.” This approach allows Chinese scholars to justify the remarks made by the Chinese Consul-General in Osaka in response to Takaichi’s statement implying that she should be beheaded. The justification is that China had to send a message to Japanese conservatives and to Taiwan’s pro-independence and ruling Democratic Progressive Party. In other words, China is allowed to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.

On Taiwan, specifically, Chinese scholars view their country’s military measures as aimed at deterring Taiwan “independence” but point out that China has also been open to political means of engagement, as evident in the CPC’s invitation to Cheng Li-wun, chairperson of the opposition Kuomintang. Clearly, though, Beijing’s efforts to advance what it calls “policies of cross-strait integration and development” are undergirded by military might and coercion. Indeed, Chinese scholars have openly declared “China is increasingly willing to punish those taking sides” — meaning, of course, those taking sides against Beijing. There is certainly a degree of confidence that China now has the capacity to make threats and to be taken seriously.

CONCLUSION

With the seeming withdrawal of the Trump administration from many international commitments, it is assumed that the resulting disruptions could open space for Asia-Pacific powers to articulate and advance new models of security co-operation. Under this assumption, China is just one among several powers with the influence to do this. However, China is more than just another power — it is a dominant global economic power that is now actively seeking a greater role as a security provider for its immediate neighborhood and has the capacity to do so.

While the US is some distance away from relinquishing its primacy in the Asia-Pacific in material terms, China is attempting to hasten the day not just by growing its material capacities but also by actively shaping the regional and global political discourse.

At the 19th CPC National Congress in October 2017, Xi declared that China would “improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.” China has now begun telling stories about the US as another way to enhance both its soft and hard power.

Jabin T. Jacob is an Associate Professor at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar University, India, and a visiting scholar at the National Chung Hsing University, Taichung, Taiwan.