



Destined for Misperception? Status Dilemma and the Early Origin of US-China Antagonism

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Abstract

Why did the US-China relations take a turn for worse around 2010 despite the bilateral efforts to forge a cooperative framework? Concerned about the danger of conflicts in the course of power transition—namely, the “Thucydides Trap”—in US-China relations, scholars tend to see either a security dilemma at play or an intensification of status competition between an emerging power and the established hegemon. While recognizing the explanatory leverage of the security-dilemma framework and the status-competition model with regard to the continued deterioration of the US-China relations up to Trump, this article asserts that both models fall short in addressing the early origin of the deterioration of US-China relations. The concept “status dilemma” promises to fill the analytic gap thereby left. The status dilemma suggests an inability of two states to grasp the status claims signaled from the other side. Misperceptions associated with status dilemmas fall outside of the purview of the security-dilemma framework, and could lead to the emergence of zero-sum competitions for status. Such misperceptions are apt to occur in a situation of power transition whereby status recognition tends to have geostrategic implications for the great powers involved. This article illustrates this logic of status dilemma via the US-China diplomacy over the “core interests.” This investigation promises crucial insights into the analogy of the Thucydides Trap to US-China relations.

Keywords Misperceptions · Status dilemma · US-China relations · Core interests

With the Trump administration escalating trade conflict with Beijing, breaking the US-China consensus on Taiwan’s political status, and labeling China as a chief competitor, antagonisms in the US-China relations are hard to gloss over nowadays.

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Shrewd observers, in fact, have sensed turning points in US-China relations in the Obama years, when the bilateral relationship met substantial obstacles for development.¹ But why did the US-China relations suffer a significant deterioration, which paved the way for the current antagonism, despite the bilateral efforts to define a cooperative framework during the Obama years? It is no small irony that Washington and Beijing—two parties having incentives for and indeed seeking cooperation—have come close to the “Thucydides Trap” in their bilateral relationship. The Thucydides Trap refers to the danger of conflict escalation between a rising power and the established hegemon. An acute awareness of this danger by the leaders, though, may contribute to prudence in the conduct of foreign policy.² It is nevertheless puzzling why the US-China relationship entered this state of affairs in the first place, given that a cooperative relationship promises mutual benefits.³

The crucial issue concerns how we can explain the downturn in US-China relations. Concerned about the Thucydides Trap, scholars have been focused on either the “security dilemma” at play or an intensification of contest between China and the United States for “supremacy.” For Aaron Friedberg, a seasoned observer of US-China relations, China has embarked on a drive for regional hegemony, and this status aspiration can only be achieved by overturning the US-led security order in Asia.⁴ Among other scholars, Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu argue that Beijing is ready to undertake policies designed to delegitimize America’s leadership role, which could pave the way for a full-blown hegemonic competition.⁵ Students of security dilemmas, by contrast, think that the lack of efficient reassurance mechanisms to mitigate strategic mistrust is a key contributor to regionwide tensions, as the uncertainty of Chinese behaviors induces other states to prepare for the worst-case scenarios via alliance formation and military buildups [14–16].

In spite of their conceptual validity and pervasiveness in policy discourses, both the security-dilemma framework and the status-competition model [17] fall short in addressing the early origin of the US-China antagonism—not least the initial efforts by the US-Chinese leaders to redefine their cooperative relationship in 2010. This article seeks to fill the analytic gaps thereby left by elaborating on the concept “status dilemma.” The concept of “status dilemma” represents a crucial, yet understudied source of misperceptions. By definition, the status dilemma suggests an inability of the interacting states to grasp the status claims signaled from each other.⁶ The status dilemma is apt to cause misperceptions in a situation of power transition, whereby status recognition tends to have implications for geopolitical bargaining between the

¹ See, for instance, [1–6].

² The main purpose of proposing this concept is indeed to advise prudence for leaders in both China and the United States. See [7].

³ For all the narratives and images of the “assertive” China, there is no clear evidence to suggest that China has developed a coherent vision for the post-American world, let alone a coherent plan to achieve that. See [8, 9]. What does alarm the international observers, however, is the rapid growth of Chinese power as well as a demonstrated resolve to use it. What is disturbing are the unintended consequences of Chinese power being employed, rather than any grand plans of Beijing to spoil the international order.

⁴ Importantly, while security imperatives and status aspirations are intertwined in Friedberg’s analysis of Chinese strategies to attain hegemony in Asia, Friedberg gives particular emphasis to the ideational dimension of Chinese motives. See [10].

⁵ [11]. Also see [12], chap. 7; [13].

⁶ For an elaboration of this concept and the plausibility probes, see [18].

great powers involved. The leaders, in turn, are prone to misinterpret the status aspiration signaled from each other. This logic of status dilemma is manifest in the US-China diplomacy over the “core interests.” The concept of status dilemma thus sheds critical light on why US-China relations underwent a dramatic deterioration although leaders on both sides sought to redefine their cooperative framework in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

Additionally, by focusing on such an early origin of US-China antagonism, this article seeks to make the case for the relevance of status dilemma for the more conspicuous dynamics of security dilemma and zero-sum status competition. The early years of financial crisis proved to be a critical juncture at which great-power leaders face stronger incentives to manage the conflict dynamics associated with zero-sum status competition and security dilemma than they do at other times. In particular, the declining power might be more receptive to a “grand bargain” with the rising power in order to retain the lion’s share of its privileges and prerogatives. The rising power, on the other hand, is arguably keen to push its favored agenda but nevertheless remain prudent in order to avoid any unnecessary conflict. If the evidence is able to demonstrate that the US and Chinese leaders did not actually view status politics in the international arena as a zero-sum competition and did indeed make a genuine effort to contain security dilemma dynamics, other neglected mechanisms must have kicked in. Hence there is a chance to ascertain the relevance of status dilemma for other conflict-inducing mechanisms that unfolded later on.

This article proceeds as follows. It begins by discussing the importance of misperceptions to the “Thucydides Trap,” which refers to the conflict escalation between the rising and established great powers. Next, the article elaborates on the meaning of “status dilemma,” and lays out its observable implications in the context of power transition. This is followed by an empirical investigation of the downturn in US-China relations in the Obama years, which focuses on the US-China diplomacy over the “core interests” as case study. The article concludes with a summary of key findings. One caveat is worth stressing here. This article, at best, offers a partial survey of the deterioration of US-China relations in the Obama years. Its central purpose, instead, is to illustrate how a status dilemma could arise in the midst of a power transition to make the situation more difficult to manage. This investigation of status dilemma dynamics is warranted, as it promises crucial insights into the analogy of the Thucydides Trap to US-China relations.

The Thucydides Trap and Misperceptions

In Thucydides’s narrative of the Peloponnesian War, the structural tension between the rising power and the established hegemon did not translate directly into war. A critical cause of war as noted by him (as well as contemporary scholars) is the belief in the inevitability of conflict between the contending states. This very belief contributes to the growth of mistrust and could blind the policymakers to diplomatic solutions. Many devastating wars in history have testified that this belief is a misperception, as the believers at the decision points did not think the wars they started would run their course [19–21].

Misperceptions could be endogenous to structural tensions that attend to a power shift between great powers, but they are more deeply rooted in human psychology.⁷

⁷ The most systematic discussion can be found in [22].

The analytic imperative, therefore, is to explore sources of misperceptions in the context of power transition. By underscoring the misperception of intentions, the article seeks to address a fatal pitfall associated with the “Thucydides Trap.” Popularized by Graham Allison, a prominent political scientist, the term connotes such a structural conflict: the growth of Athenian power fueled fears in Sparta of losing geopolitical influences and notably, prestige. In a fashion of generalization Allison argues that, “rising powers understandably feel a growing sense of entitlement and demand greater influence and respect. Established powers, faced with challengers, tend to become fearful, insecure, and defensive.” This argument underscores that antagonisms between a rising power and the established hegemon are rooted in the former’s growing claims to security and prestige, and in the latter’s fear of decline in international influence. “In such an environment,” the argument goes, “*misunderstandings* are magnified, empathy remains elusive, and events and third-party actions that would otherwise be inconsequential or manageable can trigger wars that the primary players never wanted to fight” [emphasis added] [23]. In short, misperceptions are an outstanding obstacle for the peaceful management of powerful states aspiring to international preeminence.

By definition, misperceptions include “inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgment about how others will react to one’s policies [24].” These cognitive errors are ubiquitous in interstate conflicts. Misperceptions are central to the escalation of tensions between a rising power and the established hegemon. Undeniably, a rapid shift in the balance of power stokes fears of uncertainties and temptations for expansionism. Yet, unwarranted fears of the potential adversary—an important variant of misperception—could provide an initial momentum for great-power leaders to step up investment in state power—that is, by putting national wealth into funding diplomatic offensives, ideological promulgations, and armed forces.⁸ And as both parties are determined to reverse any appearance of disadvantage relative to each other, the image of two great powers on a collision course is apt to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this regard, misperceptions pave the way to the Thucydides Trap.

Status Dilemma: An Unnoticed Source of Misperception

The status dilemma represents a crucial, yet understudied source of misperceptions. The status dilemma, by definition, refers to the inability of two states to grasp the status claims signaled from each other. As William Wohlforth puts it, “a status dilemma occurs when two states would be satisfied with their status if they had perfect information about each other’s beliefs.” Whereas the standard model of status competition views status as a zero-sum good, the status dilemma rests upon no assumption that one’s acquisition of status entails a relative loss of status by others. It assumes, instead, that whether the game of status seeking is zero- or positive-sum depends on processes of interstate signaling, which may lead leaders to misperceive how their status claims have been treated by others. “Mixed signals, botched communications, or misinterpretations of the meanings underlying action may generate misplaced status dissonance,” argues Wohlforth; as such, “what *A* does to confirm its satisfaction of with

⁸ See, for instance, [25–27].

the current set of beliefs about status may undermine *B*'s satisfaction, leading to countermeasures and an upward spiral of needless status competition among fundamentally satisfied states [28]."

The concept "status dilemma" suggests a source of misperception distinct from that emphasized by the model of "security dilemma." "With status as a preference," according to Wohlforth, "the variables that may exacerbate or ameliorate the dilemma are completely different. Most important is that solving the security problem does not necessarily solve the status problem."⁹ Whereas policymakers cognizant of the security dilemma would seek to reassure the opponent of their defensive intent, the very acts of reassurance could carry signals perceived by the target state as an attempt to reaffirm the actor's dominance. In fact, such a policy may actually exacerbate the status dilemma, in that "secure states may still conclude that their preferred status is under threat and take actions that look a lot like security dilemma dynamics."¹⁰ In the final analysis, leaders are unlikely to negotiate a deal when they are inattentive to status concerns of their counterparts in security bargaining.

The status-dilemma framework also promises to explain why a zero-sum competition for status arises between states despite the chance to conduct status politics as a positive-sum game. The status dilemma implies no zero-sum nature of status politics; but it suggests the mismanagement of a status dilemma could be an important contributor to the emergence of zero-sum competition for status. In other words, a status dilemma occurs when the leaders of two interacting states tend not to frame a status claim in zero-sum terms, but each side still fails to act in ways that confirm the status expected by the other side. Consequently, status seeking may turn into a zero-sum game, as the status aspirant believes the status conferrer is trying to impose a "glass ceiling" while the status conferrer finds it hard to peacefully manage the challenge to its status.¹¹

In a nutshell, the mismanagement of a status dilemma is in large part accountable for the zero-sum nature of status goods suggested by the model of status competition; it may also intensify security competitions, making the situation look like a security dilemma. All these have to do with the intrinsic properties of status, as well as the systemic environment in which states pursue status. For three major reasons, the status dilemma could emerge and intensify in a situation of power shift. First and foremost, status is intersubjective; it cannot exist independent of "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes [30]." To enhance status is to gain public recognition of a state's achievements by a relevant international audience. Toward this end, a state should take symbolic and highly visible acts to draw international attention to its accomplishments or desirable attributes—it must "signal" status claim in the first place. But a lack of knowledge about what the status aspirant truly wants creates difficulty in divining its signaling acts. This in turn invites misinterpretations on the audience's part and exacerbates the problem of status recognition. Since, moreover, preeminent status is inextricably linked with emotional feelings of pride, leaders cannot help but to rely upon such feelings to gauge the likelihood of attaining favorable recognition. Such a cognitive predisposition fosters misperceptions [31, 32]. For instance, the very acts to

⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹¹ For historical case studies, see [29].

reassure the potential adversary could be seen as a message of status superiority of the status-quo oriented power. For these reasons, *an observable implication of status dilemmas is that national leaders misrecognize or simply overlook the status claims by another state, and apply a policy of reassurance that ends up exacerbating interstate tensions* (hereby referred to as **Implication 1**). Thus, as the rising power seeks confirmation of its desired identity, its probing signals would likely be misperceived as an overt challenge to the prerogatives of the status quo powers.

Second, status could be instrumental in bringing about “tangible benefits in the form of decision-making autonomy and deference on the part of others concerning issues of importance, including but not limited to security and prosperity.” That is, “the higher a given state’s status, the more other states adjust their policies to accommodate its interests, institutions, and ideas [33].” Status is instrumentally valuable also because it is “sticky.” That is, a higher ranked state retains “a presumptive right” to its status—along with the accompanying privileges—even though the initial conditions that give rise to that status cease to uphold.¹² Human minds are slow in updating in accordance with a state’s performances on the international stage. As such, once a state’s status preeminence is taken as a social fact, it could take an extended period for the audiences to reconsider if that state deserves the status preeminence it has enjoyed.

Unsurprisingly then, a state undergoing a relative material decline may become sensitive to status, as status preeminence helps to ensure access to certain privileges. A rising power, meanwhile, would crave for status recognition more than it used to partly because enhanced status provides a shortcut to geopolitical security and other tangible benefits. The instrumental value of status thus present incentives for states to withhold recognition of the status desired by one another—hence the status dilemma. Here, *an observable implication is that the status conferrer does not acknowledge the status claim signaled by an aspirant state, but persist in the rhetorical (or other forms of signaling) acts that confirm its own status* (hereby referred to as **Implication 2**).

What distinguishes this observable implication from those that follow from the status-competition model is that such misrecognition of status should take place prior to a zero-sum competition for status. Here, it is worth noting that the instrumental value of status does not necessarily turn status into a zero-sum good. Arguably, the growth of national power could equip rising states with a variety of means for status enhancements. A rising power could creatively carve out a realm of activities in which to earn international admiration. Or, it could “reframe a negative attribute as positive” by countering the prevailing international norms with their own reinterpretations.¹³ Thus, competitive status seeking is not the only (let alone optimal) choice for emerging powers. Moreover, emerging powers arguably enjoy long time horizons. They want to stay on the trajectory of rise and avoid taking on the hegemon until they achieve overwhelming advantages.¹⁴ This adds to their incentives to avoid engagement in a zero-sum game of status competition.

A third reason for the intensification of status dilemmas has to do with the anarchical conditions of international politics. In the absence of an overarching authority to enforce uniform rules, states with sufficient material capabilities are arguably free to

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ [34]. Also see [35].

¹⁴ For this argument, see [36].

pursue what they see fit. Leaders, in turn, may feel tempted to press their advantages in terms of material power and ideological appeals. “If all states value positive comparisons,” argues Wohlforth, “then no state is likely to agree to a status-conferring attribute that puts it at a disadvantage [37].” Instead, each state is motivated “to highlight the particular resources in which it enjoys a comparative advantage or the particular things it is good at.”¹⁵ Likewise, leaders have every reason to gloss over “negative” aspects of state practices, which could lend justifications to the dominant states for rejecting their status claims. *As rising powers have increasing assets to demonstrate their competence in the international arena (as well as means to conceal its vulnerabilities), we can expect to see their leaders to press hard demands for status preeminence vis-à-vis the high-ranked powers (Implication 3). The established hegemon, on the other hand, may tend to push the agenda or promote norms that symbolize their leadership role—in this way, they can assert their own status preeminence (Implication 4).* These two implications might suggest that a status dilemma is turning into a zero-sum competition for status. If, however, the rising power undertakes status-signaling acts in the issue area where it enjoys no clear advantage, and the established hegemon as the guardian of the status quo undertakes no preemptive acts to escalate the tension, then the situation resembles the status dilemma more than a status competition. Interstate tension in such a situation results from misperceptions rather than the zero-sum nature of status goods.

In sum, the status dilemma tends to emerge and intensify in a situation of power transition. This is due to the intersubjective nature of status, the instrumental value of status preeminence for great powers, and the anarchical environment in which states inhabit.

One clarification is worth noting before I proceed to discuss the empirical manifestations of status dilemma in US-China diplomacy. While this article gives particular emphasis to status dilemmas, it by no means tries to dismiss the relevance of the dynamics of status competition and security dilemma. Rather, it suggests that in the situation of power transition, the mismanagement of a status dilemma could intensify the dynamics of status competition and security dilemma between the rising power and the established hegemon. When the emerging state sees failure in its negotiation for status preeminence and status-quo oriented players, on the other hand, believe that their notions of international legitimacy are being challenged by the “assertive” rising powers, both sides may feel compelled to take preventive measures. Thus, a zero-sum competition for status could occur as either the status quo’s defender or the emerging power undertake symbolic acts to signal status preeminence at the expense of each other. As such, status competition is often characterized by intensified contests for military advantages and geopolitical influences [38–42]. Like the status dilemma, though, the security dilemma could arise out of reciprocal misperceptions of intention between the rising and status quo powers. And yet, whereas the security dilemma will not intensify if the two parties manage to signal their defensive intentions, the mismanagement of a status dilemma can fuel misperceptions that feed back into the security dilemma. This pattern is evident in the emergence of the South China Sea issue as a focal point of US-China antagonism.

¹⁵ Ibid., 121.

Hence, this article seeks to make the case that dynamics of security dilemma and status competition are not sufficient to causing a zero-sum competition between the hegemon and the rising power. Specifically, both the status-competition model and the security-dilemma framework fall short in explaining why great power leaders would make initial effort at defining a cooperative relationship but fail to translate mutual interests into a cooperative outcome. In this regard, the concept of status dilemma provides much analytic purchase. In what follows, the article shall illustrate the logic of status dilemma by examining the downturn in the US-China relations in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In this case, it is puzzling why a rising power and the established hegemon failed to renegotiate a cooperative framework despite the reciprocal sensitivity to the security dilemma and apparent refusals to conduct status politics in a zero-sum fashion. This puzzle reveals the analytic gaps left by the security-dilemma framework and the status-competition model. By addressing it, the concept of “status dilemma” can demonstrate its explanatory leverage, as well as the relevance to the practice of contemporary great power diplomacy.

Explaining the Downturn in US-China Relations in 2010

The 2008 financial crisis is a watershed event for US-China relations. The financial crisis brought about steep losses in US financial sector and dealt a heavy blow to economic safeties of the general public. More profoundly, it casts into doubt the viability of the free-market model preached by American elites. By contrast, China’s robust economic performance in the wake of this crisis contrasted with the apparent decline of US power and prestige. The implementation of massive stimulation plans enabled the Chinese economy to withstand repercussions that the financial crisis had on China’s trade environment. This, moreover, demonstrated to international observers an alternative developmental model. As such, China seemed to assume impressive “status markers” for being a superpower.¹⁶ The 2008 financial crisis, in short, has “magnified and accelerated the ongoing shifts in the US-China balance of power and prestige.”¹⁷

The Chinese leadership, in fact, was sober-minded with regard to the post-2008 international landscape. China’s leaders remained focused on boosting economic growth and employment rates. Still, their emphasis on domestic priorities did not hinder the conduct of proactive diplomacy with the United States. Beijing’s quest for a stable relationship with Washington served the Chinese need for a benign geopolitical environment that could secure access of Chinese goods to world markets. Equally important, it presumably helps to end the “Century of Humiliation” that has in large part defined the Chinese identity in relation to world affairs. By forging what Michael Mastanduno terms as the “grand bargain” with the United States, China has effectively signaled status preeminence within an established international order [48].

Needless to say, in their status-seeking practices the Chinese leaders did not treat status as a zero-sum good. Rather, status aspirations seem to have heightened their image concerns, as Beijing’s leaders went out of their way to cast certain aspects of Chinese

¹⁶ For a few works that helped popularize the China model, see [43–45].

¹⁷ Quoted from [46]. Also see [47].

international and domestic practices in favorable lights.¹⁸ The financial crisis threatened to shake the US-China grand bargain which had fared relatively well after the Cold War. Yet, as demonstrated by US-Chinese leaders' commitment to expanding cooperation, there was good chance to renegotiate a cooperative framework. China did not have to challenge the liberal order at the expense of its own development prospects, whereas the costs of containing China's rise were prohibitively high for the US too. As such, Washington and Beijing had every reason to minimize the chance for conflict. Why they failed to do so is of both theoretical and practical significance.

Case Selection: The US-China Diplomacy over the “Core Interests”

The diplomatic interaction around the “core interests” was of much significance for the United States and China, as the two great powers found themselves in a situation of power shift after the 2008 financial crisis. Theoretically, as the material capabilities of a great power grew rapidly and approached the established hegemon on some key dimensions, its conception of national interests tends to expand—as such, it is more likely than ever before to clash with the hegemon.¹⁹ This is the central tenet of the Thucydides Trap. The US-China's diplomacy over the “core interests” thus could provide a window into the way in which the structural conflict came to the fore between the rising power and the established hegemon.

This case, in particular, serves to illustrate the dynamics of status dilemma in the situation of power shift. Washington's pursuit of “pivot/rebalancing” to Asia signifies a reaffirmation of its leadership role in Asia that is entrenched in its alliance networks established during the Cold War. The Chinese willingness to participate in a discussion of the “core interests” with the United States symbolizes Beijing's commitment to advancing its status *within* the existing cooperative framework. Unfortunately for both sides, however, their diplomatic interaction ended up worsening the bilateral relationship. The issues involved in this round of interaction were of vital importance to each other; as such, this case is interesting in its own right. It also helps to illustrate the dynamics of status dilemma as an underexplored source of misperception in the course of power transition, an analytic gap left by both the security-dilemma framework and the model of status competition. More crucially, the failed attempt at enhancing the cooperative framework signifies the first downturn in the US-China relations after 2008, which set the stage for the intensification of geopolitical competitions between the two great powers. As such, it predates and is likely to have underpinned the security dilemma and the status competition dynamics. Admittedly, more comprehensive empirical investigations are warranted if we are to gain a full picture of how tensions between China and the United States escalated into the current antagonism—and this is not permitted by the space limits of a single article. Still, the concept of status dilemma can shed critical light on the early origin of the US-China antagonism.

The Pivot and America's Status Concern

This negotiation occurred in the midst of America's “pivot/rebalancing” to Asia, which is a hallmark of Barak Obama's foreign policy. The Obama administration from its

¹⁸ See [49, 50].

¹⁹ See, for instance, [51, 52].

onset had signaled its commitment to redress the predecessor's perceived indifference to the Asia-Pacific, a dynamic region that the administration officials believed was to define the future of world politics.²⁰ China's growing capacity to reshape the order in the region and beyond placed accords Beijing centrality in this policy. As a matter of fact, elements of the "pivot/rebalancing" policy were in place prior to the Obama administration. What Obama's team did most was to instill symbolic coherence to that policy by committing American prestige to a wide variety of security, economic, and developmental issues in the Asia Pacific [54, 55].

Status as a sort of symbolic capital matters crucially in the reassertion of American influences in Asia. By definition, status helps to legitimize authority of a state over another by eliciting voluntary deference [56]. In this regard, a variety of diplomatic elements of Obama's Asia policy (such as increasing participation in the multilateral organizations, enhancing engagement with China, and strengthening alliance networks) were designed to signal US centrality to regional orders, a sign of America's status preeminence in international politics. During her first trip to Asia following Obama's inauguration—which featured an enhanced US engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Clinton hailed that, "the United States is back [57]." In an equally high profile trip to Asia one year later, Clinton labeled American policy as "forward deployed diplomacy," which reflected the civilian-military consensus.²¹

The challenge for Washington's diplomacy in Asia was to balance the drive for strengthening regional leadership role with the imperative to reassure China of its benign intention. The Americans "needed a sophisticated strategy," in the words of Hillary Clinton, "that encouraged China to participate as a member of the international community, while standing firm in defense of our values and interests [60]." In other words, the United States sought cooperation with China in dealing with practical matters, with a view to retaining its overall status preeminence in world politics.

The Status Dilemma at Play: The "Core Interests" Polemics

At the onset of the Obama administration, American and Chinese diplomats worked to combine annual economic and strategic dialogue mechanisms into a comprehensive one, covering issues of military security, human rights, energy and climate change and so on. As wished by Hillary Clinton, the integrated dialogue mechanism helped elevate the security and political issues to the same level as the economic issues.²² The Americans in large part expected the dialogue to be a problem-solving mechanism. A key proponent of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the Undersecretary of State James Steinberg gave much emphasis to the problem of security dilemma to the neglect of matters of status. In his view, the imperative for US-Chinese leaders was to "avoid the worst consequences of the *security dilemma*" [emphasis added] [62]. To this end, Steinberg specified a set of measures to clarify each side's intentions and increase the credibility of commitments. In practical terms, this meant the Strategic and Economic

²⁰ See, for instance, [53].

²¹ [58]. As Hillary Clinton reveals retrospectively, this term was borrowed from her military colleagues. See [59].

²² See [61].

Dialogue session would serve as a vehicle for dialogue on sensitive security issues. Through this mechanism, both China and the United States could clarify what is involved in their core interests [63, 64]. This endeavor could certainly lay the groundwork for interactions based on reciprocity and trust. The process, however, may aggravate mistrust if one or two sides put more emphasis on the symbolic values of the issue at hand, as opposed to its practical importance.

In the Chinese eyes, by contrast, this dialogue mechanism not only gave them a greater voice over matters of importance beyond the bilateral relationship, but also helped signal China's status preeminence as an emerging power. Particularly, the Chinese took pains to ensure that the Obama administration agreed to elevate the bilateral relationship from the "constructive, cooperative, and candid" one to a "positive, constructive, and comprehensive" relationship.²³ As Jeffrey Bader (the US senior official at the National Security Council) noted, "the Chinese tend to start with the overall nature of the desired relationship (as captured in a phrase) and then move toward more specific points of cooperation."²⁴ While the Americans were willing to accommodate Chinese negotiating style, they paid little attention to the Chinese intent to signal status preeminence.

The status dilemma became visible as the Chinese and US officials attached divergent meanings to the dialogue mechanism. The **Implication 1** of status dilemmas can be confirmed when we see that the US officials were too focused on confidence-building measures designed to deal with the security dilemma. This is of course not to suggest that the Chinese officials were oblivious of the need for strategic reassurances with their American counterparts. Rather, it was the Americans' lack of attention to the Chinese concern with status implications of security dialogues that caused the emergence of status dilemma.

Initially, the term "core interests" was inserted in the Joint Statement between Hu Jintao and Barack Obama during the American president's first visit to China, and the State Councilor Dai Bingguo lay out the most authoritative definition of Chinese core interests by far as "sovereignty and territorial integrity," "basic state system and national security," and "continued stable social and economic development."²⁵ From Dai's standpoint, China's core interests revolving around "sovereignty, security, and development" are fundamental to national survival, and they are not expansive [66]. Clarifying these interests could help to mitigate the security dilemma. As suggested by international relations theorists, if two interacting players have good knowledge that the other side harbors no ambitions beyond survival, then they can avoid falling into a spiral of conflict escalation [67–69]. For Steinberg, clarifying the "core interests" could help deal with the relatively urgent issues such as "arms race instability" and "crisis instability" that might arise when China felt the temptation to use its newly acquired power to reshape international security order to its favor.

While the US diplomats tried to clarify with their Chinese counterparts where Beijing's core interests lay, they in large part overlooked the symbolic value placed by the Chinese on such concepts. The **Implication 2** of status dilemmas thus manifested itself in the US treatment of China's protest over the issues associated with their "core interests" such as

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ As a matter of fact, China's senior officials had begun to use the term "core interests" well before 2009. Yet, the year 2009 witnessed a dramatic increase of the Chinese media reference of core interests. For details of content analysis, see [65].

Taiwan and Tibet. In January 2010, the US government decided on Taiwan arms sales—an issue put in motion during the Bush years—while at the same time, President Obama believed that at this juncture settling on a meeting with Dalai Lama. Obama's foreign policy team, though, went to considerable lengths to dampen the repercussions of such symbolic events on US-China relations. Accordingly, it was arranged soon thereafter that two senior officials Jeffrey Bader and Steinberg visit Beijing to mend fences with the Chinese officials. In addition, Obama decided to meet with the newly appointed ambassador in the White House at an earliest possible date [70].

Initially, the Chinese official responses were mild and did not deviate from its established pattern of protest against similar provocations.²⁶ According to a senior Chinese diplomat Dai Bingguo, he and his colleagues thought that the US acts were not abnormal [72]. This perhaps had mislead the American officials into believing that the irritant polemics over Taiwan and Tibet in US-China relations would not escalate. And yet, as the Chinese symbolically asserted their prerogatives over the Taiwan and Tibet issues, they inadvertently fostered a permissive atmosphere for the signaling of status preeminence vis-à-vis the Americans. At this juncture, botched diplomatic communications were to jeopardize the bilateral relationship to an unprecedented degree. The **Implication 3** of status dilemmas then manifested itself as the Chinese undertook an unexpected act that asserted China's identity as an emerging superpower. During Steinberg and Bader's meeting with the Chinese officials, "the Chinese executive vice foreign minister gave a lengthy presentation on China's rights in the South China Sea, highlighting it as a national priority [73]." Subsequently, the leak of this talk led to an inaccurate report by the *New York Times*, which mentioned that "[for] the first time the Chinese labeled the South China Sea a core interest, on par with Taiwan and Tibet."²⁷ With this media assertion having become a widespread meme over the following weeks, foreign and domestic pressures grew so overwhelming that it was hard for the Chinese and American leaders to clarify the matter. As a senior foreign policy official in China revealed, "once the story was out, the MFA could not publicly say that the South China Sea was not a core interest.....Nor could it state publicly that no senior officials had said the South China Sea was a core interest, that the *New York Times* source was wrong. This, too, might have raised the ire of nationalists within the population and the elite."²⁸ Arguably, the labeling of the South China Sea as part of "core interests" signaled China's claim to status preeminence. Here, the symbolic significance of the labeling outweighed the instrumental values, as it contributed little to China's de facto maritime control. Put differently, security imperatives—such as securing China's shipping lanes in Southeast Asia—did not entail high-profile declarations. China could have pursued a policy of "creeping assertiveness" to expand its maritime influence.²⁹

By contrast, the US officials saw a challenge to its hegemony looming on the horizon. In the aftermath of the "core interests" polemics, the US officials were reluctant to echo the Chinese proposal of the "core interests" on the occasion to which Beijing attached great symbolical importance.³⁰ There was no mention of the term "core interests" in the

²⁶ For the content analysis, see [71].

²⁷ See [74]. For the clarification, see [75].

²⁸ Cited from [76].

²⁹ See [77]. For an overview of Chinese attempt to strengthen control over the South China Seas, see [78].

³⁰ The only exception, though, was that the Secretary of Finance Timothy Geithner echoed this concept at the opening session. See [79].

US briefing on the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue 2010 Outcomes of the Strategic Track [80]. In the concluding joint statement of the S&ED, whereas China's State Councilor Dai Bingguo suggested four times that the bilateral relationship be based on respecting or accommodating the "core interests" of each side, the concept "core interests" found no echo on the US side [81]. This pattern of interactions reaffirms the **Implication 2** of status dilemma.

China's assertion of its core interests has more to do with status preeminence than security imperatives. The US then showed reluctance to accord the Chinese the desired status preeminence in Asia, as Washington feared that its acquiescence in Beijing's assertion of their prerogatives in the South China Sea could undermine the credibility of US capabilities or resolve to employ power in defense of its allies in the region. In short, America's status preeminence is intertwined with its geopolitical security interests. Subsequently, Secretary Clinton asserted America's role in the South China Sea disputes in which China was involved at the Hanoi ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010. At a meeting with senior officials from ASEAN countries as well as China, Clinton found it imperative to signal status preeminence of America in the regional order. She thus claimed that, "the United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea [82]."

Clinton's gesture was puzzling from the standpoint of security imperatives: prior to the Hanoi meetings, the US government did show signs of disinterest in raising the South China Sea issue, with a view to defusing tensions with China [83]. Viewed from the standpoint of status dilemma, however, Clinton's gesture was understandable: it represented an attempt to signal America's status as the established hegemon. That is, the US role in safeguarding the norm of freedom of navigation embodies America's status preeminence in world politics. The openly stated commitment to safeguarding that maritime norm, in particular, could demonstrate its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other nations. Only the global hegemon is entitled to the "command of the commons." To the extent that this is common knowledge, it shows the US was persistent in its rhetorical signaling of the established hegemonic status—hence the confirmation of the **Implication 4** of status dilemmas.

A participant in that meeting, the Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi was caught off guard by Clinton's remark, to which he protested by leaving the meeting for an hour. Apparently, Clinton's assertion of US role in guarding the free maritime order posed challenge to Chinese status as a rising power, which Yang felt compelled to defend. After his return, Yang engaged in a "rambling thirty minutes response," during which he forcefully asserted China's great-power status. In particular, the Chinese foreign minister charged Clinton's offer to mediate the South China Sea disputes as an "attack on China." And he subsequently dismissed a Singaporean minister with the words, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact [84]." Yang's response presents clear evidence that emotions could heighten status concerns: Clinton's challenge seemingly inspired a feeling of frustration on Yang's part which prompted him to assert China's status as "a big country." In this case, the Implication 1 of status dilemmas finds reaffirmation.

With Yang's words being widely cited as a prominent sign of China's growing ambition, the image of the Chinese quest for great-power status at the expense of America in Asia and beyond came to gain currency. In the long run, of course, China's

reclamation of the artificial islands in the South China Sea would undermine the US geopolitical influences. Yet, Chinese naval power was clearly no rival to the US command of the maritime commons, and will not be in the foreseeable future [85]. As such, the South China Sea should not have been an arena for the Chinese to engage in a zero-sum competition for status vis-à-vis the United States. Rather, asserting its claim in the South China Sea simply served the purpose of signaling China's status as an emerging power. In this regard, China has been imitating status-signaling acts of all great powers which aspired to being perceived as maritime power, rather than challenge the US maritime domination *per se*.

For Washington, however, the intrinsic values of the disputed maritime domains could be outweighed by the symbolic drawbacks of acquiescing in the perceived (or perhaps alleged) Chinese assertion of core interests in the South China Sea. This would have negative implications for America's status in Asia and beyond, which links to other tangible interests such as the command of the maritime commons. Hence, during her visit to Australia in November 2010, Clinton asserted that Dai said the South China Sea was a "core interest" of China and she expressed opposition immediately to Dai's remark [86]. It is less likely that Clinton misremembered her conversation with Dai than that she wanted to "deter China from attempting to add South China Sea to its list of core interests."³¹ As the US-China diplomacy over the "core interests" failed to clarify the status quo intention of each other in 2010, thereafter senior US officials as well as policy analysts came to express growing concern about the development of Chinese military power [88]. Hence the situation increasingly became analogous to the security dilemma. While those American concerns were rooted in a persistent lack of transparency of Chinese military budgets and uncertainty about the likely change of Chinese intentions, there is no denying that "independent of material power, leadership rhetoric and political statements can generate insecurity" in other states.³² Inasmuch as political rhetoric and diplomatic interactions have to do with status recognition, the status dilemma could trigger security dilemma dynamics.

Conclusion

The US-China diplomacy over the "core interests" represents a missed opportunity for a rising power and the established hegemon to redefine their cooperative framework. Ironically, while the bilateral diplomacy over the "core interests" mechanism was in large part motivated by sensitivities to the security dilemma, it ends up intensifying it.

Undeniably, the intensification of US-China competition in East Asia and beyond provides much evidence for the dynamics of security dilemma and the status competition, which are easy routes to the Thucydides Trap. The status dilemma, however, suggests that there is no preordained path to the Thucydides Trap. As the two great powers were aware of the potential security dilemma from the very beginning and took precautionary measures, the security dilemma might not have operated strongly to hinder the bilateral diplomacy at the time they attempted to introduced the "core interests" issue into the S&ED mechanism. Non-security interests seem to have played a pivotal role, but one

³¹ For the likely reasons for Clinton's (mis)representation of Dai's remarks, see [87].

³² *Ibid.*, 61.

should not rush to the model of status competition. If status as a relative gain has great values and status conflict is bound to be zero-sum, then the American and Chinese leaders should not have entered into negotiations over cooperation in the first place. It was only after the failed negotiation of the overall cooperative framework that the US-China relations came to show signs of security dilemma and zero-sum competitions for status.

The concept of status dilemma discussed above proves well suited for explaining why a situation of power transitions fosters misperception of intentions. This article pinpoints status dilemmas as a crucial source of misperceptions, which could aggravate structural tensions between the rising power and the established hegemon, making their conflict of interests hard to manage. Due to status dilemma dynamics, great powers in a situation of power transition are prone—though not destined—to suffer misperceptions. However, if the concept of status dilemma suggests that status conflict does not have to be zero-sum, optimism over the ability of two great powers to avoid the Thucydides Trap is warranted. If, moreover, status dilemma dynamics may underpin other mechanisms of conflict such as security dilemmas and zero-sum status competitions, the concept of status dilemma deserves more emphasis than it has received, not least due to its relevance to the Thucydides Trap.

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