

**March 10, 2011**

**Dr. Gilbert Rozman**

**Professor, Princeton University and Visiting Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center  
“Testimony before the U.S.-China Economy and Security Review Commission”  
“China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy”**

The Chinese narrative emerges most clearly from Chinese-language publications on the great powers, including the United States, and on challenges in East Asia, notably in 2010 those related to North Korean belligerence and regionalism involving both Northeast and Southeast Asia. It is part of an orchestrated, top-down expression of Chinese national identity. There are divergent views, but not direct contradictions.

The diversity in 2009 was greater than in 2010, suggesting that scholars sought to forestall the new narrative and its negative consequences. The drumbeat of a one-sided narrative reached its peak intensity in the fall of 2010. There was some sign it was waning afterwards. State Councilor Dai Bingguo in December restated an older narrative as if it still prevailed, but in early 2011 Dai’s remarks have not displaced the predominant narrative of 2010. Indeed, the mainstream narrative of 2010 is the culmination of earlier trends, not a sharp break from them, and it is likely to endure.

The narrative demonizes the United States. Compared to earlier Chinese writings, it places the entire responsibility on Washington for wrecking the Six-Party Talks and taking a cold war, ideological approach to North Korea. Allegedly, Washington found a willing partner in Seoul for this destabilizing behavior. Rather than criticizing the regime in Pyongyang for attacking and sinking the Cheonan or for shelling an island under the administration of South Korea, Beijing puts the onus on Washington for its dangerous escalation of tensions, such as in military exercises in the Yellow Sea, supposedly directed against China. Seeking resumption of the Six-Party Talks, China seeks to transform them into a security framework to diminish the U.S. alliances.

Another target of Chinese criticism is the so-called U.S. “return” to Asia. It is treated as containment, directed against the natural course of regionalism. To appreciate the disappointment expressed at the new U.S. policy toward Asia, we must recognize the expectations that somehow had been growing about the United States pulling back from East Asia. Many writers treated ASEAN + 3 as if it was firmly on course to establish a true East Asian community, economically integrated while marginalizing outsider states and, in stages, adding political and cultural ties that draw ASEAN ever closer to China if not Japan and South Korea. U.S. entry into the East Asian Summit is widely criticized as a threat to regionalism, as is U.S. support for Southeast Asian states in the dispute over sovereignty in the South China Sea.

One feature of demonization is unqualified attacks on foreign leaders. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are repeatedly criticized in the Chinese narrative. I have seen nothing like it in the treatment of prior U.S. leaders. President George W. Bush was treated better. In the case of Japanese leaders, Prime Minister Naoto Kan and Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara are treated with even more

venom. Even when leaders seek to engage China more vigorously, as previous Prime Minister Yuichi Hatoyama did, the emphasis is placed on how far short they fall of what China requires. That is also the case for President Obama. Of all leaders, the one who has been treated as a villain the longest is President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea. The security narrative warns against the growing threat to China from the behavior of each of these leaders, who purportedly have cold war thinking.

The recent security narrative is the culmination of an emerging narrative since the 1980s. It is part of a broader reconstruction of national identity by China's leaders. That identity has many dimensions, including a reinterpretation of history to favor China in all stages of the struggle against the United States and the West. Two main themes in 2010 that revealed the essence of the security narrative are treatment of the North Korean threat and assessments of challenges in maritime security.

### **The Transformation of China's Security Narrative**

In 2007 and early 2008 Chinese proudly pointed to positive and improving relations with each of the great powers and to successful multilateralism in all directions. There was much talk that Sino-U.S. relations were better than ever, as coordination extended even to the Taiwan issue. Memories of the 2003 "new thinking" toward Japan were revived in three successive summits with Japan, culminating in Hu Jintao's trip to Japan in the spring of 2008. China had pride in hosting "successful" Six-Party Talks concerning the Korean peninsula, and optimism about the course of regionalism with ASEAN and through ASEAN + 3. Sino-South Korean relations were still forward-looking despite some distrust due to interpretations of ancient history. Many had the impression that China, if not a status quo power, was ready to act in accord with the U.S. appeal for it to be a "responsible stakeholder." There was no outside impetus to anger China into changing direction. It came from within.

Was this the actual security narrative in those years? The answer is definitely not. There was a calculated duality to Chinese writings. The security narrative most prominent in 2010 already was visible in many publications. Critiques of U.S. hegemonism and alliances were widespread. Coverage of the Six-Party Talks often was tougher on the United States than on North Korea. Beneath the surface of feigned optimism about Sino-Japanese relations, criticism of Japan persisted. Vague wording on sensitive themes obscured China's growing challenge to the status quo.

Has the Chinese narrative been intentionally deceptive? I think so, although serious research can easily uncover the contradictions. One source of deception is the role of internal circulation (*neibu*) publications for sensitive discussions that are to be kept from foreigners. Another factor is the Central Propaganda Department's role in managing perceptions with an eye to enhancing China's soft power and steering ties with designated states in a desired direction. Having closely followed Chinese works on the Korean peninsula, I am persuaded that the positions taken in 2010 that are at variance with earlier positions are a result of prior concealment of China's attitudes.

A message may be delivered for particular short-term effect, as in the case of Dai Bingguo's December statement, without explaining how it coexists with a clashing narrative. Chinese writings fall short of the standards of scholarship, which require analysis of changes or discrepancies on the Chinese side. This is a sign of censorship, which serves the purpose of propaganda and deception and has been tightening.

The assertive, at times belligerent, narrative of 2010 was connected to changes in foreign policy. Increasingly confident, China's leaders revealed attitudes that had earlier been concealed. Military voices became more prominent. Some respected scholars wrote less or expressed themselves more indirectly without endorsing the new line. The new narrative was a combination of more forthright expression of the views hidden earlier due to the duality of messages and the *neibu* system, and of the logical extension of arguments that earlier were tempered by Deng Xiaoping's clear advice to keep a low profile until China's comprehensive national power had risen.

### **The Broad National Identity Framework for China's Security Narrative**

The specifics of the Chinese narrative are easy to find. What is more interesting is to identify the driving forces of the narrative. I see them as the various dimensions of national identity, as constructed by China's leaders. The first force is ideology. After three decades of downplaying ideology, Chinese affirmed that ideology remains an important factor in national identity. First, as confidence in socialism rose in Party circles, particularly after the world financial crisis was blamed on capitalism, some sources revived claims that socialism will prevail over capitalism. Second, a sharp reversal occurred in assessments of imperial history; Confucianism emerged as the centerpiece in an ideologically tinged narrative about what has made China superior to other civilizations over thousands of years and will enable it to prevail again in the future. Finally, in contrast to the admiring tone of many writings on the West in the 1980s, the perennial theme of anti-imperialism and anti-hegemonism gained force with more intense attacks on Western civilization. To the extent that the new amalgam became unassailable, repeated in ever more declarative forms and not openly contradicted, an ideology, although not proclaimed as such, was reinstated.

Why does this matter for security? Chinese stress the importance of culture as one element of comprehensive national power. They attribute the collapse of the Soviet Union to ideological failure. Warning that Western culture is a threat to sovereignty, they regard ideology as a bulwark protecting the state. In turn, accusations against the United States, Japan, and South Korea center on their anti-communist and other cold war thinking that targets China. This outlook is behind the security threat to China, which was increasingly emphasized in recent publications. Pretending that foreign leaders are driven by ideology to contain China, Chinese hide the reality that it is their Communist Party leadership that is increasingly under ideological sway.

A second force is what I call the horizontal dimension of national identity or the way Chinese perceive the outside world. Showing little faith in the international system

and rejecting U.S. relations as they have evolved over the past four decades, China only embraces regionalism to the extent that it confirms China's rise and revives sinocentrism. China is obsessed with great power relations in ostensible pursuit of multipolarity. Yet, as the others potential poles have lost significance in Chinese calculations, the bilateral gap with the United States has come clearly to the fore. By widening it and exposing the bankruptcy of U.S. claims to leadership, Chinese have sought to narrow the horizontal dimension to a two-way competition, marginalizing others. Delegitimizing the U.S. role undermines the international system and creates a vacuum for China to fill as sources argue that the United States not only is not essential for security, it is now a source of instability. Many argue that U.S. financial leadership and the dollar are no longer necessary after their negative effect in the world financial crisis. East Asian states are pressed to choose between two poles.

Writings in China in 2009-10 were obsessed with the threat of U.S. interference in the natural course of closed East Asian regionalism. They attribute this involvement to three factors: 1) hegemonism, based on stereotypical cold war thinking about the U.S. right to be in control of not only the international community but also regions such as East Asia; 2) containment, rooted in refusal to accept any rising power as a challenger for regional leadership; and 3) cultural imperialism, centered on the belief that Western civilization must continue to have ascendancy and undermine other civilizations. The United States is accused of being behind Japan's rejection of ASEAN + 3 as the natural unit for the healthy growth of regionalism and the decision in ASEAN to support the expansion of the East Asian Summit. Both moves are deemed harmful to cooperation in East Asia and deliberate steps to deny China its anticipated leadership status. Chinese depict the U.S. stand as that of an outsider prepared to undermine long-term regional stability for selfish desire to maintain its own leadership even as conditions no longer are conducive to that. If most outside observers are focused on the clash between Chinese and U.S. hard power as a natural dispute over a rising power, they miss the clash centered on an identity gap.

Chinese point to an upsurge in warnings of a China threat, attributing it to failings in other countries. First, it is based on alarm over China's rising power, which has grown sharply since the financial crisis as the "China model" casts doubt on the future of capitalism and the West's venerated trio of democracy, freedom, and human rights. China's growing appeal endangers U.S. and other identities. Second, Western psychology is programmed through a history of colonialism to predicate the rise of a new power on wars, assuming that China will prove expansionist too. Third, China's relative weakness and passivity has emboldened Western states to press their warnings, which they soon will not dare to do. In this perspective, China is being demonized unjustly due to U.S. national identity, and it must respond.

Chinese analysis of identity gaps is essentially a propagandistic effort to steer states into its orbit while turning them against each other. Coverage of U.S.-Japan relations reveals this pattern. When Hatoyama took office, Chinese insisted that Japan's search for normal identity requires merging with Asia and insisting on equality with the United States and that the Futenma base dispute exposes a shaky alliance as U.S.

influence declines. Absent in the discussion are what draws Japan to the United States and what makes it suspicious of China. Chinese sources generally cast choices in zero-sum terms. An East Asian community is contrasted to U.S. hegemonism, bringing equality and the end of cold war mentality. At a time when Hatoyama was eager to foster an East Asian community and Barack Obama sought cooperation with China to address regional and global problems, China vilified the U.S.-Japan alliance, pretended that Obama's hegemonism was the same as earlier U.S. leadership demands, and put Japan on notice that it had to go much further in distancing itself from its ally in order to win Chinese trust. Missing an opportunity to find common ground on security and values necessary for community building, Chinese spokespersons left an impression of Chinese national identity unbent in the quest for regionalism and in the challenge of facing increasing global challenges. By depicting a U.S. trick to co-opt China into serving its interests and charging that the balance of power has changed in China's favor by 2010, they argue that the rivalry is intensifying and that increased U.S. dependence means China can take the lead.

### **The Narrative Regarding China's Past, Present, and Future Roles in East Asia**

Whereas in the Cultural Revolution China may have had the worst self-image of its own history of any major state, by 2010 it boasted what has likely become the most positive self-image. Whether its Confucian past, struggle against imperialism over a century, sinification of Marxism under Mao, astute reforms under Deng, or post cold war rise in the face of containment, this is now a history of success with only pro forma mention of mistakes of the Cultural Revolution or regret over the delayed resistance to the West and delayed borrowing of the essentials for modernization. Reinterpretations of premodern history and the transition to 1949 parallel support for cold war Chinese policies and pointed resentment toward later containment of China. The combined narrative posits an idealized past interrupted by antagonistic forces that still stand in the way of a promising future. Instead of ambiguity about its Confucian past, hesitancy in praising much of the Mao era, and an upbeat approach to the post cold war era as positive for China's rise as relations with all of the great powers favored cooperation over competition, this recently altered narrative puts the stress on victimization and takes unbridled pride in all phases of China's history.

The villains of earlier Chinese history have largely been transformed into patriots, whether the Mongols and Manchus or the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. Ambivalence about the nature of the Korean War has shifted to celebration with North Korea of this just conflict. Fixing primary blame on the Soviet Union for the continuation of the cold war during the second half of its existence has yielded to emphasizing U.S. cold war and anti-communist thinking that carried over to the post cold war period. Looking back, Chinese sources have simplified history into a struggle between a virtuous Chinese nation under all forms of rule and predatory Western and Japanese intrusions that humiliated and victimized the Chinese.

This historical narrative has acquired greater potency in recent years. The struggle is widely depicted as between Western and Eastern civilizations, the latter best represented by Chinese civilization. While China strove for harmony with ethnic minorities at home and developed a system of relations with nearby states based on mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs, Western states were prone to expansionism and intent on imposing their own civilization. In this contrast there is no mention of the Enlightenment and humanist traditions that emerged in the West nor of blemishes in Chinese history. The national identity thrust is to widen the gap between two irreconcilable forces, not to find common ground. In the 1980s-90s there was much talk about the need to borrow from the West, but of late the notion of borrowing has been sharply narrowed. The rise of Asia with China at the center is now heralded as bringing non-Western traditions to the forefront and ending centuries of cultural imperialism among other evils. Loss of self-confidence as cultures were transformed under pressure from the West is seen as an insidious consequence of the world order that China insists on changing. The civilizational narrative is now deeply embedded in historical contrasts reaching far back in the past but also extending to today and claims for future world relations.

Plans for the future include East Asian regionalism, which after centuries of outside interference, excludes the Western powers and enables Eastern civilization under the leadership of China to thrive. The U.S. alliances will be gone, Taiwan will be part of China. The enormous economic clout of China will be used to reward countries that do not interfere in its sovereignty, as in criticism of human rights problems. Features of past sinocentrism will reemerge, stressing deference and benevolence.

### **The Korean Security Narrative**

North Korea is the litmus test of China's intentions and its narrative. Its response to the sinking of the Cheonan was to insist that the evidence was insufficient to blame North Korea. Yet, the narrative on the Korean peninsula is much more provocative than just passively withholding judgment. China has shifted from neutrality to clear preference for North Korea's position in opposition to those of the United States and South Korea. No longer is China a reluctant convener of the Six-Party Talks or a state attracted to South Korea but wary of isolating the North. Instead, it lambasts the end of Roh Moo-hyun's unconditional engagement of the North, pretends that U.S. policy is still uncompromising due to determination to use the North as a pretext to contain China, and advocates an entirely different direction for the Six-Party Talks. In 2010 the thrust of Chinese rhetoric was to take advantage of the North Korean threat to regional security without even, in print at least, warning the North against further acts of aggression. Only through such threats did it seem possible that South Korea would lose confidence in the U.S. alliance and the United States, mired in conflict elsewhere, might out-source management of North Korea to China. Yet, unrealistic expectations abound in these superficial writings on the peninsula.

Korea is the prime example of the sinocentric imperial order, and in 2004 was more inclined than any other middle power to draw closer to China. Yet, China's security thinking and reconstruction of national identity to strengthen sovereignty at almost any cost sacrificed South Korean goodwill. Finding Lee Myung-bak insufficiently deferential and thinking that the United States is vulnerable to North Korea, China has cast doubt on its repeated insistence that it stands for peace and stability. In shaping the future of the peninsula, it stands instead for influence and regional transformation at the expense of the United States and its alliances. Sinocentrism is most blatant in the narrative about Korean issues. While in 2003-08 Sino-U.S. cooperation in the Six-Party Talks was considered the best evidence that the two countries could be partners in security, the best evidence in 2010 that China would be driven by hostility to hegemony came from its Korean narrative and policies.

Not only China's policy but its narrative about the Korean peninsula will continue to be a test of its readiness to cooperate to manage a dangerous situation. If China fails to reassure South Korea as well as Japan about its intentions in the region, then the narrative on the United States and the West is even more unlikely to be promising.

### **The Maritime Security Narrative**

Chinese coverage of tensions in the three seas to the east follows a similar pattern. It argues that these issues should be handled bilaterally without interference from the United States. While the incidents that elicited U.S. involvement in 2010 provoked states in the region to seek support from Washington, Beijing ignores the context in an attempt to blame Washington for finding pretexts to strengthen alliances, rally other states against China, and deepen containment. Maritime security was popular in writings of 2010 with little indication of dissenting voices. Treated as matters of sovereignty or core interests, maritime controversies are covered simplistically, even if they affect relations with most of China's neighbors.

The military voice is particularly strong on maritime matters. While scholars known for trying to find ways to bolster ties with neighbors, especially ASEAN, concentrate on other themes, writers who vehemently object to U.S. military exercises or moves to counter China and North Korea gravitate to the subject of tensions at sea. Having alarmed Japan and South Korea as well as Southeast Asian states in 2010, China may for a time tone down its rhetoric on maritime disputes. Yet, there is no backtracking in sight. While Taiwan has not been a major theme in the recent narrative, apart from U.S. arms sales, it is likely to reemerge and reinforce the assertive tone.

No less than the shift in tone toward the Korean peninsula, the change in attitude toward Southeast Asia occurred abruptly and likely with considerable forethought. Whereas in Northeast Asia there are multiple villains, ASEAN is generally targeted more obliquely, leaving only the United States as the true villain. Its hostility is seen as stretching broadly through the Indian Ocean, drawing in India and Australia. If ASEAN is still depicted as cooperative, other U.S. partners are directly targeted.

## **The Actors Who Shape China's Narrative**

Foreign observers gain most of their information from the writings of academic experts and through interviews with them and officials, many from the Foreign Ministry. These persons are expected to follow guidelines devised by others. When sensitive information is revealed, they may be arrested and sentenced to long terms in prison. The marginalization of the academic and diplomatic experts was never more apparent than in 2010. When their advice of many years was disregarded, they had no recourse to continue to make their old arguments in print. Those who most boldly persisted could easily get in trouble.

In contrast to the quieting of the experts, the year 2010 witnessed more outspoken remarks by military officers than ever before. If not the driver of the new policies on North Korea and maritime security, the People's Liberation Army and the Navy have emerged as its most ardent supporters. Economic interests do not appear to play a large role on security questions except energy. The policy debate in China has often been quite vigorous when leaders invite small groups of experts for timely input, but after decisions are taken about the overall narrative or foreign policies are set, the debate is stifled. Only a small leadership group is seen as acting in the interest of the state, whose identity is paramount, preventing those who may pursue other interests from undercutting the rapid build-up of comprehensive national power.

## **Overview**

Adopting a much more assertive posture, China was emboldened by new military advances and increased economic leverage. Relevant too was a growing sense of entitlement, rooted in a national identity narrative that had been submerged to a degree, but finally was bursting forth. Repudiating the "integrationist" notion of peaceful incorporation into the world order as yielding to the West as the center of the order, which would mean changing the values and also the ideology of China's political system, Chinese sought a new international order. In many publications the concept of "responsible stakeholder" was derided as a trick to get China to assist the United States in preserving an unjust international order. China is leaving no doubt that it is a revisionist power impatient to change not only the existing order, but also the way the world perceives the recent centuries of Western ascendancy. Whether it focuses on the rise of the East vs. the West or of the South vs. the North—both are dichotomies found in Chinese writings--, a very different world order is anticipated.

We should be careful to distinguish China's narrative from its strategic thinking. In the three decades prior to 2009, strategic thinking was generally successful because China's leaders had a long time frame and recognized that China's national power needed to be increased incrementally. They spent a lot of energy drawing lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regular reassessments of strategic results and

changing international relations have led to timely adjustments. Engagement with the United States and other powers remains the preferred means to realize China's rise and its strategic narrative. In 2011 following the Obama-Hu summit positive statements about the prospects of cooperation are common. However important it is to understand the Chinese narrative clearly, it is also essential to recognize where cooperation is possible to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. The Chinese side sees itself as more adept at balancing competition and cooperation and successful in its strategic thinking at least until 2010. Only flexibility based on clear awareness of its thinking is likely to produce an effective, long-term strategic response.

The danger of North Korean aggression against South Korea is the primary strategic issue in the near future that will test whether China's narrative is changing and how much it influences policies. There are signs that public opinion is not supportive of North Korea. Many in the academic community apparently do not subscribe to the 2010 narrative on that country. Although Russia continues to be deferential to China on Northeast Asian matters, its position is more critical of North Korea. Impatient belligerence by the North will lead to intense diplomatic discussions as well as sharp retaliatory measures, and China's interpretations will reveal whether Dai Bingguo's December 2010 article represents a return to the softer line that led to cooperation through 2008 or whether the narrative of 2010 is now unequivocally supported.

The Obama-Hu summit of late 2009 accompanied a shift toward a more negative view of the United States. Their summit 14 months later saw some adjustment in the other direction. Sino-U.S. relations matter; yet they do not drive China's narrative. In the year before the first of these summits the Chinese were already widening the national identity gap with the United States, and in the months after the January 2011 summit the essence of the narrative remained. It is not clear what U.S. moves within the realm of realistic possibility would lead China to narrow the gap. Instead, the possibility is growing that China's behavior and rhetoric will lead to a vicious cycle of a U.S. security narrative growing more critical of China and, in turn, China seizing on that and on U.S. policies to intensify its own rhetoric. Even without a cold war in reality, clashing narratives reminiscent of the cold war may be difficult to avoid if China persists in the direction it has taken during the past few years.