THEMENSCHWERPUNKT

Threats of a Different Kind: China and Russia in U.S. Security Policy Discourse*

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Abstract: The article illustrates how U.S. security policy discourse constructs China and Russia as threats of distinct qualities. Since articulations of another state as threat can constitute boundaries towards that state and thus conflict potential, the article aims to contribute to our understanding of how perception, national identity, self-other and spatial constructions inform international state behavior. The article begins by outlining the concepts of perception, national identity, and self-other and spatial constructions. It then presents analytical results on constructions of China and Russia vis-à-vis the U.S. self-image, and closes with implications for contemporary security challenges.

Keywords: security policy, discourse, U.S., China, Russia
Schlagworte: Sicherheitspolitik, Diskurs, USA, China, Russland

1. Introduction

It matters how a state's national decision makers perceive and construct challenges and threats in international security. This also extends to the construction of other states; whether or not another state is constructed as threatening or as non-threatening shapes policy/security policy and interstate relations accordingly. As argued by scholars and outlined below, how something or someone is constructed constitutively affects interpretation of issues, developments or actors' behavior, confines the way in which action and interaction are thought possible, and thereby contributes to behavior towards another state. U.S. national decision makers follow a U.S. self-role of global leader in international security, and U.S. national security is defined as extending beyond national borders. This also facilitates an extended view of threats and threatening others. In the U.S. perspective, more issues and actors represent potential threats. Thus, also states that challenge globally defined

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U.S. national security or the U.S. in the provision of international security may be viewed as potentially threatening. Aside from international terrorism, extremism, fragile states, rogue actors, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational organized crime, cyber attacks, and consequences from external violent conflicts, as stated in the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy (see for example White House 2015), both China and Russia are/have become again serious concerns in U.S. security policy discourse. And while U.S. discourse under the Obama administrations has also increasingly highlighted the need for multilateral action, it is unilateral measures that remain primary for the U.S.

This article offers empirical results on how the U.S. approach international security, and, in particular, how U.S. security policy discourse constructs current challengers. Perceiving and constructing another state as rival, threat or enemy has constitutive effects on interaction with that state. Discourse's constitutive effects on behavior are illustrated in recent scholarship (Herschinger/Renner 2014; Diez/Bode/Fernandes da Costa 2011; Nabers 2009). Thus, as this article argues, if states such as the U.S. perceive and construct other states such as China and Russia as threat to own and international security, it will constitutively affect interaction with these countries (see also Campbell 1998; Dalby 1997).

As U.S. decision makers are said to still see the U.S. leading the world (Nye 2015; Tomes 2014: 46; Wolf 2014: 89-92),[1] this article poses the question of how potential challengers to U.S. primacy are constructed. Regarding China, for example, scholars point to the U.S. fearing a loss of influence in the region (Hacke 2013; Goh 2007/2008: 113-157), to China's increasingly aggressive pursuit of its interests, its options for asymmetric conduct towards the U.S. (Colby 2015; Worcester/Bühler 2011: 28-29), and even a new bipolarity (Maull 2015). In case of rising U.S.-Sino conflict, the great U.S. mistrust in the Chinese government would likely favor tough policies (Wolf 2014: 96). Additional tension can come from Chinese efforts to increase military presence in the South China Sea. Russia, on the other side, was not seen as threat to U.S. interests until the Ukraine crisis. Some merely argued that Russia is a difficult partner for the U.S. and that the U.S. have the dilemma of needing Russian cooperation to deal with global challenges but also aiming for deeper relations with the young democracies in Russia's neighborhood (Hacke 2013: 6-7). In 2012, Russia was still no clear challenge, as Russian and U.S. interests did not intolerably interfere (Smith 2012: 184-186). But the Ukraine crisis has created the view of a threatening Russia and even conjured up Cold War images (Monagan 2015). Increased strategic Sino-Russian aligning (Trenin 2015; Rudolf 2014) likely increases U.S. concern.

As outlined here, perception, national identity and self-other constructions inform – via decision makers – interstate relations. By their very nature, interstate relations are the experience of different and at times opposed perspectives, where perception and identity impact the interpretation of events and of self and other. Possible outcomes are threat constructions, even enemy images, and the demarcation and defense of spheres of influence. The sense of national identity is also shaped by historical experience as shared by the collective of a state; experienced gains and victories as well as losses and traumata in relations with other states impact how national identity is felt and acted out vis-à-vis others. This also includes relations with those perceived as rivals or enemies. As argued (Nabers 2009: 191-214; Mersken 2005: 373), an enemy can be a useful hegemonic tool for mobilization and the enabling of new policy measures. But when one state discursively constructs another state as a threat, it creates dichotomies and boundaries to that state (Eriksson/Noreen 2002: 8-10; Campbell 1998: 3-4, 170-171). A critical geopolitics lens adds the link of identity, discourse, space, power and policy, and how this link may translate into processes of ordering by one state towards another, referring to the creation of spatial order with effects of inclusion or exclusion (Agnew/Muscarà 2012: 1-2, 11, 28-29). In this light, U.S. security policy is explained with America's myth and universalizing tendency as facilitator of both expansion and strong self-other differentiation (Ó Tuathail/Agnew 2008: 225-228). A state's national identity can become threatened, motivating a need to safeguard national identity, which in turn may facilitate the creation of dichotomies and barriers between states (Campbell 1998; Shapiro 1997: 58-59). It must be clearly stated here, that there is a distinction between states engaging in self-other constructions for their identity – a normal process, and divisive processes of othering, in which another state is articulated as threat. Since also states have ontological security, national identity can become threatened by changing situations and inherent uncertainty (Steele 2008: 12), including increases in other states' power.

This article is based on an analysis of national security documents and speeches by U.S. security policy officials. It should be pointed out that such documents, in particular national security documents, are products of lengthy processes with multiple authors and rounds of writing and editing, etc. Such processes and the resulting assessments are also informed by information and analyses of other actors, including security and defense agencies/departments (CIA, NSC, Pentagon, etc.), foreign policy institutions (State Department), legislative bodies (Congress), a number of U.S. think tanks – of varying ideological position, and the media (key among them being the New York Times and Washington Post, for example).[2] Additional actors in the political establishment that provide information and interpretation, and thereby inform policy formulation, are, for example, the United States European Command (EUCOM), United States Pacific Command (PACOM), or NATO. These bodies are based in specific regions/countries and in dialogue with local representatives. The commanders typically report to the U.S. president via the U.S. defense secretary about issues and developments in their particular region. These reports then become part of the policy formulation process regarding a region or country. Developments and issues that are interpreted as particularly important or threatening likely receive greater attention, while it is typically the case that several issues must be attended to at the same time. There are then multiple actors that are directly and indirectly involved in policy formulation (for more information, see Bolton 2008; Dixon 1984). Constructions of enmity relate to perception and discursive processes; it can be influenced by conscious efforts to create or exaggerate enmity, for various reasons,

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1 For a debate on whether or not the U.S. has declined in global order, see Ikenberry 2014; Hacke 2013.

2 While also sources directly from these actors could be considered, it would be beyond the scope of this article; therefore, the analysis here relies on national security documents and speeches.

including political agendas, or by efforts to overcome enmity and foster dialogue. Because national identity, self-other constructions, perceptions and even emotions are involved in perceiving and interpreting developments, processes relating to the construction of enmity are also psychologically driven and not only conscious; whether conscious or not is however difficult to analytically assess. In the following sections, the article presents empirical results on 2) the U.S. construction of China, and 3) the U.S. construction of Russia. The article closes with 4) implications of U.S. self-other constructions vis-à-vis China and Russia.

2. U.S. Construction of China

The analysis of U.S. discourse on China reveals both positives and negatives. Also changes over time are expressed, in response to changes in U.S. administrations, the global environment and China's influence; constructions of a threatening China have increased. Already in 1994, the U.S. recognized China's possible impact on U.S. security, based on China's growing economic power, UN Security Council veto power, nuclear arms and military advancements, and thus called for rebuilding relations with China by establishing high-level dialogues and working-level relations (Perry 1994). Today, China is perceived as challenge to U.S. influence and interests and even as threatening near-pear adversary, due to the rapid modernization of its military and global defense industry and a more complicated world (Hagel 2014; U.S. Department of Defense 2015).

China is constructed as clear challenge and threat to U.S. vital interests. Thus, China is said to aim to "replace the United States as primary power in Asia", weaken U.S. alliances with Asian partners and limit U.S. access to and deterrence of threats in the region, and that China's "dangerous policies" present a "systematic" challenge for the U.S. (Blackwill/Tellis 2015: 19, 20). Not only is China articulated as threat to the U.S., but also to the future of Asia and the liberal international order (Blackwill/Tellis 2015: 20, 39; U.S. Department of Defense 2012: 2, 4). The representation of China as systematic challenge to the U.S., thus to core values and interests, is particularly telling. It points to China having become the key other of the U.S., against which the U.S. must safeguard. Actions directed against China as threat likely promote conflict potential. Portraying China as threat for regional stability furthermore fits with expressed U.S. regional interests.

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) accords considerable space to China. In the 2010 NSS, China is an important emerging but still new actor at the global stage that must be reminded of the rules and integrated into established normative structures. China is constructed as weaker than the U.S., although indispensable in dealing with global challenges. U.S. national identity is expressed as keeper of the current geopolitical order, primary global power, and primary rule-maker and rule-protector with sufficient force to keep others, including China, in line. While the aim of deeper cooperation and constructive relations with China is stated, China's regional and global behavior is expressly watched with great suspicion. Also linked are spatial aspects regarding the U.S. sphere of influence; the U.S. will protect its interests and power position (White House 2010: 3, 8, 11, 43). The current NSS, of 2015, shows no substantial changes. Competition with China is said to

continue, and the U.S. will use its strength to monitor China's regional and international behavior (White House 2015: 24). China remains the still not responsible, still not to be trusted and threatening other, expressed in the U.S. implicit but unmistaken threats towards China should it endanger U.S. interests.

Points of tension also exist on Taiwan and the South China Sea. Former U.S. president George W. Bush portrayed an intrusive China against Taiwan and the ready-to-rush-in U.S. He had favored a view of China as rival (On the Issues; Inland Valley, Apr. 26 2001; GOP Debate, Feb. 15 2000). Regarding the South China Sea, the U.S. have warned China of increasing its land construction on the Mischief Reef, part of the Spratly Islands, and reject any level of Chinese control of the waters and resources there (White House 2015: 10, 13). While U.S. Vice President Biden (2013) saw cooperation possible, he made clear that the South China Sea was not "China's sea… [but] international waters". Secretary of State Kerry (2014, 2015) sees China as challenger of internationally agreed upon norms and as risking regional instability. Satellite images by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI 2015) show China's rapid and intensified land gains on the Mischief Reef and other reefs since 2014; China is said to destabilize and militarize the South China Sea, especially since it blocks any attempts to solve the territorial dispute in UN or ASEAN arbitration. A number of incidents have already occurred in these waters, involving a U.S. surveillance aircraft in 2015, for example, which add to the view of a threatening China and to U.S.-Sino tension.

To deal with rising conflict and bind China more closely into Western normative structures, the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue forum was initiated in 2005 and in 2009 became the Strategic & Economic Dialogue (S&ED). U.S. officials have highlighted that China is needed to deal with global challenges and, repeatedly, that China must become "a responsible stakeholder". They express mistrust towards the Chinese leadership, and that the U.S. will continue cooperation with regional allies (Council on Foreign Relations 2015; Clinton 2009a, 2009b). Even though the 2015 S&ED heralded the growing Chinese commitment to cooperation, China was still and again called on to become a responsible actor. Concerns also relate to China being mistrusted on cyber security and cyber incursions (Kerry 2015).

U.S. discourse constructs China as still emerging global actor that must be reminded of the rules, learn to play by the rules, and that is still to be integrated into existing normative structures. China is new to the global stage and must still be guided, if need be with strong measures. It is clearly not considered as equal to the U.S., rather as inferior, but at the same time as important, even indispensable to deal with global challenges. The U.S. self is constructed as keeper of the current geopolitical set-up, this position being part of and confirming U.S. national identity. U.S. national interests regarding international and regional security motivate the warnings towards China. This in turn expresses and confirms the U.S. self-understanding as primary global power, as primary rule-maker and rule-protector – with sufficient force potential to keep others, especially possible rivals or challengers, in line.

Also spatial aspects and processes of ordering are visible in U.S. discourse. These especially relate to sphere-of-influence expressions, stated goals and efforts to protect interests regionally and internationally and uphold the power position, while China's

military and other expansion in the region is strongly criticized. With U.S. discourse portraying a China that aims to constrain U.S. influence and action and a U.S. that will protect against such efforts, we find antagonism. There is a clear hierarchy between China and the U.S. Furthermore, China is the still not to be trusted and threatening other, and it is considered a country that can be implicitly but unmistakably threatened, including with military means, should it endanger U.S. interests (White House 2010; Obama 2014b; US Department of Defense 2014).

Thus, the U.S. feel at least partially threatened by China and its growing regional and global weight; China is constructed somewhere between enemy and rival. The country is still viewed with suspicion and mistrust, and it is made clear that also in the future China must be carefully watched in its regional and international behavior. Negative elements in constructions of China outweigh positive or neutral ones; referrals to China being a growing and indispensable partner are in the minority. Via hierarchy-creation and differentiation, the U.S. may aim to both maintain the own position and 'coerce' China to normatively align more with the West. Discourse expresses implicit warnings that the U.S. will act to marginalize China, should it not become a responsible actor. Such acts contain antagonism and conflict potential – which can become virulent when relations are disturbed by new tension. While existing dialogue and cooperation fora can cushion minor disruptions, larger conflict developments may be too burdensome. At the moment, increasingly aggressive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea could motivate conflict.

3. U.S. Construction of Russia

According to the conducted analysis, U.S. discourse on Russia expresses more positives than negatives in comparison to discourse on China. This differs from the picture of more positive U.S. contact with China in previous times. Since 2013/2014, however, the Ukraine crisis has led to a clear change in U.S. constructions. Now Russia is seen as more aggressive again as well as uncooperative, and this picture seems to outweigh the up until then cooperative aspects in relations.

Until the Ukraine crisis, U.S. discourse highlighted the importance of cooperation with Russia, its benefits for the U.S. and the world, and the aim for even deepened cooperation. Russia is again considered an actor to be taken seriously and that can be worked with to deal with global challenges. Key areas for cooperation are seen in nuclear non-proliferation, counternarcotics and counterterrorism (U.S. Department of Defense 2015: 2; White House 2010: 11, 23, 43). Relations with Russia are considered among the most important bilateral relations. Positive is also the stated U.S. interest in a stable and flourishing Russia (White House 2010: 44). Negative elements in the constructions of Russia refer to different positions on a number of policy aspects. Thus, the U.S. is said to have "serious differences" with Russia, for example on "Syria, missile defense, NATO enlargement, democracy, human rights". But, again, it is also reminded of the opportunities for U.S.-Russian cooperation on current and future challenges (Biden 2013). Negative is also the portrayal of a militarily modernizing Russia within a world that is becoming more combustible (Hagel 2014), pointing to mistrust of Russian intentions and capacities.

Other and clearly negative elements refer to developments since the Ukraine crisis. Thus, the U.S. has warned Russia to respect its neighbors' territories and sovereignty and not risk regional instability (Obama 2014b; Department of Defense 2015: 2, 9). The U.S. "will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence", but insist on the right of a sovereign state to decide about their future and alliances (Biden 2013). While acknowledging the cooperative steps in U.S.-Russia relations in the past years, in 2015 the U.S. constructs Russia as still not committed to internationally agreed upon norms of peace and stability. Rather, Russia is said to have "contempt" for its neighbors' rights, disrespect Ukraine's sovereignty, and create instability in Georgia and Moldova. With this, Russia is said to "disregard" its own commitments made in Minsk, Helsinki and elsewhere, so that it cannot be trusted (Biden 2015). While Russia mostly remains a non-threatening other for the U.S., discourse now highlights Russia as aggressor in Europe and represents Russia as threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and regional stability (White House 2015: 10; Obama 2014b). Recent discourse then expresses the necessity to react to regional aggression by Russia, also to avoid having to later intervene or use military means due to alliance obligations (Obama 2014b). While not a threat for the U.S., Russia is seen to threaten the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO's Readiness Action Plan, which aims to increase operational readiness during crises, is founded on the view of Russia needing to be deterred from violating its neighbors' sovereignty (Gutschker 2014). NATO's presence and capacities in eastern member states are increased, and defense against potential Russian attacks is trained; the July 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw re-confirmed the need to have ready defenses against possible Russian aggression. However, the U.S. concern about Russian regional aspirations and their effects on stability could motivate U.S. efforts to marginalize Russia, which points to further conflict potential. Obama (2014a) calling Russia an important but only regional power possibly illustrates such moves to marginalize Russia. A recent U.S. strategy report also sees Russia, due to its continuing military modernization, as threatening (U.S. Department of Defense 2015). Thus, since the Ukraine crisis there are significant changes in U.S. discourse. Russia is perceived as a threat again, though not to the U.S. and U.S. national identity as leading state, as during the Cold War, but in terms of U.S. interests of a stable Europe.

Over the longer term, Russia is constructed as important actor that is needed to deal with global challenges, and as actor with sufficient weight to be taken serious by the U.S. At the same time, Russia is considered as inferior to U.S. power (White House 2010, 2015). In addition, Russia is portrayed as not always being reliable, in particular towards its neighbors, and as country that must once in a while be brought into line. U.S. discourse shows a strong awareness of power having shifted in favor of the U.S. since the end of the Cold War. Russian efforts to rebuild the former power position, especially under Putin and as evidenced in current regional behavior, are forcefully rejected by the U.S. The U.S. are positioned as primary global power and key actor safeguarding the rules, which is linked with U.S. national identity. As rule maker and rule keeper, the U.S. will allow Russian expansive efforts only as long as U.S. interests are not seriously threatened.

Also here, we find a presence of spatial aspects, in terms of the U.S. sphere of influence. Likewise, processes of ordering

are expressed in U.S. warnings against Russia to not threaten U.S. regional interests by not respecting its neighbors' territorial sovereignty (White House 2010: 23, 44). The U.S. thus have national interests in the region, such as stability and territorial sovereignty. The U.S. will also maintain influence in the region. Since Russia is considered to be weaker and inferior, the U.S. is able to warn Russia to abide by the rules, to not threaten U.S. interests in the region and not expand beyond own borders. On the other side, the stated U.S. interest in a flourishing Russia is also interesting – because a stronger Russia could presumably threaten the U.S., but this is not mirrored in discourse. This may point to the existence of a greater trust towards and familiarity with Russia, in comparison to China, and a greater familiarity in U.S.-Russian relations. The U.S. does not feel threatened by Russia, even though the Ukraine crisis has led to deteriorated relations.

Overall, Russia is constructed as an actor to be taken seriously; while Russia is considered inferior to the U.S., Russia's standing is recognized. U.S. national identity illustrates a view of being the primary global actor to uphold international rules. While also here, the aim for deepened cooperation is expressed, cooperation seems already more specific, for example on nuclear non-proliferation. The reminders directed at Russia to mind its neighbors' sovereignty show Russia as not always reliable actor that at times must be nudged towards upholding the rules. When considering U.S. discourse also before the Ukraine crisis, thus over the longer term, the positive or neutral aspects slightly outweigh the negative ones. Recent developments in the Ukraine have caused a change in U.S. discourse: Russia, while not seen as threat to the U.S., is considered a threat to Europe and regional stability, and thus seen to act against U.S. interests. Since the U.S. place Russia below the U.S. in hierarchy, and act accordingly by warning Russia, there is still conflict potential. The U.S. hierarchy-building will likely not be accepted by Russia. While smaller disturbances should be softened by the existing level of relations and familiarity, larger crises or a worsening in the Ukraine crisis could overburden relations. But the geographical position of Russia on the EU's border should also have a mitigating effect on any conflict and U.S. responses.

4. Conclusions and Implications

This article has analyzed the construction of China and Russia in U.S. security policy discourse, attending to the role of perception, national identity, and self-other and spatial constructions. Overall and up until the Ukraine crisis, Russia is considered a possible partner much more than China. There seems to be greater trust in – or at least a greater familiarity with – political leaders of Russia than of China, despite existing difficulties. The Ukraine crisis has again highlighted these difficulties. But still, Russia is seen as a necessary partner even there. At the same time, U.S. discourse expresses views of locating Russia in an inferior position to the U.S. The latter is also true for China. But from the U.S. perspective, China is seen as more threatening than Russia. U.S. discourse constructs China as a key other and as threatening other to the U.S. Discourse also expresses a greater need to closely and carefully observe developments in China and moves of the Chinese leadership – there is a clear mistrust by the U.S. leadership

towards China's leadership. It is then of interest, how the greater unfamiliarity of and mistrust towards the Chinese leadership will translate into interaction in the coming years (where of course also the strong economic interdependencies, among other factors, will play a role). Turning to Russia, up until the Ukraine crisis Russia was constructed as non-threatening. Since then, Russia is constructed as threat to a stable Europe, but not to the U.S. or to U.S. national identity as leading state in global order. This should enable cooperation even when relations are less than positive.

According to discourse, the U.S. self is understood as leading global order and international security. U.S. national security is thereby globally defined. China is then constructed as a key U.S. other who can more directly challenge the U.S. Russia has, since the Ukraine crisis, become a growing threat to U.S. interests of a stable Europe. Clear enemy images are not found in current discourse. Ongoing developments in Syria, with Russia having become militarily involved to aid Syrian president Assad against U.S. interests, are still unfolding their full impact. The U.S. view of Russia has all but improved due to Russian involvement, but U.S. decision makers know that Russia is also needed for any regional peace settlement. Regarding the Ukraine crisis, U.S. decision makers have discussed the possibility of unilaterally arming the Ukrainian army to assist them against the Russian-backed separatists. Unilateral action, often of a military type, thus remains an essential element of the U.S. approach to international security. But the U.S. government under Obama has not put such plans into action. The next U.S. administration, if a more belligerent one, may take a tougher line though.

The U.S. perspective sees the substantial need to integrate China and Russia more into international normative structures and to thereby affect an alignment of China's and Russia's actions with Western norms and interests. Both China and Russia are called upon to become responsible stakeholders in global order, meaning democratic and rule-of-law-oriented. The almost paternalistic call for responsibility expresses the view of a, in power and values, superior U.S. vis-à-vis China and Russia. Discourse then also offers warnings in the case that China and Russia do not learn or abide by the rules, in particular if they endanger U.S. interests. Again, seeing that both China and Russia are needed to deal with global and/or regional challenges, the U.S. must in some way continue to work with both. A new U.S. administration could, however, change policy.

Attempting to draw possible recommendations from these results, regarding the U.S. self and national identity's impact on policy, it seems useful to recognize the elements of threat in constructions of China and Russia, to understand their specific motivations and critically consider these when formulating policy towards both countries. If threats are perceived due to the motivation of national identity and its often restrictive frame, relations with the other may quickly become conflictive in times of tension. Threat perceptions and conflictive relations then hinder efforts to build a peaceful global order. This highlights the importance of differentiating between threat constructions motivated by national identity and those motivated by actual indicators of threats. Though this is not an easy task, especially in the homogenizing atmosphere of often closed policy-making circles and under stress, the worth of a clear understanding of what motivates threat constructions cannot be overstated. Threat constructions should be critically questioned in

the process of policy discussions, so that alternative interpretations are not automatically ignored. Policy formulation can benefit from active attempts to widen the frame of interpretation by provoking alternative explanations for the other's behavior and recognizing the self's contribution to a given situation. Discourse and policy towards other states should then also be guided by a critical view of the self's interests and of implemented measures to safeguard these.

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