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Chinese Studies

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# Analysis

## The US-China “Strategic Distrust”: Perceptions from New Delhi



**No.5  
May  
2012**



The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution which has a leadership role in promoting Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. ICS Analysis aims to provide informed and balanced inputs in policy formulation based on extensive interactions among a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel.

# The US-China “Strategic Distrust”: Perceptions from New Delhi

*The ICS in collaboration with the India International Centre, organized a Round Table on a recently published monograph by the Brookings Institution, Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust. Jointly authored by Kenneth Lieberthal, (Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy and in Global Economy and Development and Director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution) and Wang Jisi (Director of the Center for International and Strategic Studies and Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University) this was briefly reported in the Indian media along with some reports from the Chinese media. Chaired by Amb. Vinod Khanna (ICS), the speakers at the Round Table were Prof. Varun Sahni (Jawaharlal Nehru University) Prof. C. Raja Mohan (Observer Research Foundation) Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi (Punjab University) Prof. Chintamani Mahapatra (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and Prof. Alka Acharya (ICS). The discussants were Amb. Leela Ponappa (CSCAP-India) Amb. Kishan S Rana (ICS) and Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty (ICS) The following is a summary of the discussions, incorporating the different viewpoints without specific attribution and it raises some extremely useful areas for further exploration.*

An intensive discussion by Indian scholars on the US-China relationship is eminently necessary for broadening our own perspectives. A close examination of the US-China dynamic would help the Indian discourse communities address the ‘power’ factor in great power relationships from a variety of perspectives. The monograph under discussion brings out an analytical contradiction, which reflects a fundamental divergence between the United States and China, epitomized in the concept of ‘Strategic Distrust’.

‘Strategic distrust’ is defined in the monograph as distrust over long-term intentions. The issue of ‘trust’ features often in the Chinese political discourse. In reality, ‘strategic’ implies more than long-term; it relates to core issues, divergent values – political, economic and cultural - that undergird the notion of ‘distrust’. Furthermore, it may not reflect the actual state of affairs, and may more accurately be described as a tension between American anxiety and Chinese aspirations. The term ‘strategic’ has been utilized in a rather limited sense. Besides, the “distrust” discourse has begun to dominate international relations debates, which by definition is a zero-sum framework. Furthermore, the global transformation process is not adequately captured in this concept.

On the other hand, ‘strategic distrust’ could be usefully considered a reality; indeed history is replete with examples of such distrust. There exists no better precedent of collaboration between the established power or ‘hegemon’, and a rising or ‘revisionist’ power or challenger, as is the case between the US and China today. In the US-USSR confrontation of the Cold War days, or earlier, there was no instance of such deep economic interdependence, as in the Sino-US relationship. Not only is China the biggest market for the United States, American allies as well are trying to engage China as an economic partner. It can therefore be asked, under the circumstances, whether or not ‘lack of mutual confidence’ is a better description than ‘strategic distrust’, because it leads directly to question or necessity of Confidence Building Measures.

As the father of geopolitics Halford J. Mackinder might have said, the declining power looks to defend its spaces, while the challenger looks to enlarging its own spaces

or creating new spaces. 'Strategic distrust' thus emerges as a prism for interpreting the strategic conduct of statecraft. Of course, 'decline' is in relative not absolute terms, and therefore, also contributes its own complexity to the manner in which the relationship between the declining hegemon and the rising power evolves. As the authors of the monograph point out, Asia is the most important area of future American interests and therefore likely to be the cockpit of the emerging US-China confrontation, as reflected in President Obama's 'pivot to Asia'. Even as an unprecedented geopolitical transformation is underway, the various tendencies in the US-China relationship will be reflected in divergent ways in different sectors. The monograph describes 'institutionalized distrust' in a somewhat facile manner, which glosses over the fact that there could be different institutions and individuals which could take different perspectives. Interestingly, the term could well describe the situation in India's relations vis-à-vis China.

The US meanwhile, is extending its Asian connections, not only via APEC (and its spawn, the 'Trans-Pacific Partnership') but also through ARF, EAS and a larger presence in Micronesia and Guam. The US needs an antagonist – it is the only country which has an expansionist flag. Thus the monograph identifies the spaces where the 'distrust' discourses are being mapped out. It is in Asia that the Westphalian state reigns supreme. Behind the ASEAN rhetoric, one needs to look also at the arms buildup by key members. However it must be borne in mind that Asian states have experienced extremely rapid economic development and have consequently put concomitant effort into modernizing their militaries. Asia is thus likely to present a highly complex scenario.

While the document does not say so explicitly, it would seem that the G-2 discourse is not quite dead. While continuing to assert that it remains a 'developing' country, China is 'hiding its light'. One interpretation of the monograph was that its basic thrust is an offer of

a 'duopoly' to China. Meanwhile, the American concept of 'responsible stakeholder' seeks to co-opt China (and sometimes India) and make it a 'burden sharer' as well. Military confrontation is therefore not likely in the near future, but there is also the question of third party conflicts which might draw in both powers. The focus of the monograph is thus almost exclusively on the 'distrust' and sidesteps the enormous range of positive dimensions.

### **Relevance for India**

The Report has three sections, setting out US and then Chinese perspectives, and finally joint recommendations. In the second section, comments about India are equally revealing of China's distrust vis-à-vis India. It says: 'Washington has strengthened security ties with a number of China's neighbors, including most recently India and Vietnam, two states that once fought border wars and still have territorial disputes with China...When India is referred to by Americans as "the largest democratic country in the world," the implication for China is obvious.' India must pay close attention to domestic developments in China. US politics may also undergo a change in the near future. Dealing simultaneously with the two most powerful states - one distant and the other in the neighbourhood, would also require different strategies and would depend on the specific context and circumstances.

The 'Indo-Pacific' will be the arena of the 21st century's geopolitical and geostrategic manoeuvres. This space, where the US will engage with Asia, may carry the danger of completely marginalizing the smaller powers. It is vital therefore, to critically engage with the exclusivist implications of this emerging notion, since it may contribute to a possible 'strategic distrust between India and the US which could carry a range of new issues between India and China as well. How will India position itself? 'Strategic autonomy' makes sense for India as an 'emerging power' in a quasi-multipolar world, for maximizing its own options. BRICS is a possible roadmap to a

transition to a new international system, not an endpoint, as other powers are also waiting in the wings. India should pay greater attention to these other emerging powers since it enjoys positional maneuverability.

India too often looks at the world in terms of its bilateral relationships with individual states, and almost exclusively from an India-centered perspective – this is possibly, on account of minimal exposure of MEA officials to IR theory, and power interplay.

Hence, it is useful for us to see the perspective in which other major bilateral relationships operate. Further, the debate on ‘strategic culture’ must be leavened with the 21st century political economy perspective to prevent over securitization in our approach.

The time has possibly come for an overarching Asian security dialogue. The notion of ‘cooperative security’ is relevant to Asia, which should pay attention to OSCE methods and experiences. The monograph recommends ‘mini-laterals’, clusters of China-Japan-US and China-India-US, but it is amply clear that the US and China do not concur on these ‘mini-laterals’. Instead of two mini-laterals, why could a China-India-Japan-US quadrilateral not be considered? However, India should be aware of the ramifications of such an exercise and certainly should not limit such multilateral interactions to major powers only.

There is a case to be made for India and China, jointly producing their respective perceptions of ‘strategic distrust’ in their relationship.



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