

## THE FUTURE OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN EAST ASIA: A CONVERSATION WITH DR. PAUL HEER

Conducted by Freya Jamison, Steffi Colao, and Alexis Allen

World Outlook (WO): What you would say are some of the biggest challenges to gathering intelligence in China specifically? Is there anything that is unique to that environment? Or would you say it shares the general challenges of intelligence gathering anywhere in the world?

Dr. Paul Heer (PH): No, I think that it's not typical of intelligence gathering in other parts of the world. A lot of issues are not unique to China, but China is on the list of what we call "hard targets." And the biggest challenge, basically, is just the secretiveness of the Chinese leadership system and decision making processes. Their entire foreign policy process is completely lacking in public transparency. It's simply very hard to get a handle on how the Chinese leadership makes decisions, both in terms of foreign and domestic policy. It's not unique, but it fits within the small category of countries like North Korea and Russia. That's the hardest thing about China—it's just a very, very tight system. And so much of our understanding of Chinese international behavior—or frankly domestic leadership behavior—has to be based on our knowledge of internal leadership decision-making.

WO: Do you think that, given that challenge, we've been generally successful in making analysis regarding China? Or do you think that's a huge detriment to decision-making or intelligence production?

PH: Well, if I say we haven't been successful, I would be denigrating the success of the offices I've worked with for the last thirty years. I think we've been very successful in assessing Chinese behavior, even given the gaps in our knowledge. As I said last night in a session with some students, doing intelligence analysis is like putting together a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle with only 300 of the pieces.

Dr. Paul Heer is the 2015–16 Robert E. Wilhelm Fellow at the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served from 2007 to 2015 as the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia—the senior analyst of East Asian affairs in the US Intelligence Community—in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. A career officer of the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Intelligence, he began that career in 1983 as a political and foreign policy analyst on Southeast Asia before specializing on China as an analyst and analytic manager. He served on the staff of the President's Daily Brief, and as a member of the CIA's Senior Analytic Service and the Senior Intelligence Service. He is a recipient of the CIA's Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal and the DNI's National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal. Dr. Heer was the Visiting Intelligence Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations during 1999–2000 and was subsequently elected a Life Member of the Council. He is also a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He holds a B.A. degree from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa; an M.A. in history from the University of Iowa, and a Ph.D. in diplomatic history from The George Washington University.

But I think we have enough expertise on China, enough of a record of assessing how the Chinese behave under certain circumstances, what their motivations and drivers are, that we do a pretty good job of filling the gaps in our knowledge with assessment that is well grounded in prior information and reporting. I think we understand the Chinese pretty well even though we don't know everything.

WO: Given the relationship that the U.S. currently has with China, do you see it evolving in the next 10 years, or do you see it tapering off? What in particular does the U.S. want from its relationship with China?

PH: Well, first of all, I should say that when I worked in the intelligence community, I did not work as a policy maker or as a policy commentator. It's kind of new to me to be addressing policy questions. But I think what the U.S. wants from its relationship with China is pretty self-evident. We want a cooperative, constructive relationship. We have both a genuine desire and need for a relationship with China, and we can work effectively together on areas of mutual interest and where we have shared concerns. We also want to be able to find ways to manage our inevitable disagreements, which are a product of competing national interests and certainly conflicting political systems. And I think that we have been evolving pretty effectively in that direction despite all of the tension and conflict that sometimes emerges in the relationship. If you look at the trajectory over the last twenty years, we have a much more cooperative and interactive relationship with the Chinese than we did twenty years ago. This is certainly more true after Tiananmen Square crises of 1989. There's a long way to go because, as I said, there's still going to be problems there. I think there's the potential for it to devolve in the wrong direction because of lack of mutual trust and disagreement on security policy and human rights. There's always going to be the potential for faults in the relationship; the fear is that tension in the military or security realm will spin out of control. So, I guess I tend toward optimism because I think there is such potential there. I think China recognizes the need for and is genuinely interested in pursuing the same kind of relationship that I said Washington is pursuing. And neither side wants to get into conflict. It's just a difficult relationship to manage because of the mistrust and tension that a lot of commentators have drawn attention to. Many have pointed to what appears to be inevitable conflict between an established power and a rising power. I think that we're just facing the challenge of managing that process in a way that avoids things getting worse.

WO: Speaking of tension and security issues, one obvious issue to note is the dispute over the islands in the South China Sea. We're wondering what the strategic or symbolic meaning of control over these islands is for the U.S. and China, and do you think that those motivations are strong enough to actually lead to conflict, or can the areas of cooperation between the two countries prevent it?

PH: Well, the U.S. doesn't have a sovereignty claim there. The issue itself is between China and the other countries in the region that have claims to the same islands and territories and waters that the Chinese do.

WO: So do you think the U.S. interest is strong enough there to actually provoke a response in defense of the smaller nations?

PH: There is a strong, legitimate U.S. interest there, even though we don't take a position on the sovereignty claims themselves. The United States is firmly committed to ensuring or at least advocating that the claimants pursue their disputes in a way that is peaceful, which is deliberative, and which is based on the principles of international law that applies to these islands and the waters around them. We pursue this rather than attempting a coercive, unilateral approach—which is the way the Chinese are behaving. So I think that it makes perfect sense for us to be involved, especially because of our obligations to one treaty ally, the Philippines. We are committed to a mutual defense pact with them if the Chinese were to actually attack the Philippines, which I don't think the Chinese are going to do. So we have a security obligation there. But the broader obligation is promoting a rules-based pursuit. I think there is enough mutual interest between the U.S. and the Chinese to avoid escalation of this into a direct conflict. I think the danger is miscalculation, or an unpredicted incident escalating simply because tensions are high. The Chinese and all the other claimants are increasing their military deployments, particularly their naval operations and coast guard. And the United States, in order to emphasize the principles that I mentioned, is conducting navigation operations in the region with our own naval forces to refute the perceived, exclusive Chinese claims to the waters. The danger is basically that we have a lot more ships and planes operating in that area than we had twenty years ago. I think there's always going to be the risk that two of these ships run into each other, or that any of the claimants try to interfere with the operations of other countries' ships in what they think are their waters. Sometimes the ships run into each other deliberately, sometimes they try to interfere with the operations. That's the kind of incident that, under the right circumstances, could escalate into a real tense situation.

WO: In your experience, what makes it worthwhile for the United States to engage in a relationship of mutual benefit and respect with an authoritarian country like China?

PH: Well I think diplomatic and realistic necessity often requires cooperation or the establishment . . .

WO: Or perhaps, considering the fact that the U.S. is a strong power, do you think there is a trade off between respecting and trying to curb China's growing power?

PH: I think that there is both basis and a need for a relationship simply because we have shared interests. That would be issue number one. We have dealt historically with a lot of distasteful governments across the world because there was always a necessity to do so. And because even if we find the nature of another regime offensive to our values or our sensitivities, that doesn't obviate the possibility that there are other interests that we have elsewhere in the world. In fact, a professor at Princeton, named Todd Christianson, published a book last year called *The China Challenge*, which goes into great detail on the need for cooperation with China and a constructive working relationship with China. Global and regional issues like climate change exist, where the U.S. and China have both the opportunity and the need for cooperation.

WO: Could you also speak to respecting a rising power versus a curbing one?

PH: Well I think that's really one of the core challenges we're facing right now. The tension between a rising power and an established power has been referred to as "the Thucydides trap." This comes from a classic history of the Peloponnesian War by a Greek historian named Thucydides, which sounds obscure and arcane—and it is to most people. The main theme of this history is the kind of tension and conflict that developed between an established power and a rising power. A lot of people have noted that conflict seemed inevitable and in fact developed, and pointed to our relationship with China. And the question now is, how do we avoid falling into that trap and letting the tension both real and perceived divergence of interest between the U.S. and China develop into conflict? I don't think it's inevitable. One of the things that the two sides have going forward is that enlightened leadership on both sides recognize a mutual desire to avoid conflict. Now, respect is a particularly problematic issue with the Chinese because they have a lot of historical baggage based on their own historical experience with and perception of powers. Western powers especially have not respected China's power or sovereignty. The Chinese refer to what they call the "Century of Humiliation," between the opium wars of the 1840s when the British invaded China and the end of World War II, which ended over twenty years of Japanese occupation. During that period in the middle, China was colonized by Western powers including the United States, but especially the European powers that had extraterritorial privileges within Chinese territory. This historical memory is also one in which China was disrespected, abused, insulted, and inflicted great damage upon. I should also say that this was in light of the previous Chinese experience. The Chinese historical mindset was that of one of the greatest civilizations of the world. It was the Middle Kingdom and had the mandate of heaven to govern East Asia. That, juxtaposed against this more recent history from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, gave the Chinese a very divided mindset. Ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China at

the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, one of the primary goals of their foreign policy has been to rectify that period and to restore China's place as a great power and as the preeminent power within East Asia. But I should add that its not just a Chinese communist ambition, it's a nationalist Chinese ambition that even predates the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese claim to the South China Sea is actually derived on a claim that was made by the non-communist nationalist government in the 1930s. The island of Taiwan basically still retains the same claim to the islands that the government in Beijing does. This is a long-winded history lesson, but it comes down to the fact that mutual respect is a very tall order because the Chinese are particularly focused on just that. They do not think they have been respected as a great power. And a lot of their regional foreign policy, particularly their approach to the South China Sea, their relationship with Japan, and their fixation on the Taiwan issue are all legacies of this period when foreign powers were trying to prevent China's territorial unity and integrity and were not respectful of what the Chinese saw as their rightful place in the region. It is important to keep this in mind to fully understand the why the Chinese have inflated some of their sovereignty claims to a very questionable legal basis, and why they have created a lot of propaganda and twisted truths in their telling of this history. I think we still need to be attentive to that history because we're not going to be able to deal with them effectively unless we at least understand where they are coming from historically. The other complicating factor is simply the fact that the Chinese have become that more wealthy and powerful. They are a much more consequential power because of the success of their economic reform program over the last thirty years. They are a force to be reckoned with. This shift in the material balance of power in the region makes one of the challenges for establishing a respectful relationship recognizing some of the limits and constraints it imposes upon U.S. power and influence in the region. I don't think this is a zero sum contest. I'm not convinced the Chinese believe that it is, but it is a very difficult historical transition for the two sides to manage. There are a lot of layers to that issue.

WO: So now I'm going to move towards the internal dynamics of China, another big issue given talk of economic liberalization, potentially increasing civil liberties for citizens, and a growing business class starting to gain power. I'm wondering if you think China will reach a stable point where its economy can continue to grow while simultaneously ensuring the balance of power continues to favor the government?

PH: That's a very good question and I wish I had the magic answer to it. As a historian I'm not terribly optimistic, but let me start with the Chinese mindset. Bill Clinton, on a trip in 1998, said publicly at a press conference in Beijing that China is on the wrong side of history because communism had proven itself invalid when the Soviet Union collapsed. However, the Chinese don't read history that way they don't

think they're on the wrong side of it. They spent the last 25 years trying to study the Soviet collapse and look at the causes for it. They believe, contrary to what we think, that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not invalidate Communism or socialism. It invalidated the wrong version of it, which they attribute to Gorbachev. Their economic success over the last thirty years has validated their version. And I think that they believe that the lesson they took away from the Soviet Union was the importance of demonstrating good governance to your populace. My own shorthand version of this is the Chinese believe that what they're trying to do is make the case to the Chinese people that prosperity and international competence was brought to them by the Chinese Communist party. In a sense they've tried to coopt capitalism and take credit for it, and it's made them actually somewhat popular within China. The Chinese government, aside from some of the dissident issues, often gets better domestic popularity ratings than the U.S. government does, strangely enough. But I don't think that this is a persuasive case that they can sustain power forever. As you said, the kind of economic reform that they have conducted inevitably produces pressure for political reforms. I don't think this is a simple cause and effect equation; there are different constituencies in China that think of this in different ways. For example, a lot of middle class Chinese who have been beneficiaries of economic reform are not fans of total democracy because they don't have a lot of confidence in the will of larger elements of the population in China. That's kind of a strange internal dynamic. Basically, economic reform will not necessarily bring the Western-style democracy that we would like to see China adopt. The other reason the collapse of this equation isn't necessarily inevitable is that you do have a lot of technocratic expertise in the Chinese governmental leadership. They know the challenges that they're facing and that they are riding a tiger. A lot of people would've predicted they couldn't sustain it as long as they have, so they're doing a pretty good job. But then of course every time the Chinese stock market faltered or growth rates start to fall these questions still arise. The bottom line is that I just don't think you can in perpetuity sustain a one-party system that governs that huge of a polity with such profound social and economic change happening at the same time. So my own guess as a historian is that something discontinuous is bound to happen here. I don't think they can hold this this machine together forever. Something comparable to the collapse of the Soviet Union may very well happen, but again I would emphasize if you look to the Soviet example, the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party did not bring in a thriving democratic system. You still have all kinds of nationalist impulses and a style of leadership that is still autocratic. I think that if China is ever going to evolve into a democratic system, it's going to be a long, hard slog even after the Chinese Communist Party ceases to be the sole source of authority.

WO: Do you have a guess on a time frame here or is it way too speculative?

PH: It's way too speculative. People predicted thirty years ago that the North Korean government would collapse and that's still not happening. There's so much vola-

tility in the Chinese system. I think the Chinese leadership has such effective control over their system that they have less reason to be afraid of regime-threatening instability than the Soviets. Yet certainly environmental disasters, serious economic collapse, or an international crisis involving a territorial conflict could provide the catalyst for a serious split within the leadership through a crisis of confidence that quickly evolves into a regime-threatening situation. That's what happened with the Soviet Union, and that is why the Chinese leadership is concerned about the loyalty of the military. There's any number of things that could that could lead to a much more precipitous collapse of the Chinese Communist party than what seems to be on the horizon right now.

WO: Right. To transition: would you recommend a career in intelligence to undergraduates, and what kind of person do you think thrives in the analytical culture of intelligence work?

PH: I would definitely recommend it. I miss it myself already. And it's a fantastic career that combines being able to work on international affairs topics and having a direct impact on policy makers. Your analytic work directly feeds into policymakers' inboxes and deliberations. When I worked for the Director of Intelligence at CIA and the National Intelligence Council, I called the organizations the two greatest international affairs think tanks in the world because of the breadth of issues that we assessed and the many sources of information we had to bring to bear. You can't ask for a more impactful, although anonymous, influence on policy. I think the people who thrive there are those who certainly have that appetite and level of interest for analysis. If you want to get into the operational collection side at CIA or other agencies, there are 17 different intelligence agencies in Washington. But I think the most competitive candidates are folks that have a particular depth expertise on a specific geographic area, like a Middle East or Latin America specialist. Functional specialties, such as specialization on proliferations or weapons or international finance are also value-added qualifications. The most competitive analysts are people who have some direct experience in the country that they're working on, and certainly possessing language skills makes a big difference. Obviously, a graduate level degree is going to deepen your experience. The last thing I have to say is that established general skills are really important. In fact, I think they're foundational regardless of your substantive area of expertise. I'm a diehard fan of the liberal arts. Never stop reading and never stop learning. You have to be a really good researcher, analyst, and writer. I can't emphasize that enough—clarity of expression is incredibly important to the intelligence trade.

WO: Great. Just to wrap up, we're looking forward to what's next for you. You've had a long career, but you still have a good bit of time ahead. Will you continue to focus on East Asia?

PH: I don't know—I say I'm trying to decide what I want to be when I grow up. I'm in transition now since I retired from the agency and the intelligence community after thirty-one years and four months. I'm currently visiting the research center at M.I.T., where I'm working on writing my doctoral dissertation on George F. Kennan's role on East Asia policy. Kennan was one of the most famous U.S. foreign service officers in history as well as a Russia specialist who promoted the policy and containment of the Soviet Union after the war. He was deeply involved in East Asia, so I'm hoping that I can turn this into a published book and that it will open opportunities for me to transition into a longer-term academic teaching position. Of course I would also like to travel, too.