

Pointless Lying about US China Policy

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In his book *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics*, John Mearsheimer argues that because there's so little trust in international politics—high politics in particular—there isn't very much lying in international politics. That is, lying wouldn't really do much good.

Yet American leaders constantly lie about US-China policy. They consistently protest when people claim the United States is encircling or containing China. But, in fact, Washington is encircling and containing China. In 2012, Washington declared it would devote 60 percent of its naval assets to the Asia-Pacific region. Washington is expanding its relationships with all countries that have territorial disputes with Beijing, and taking side with them in those territorial disputes.

The Obama administration justifies its Asia policy on the basis of an array of problems ranging from piracy, humanitarian needs, drug trafficking, and proliferation, among others. Except it's ridiculous to argue that all these needs together require, or could be fixed by, 60 percent of US naval assets. In other words, the official justification for US military posture in Asia is ridiculous.

The latest offender is Secretary of State John Kerry, who puffed up in outrage yesterday at a press conference during the Strategic and Economic Dialogue:

When I read some of the commentary about the United States and China, when I listen to some of the so-called experts, and they talk to us about our relationship, too many of them suggest that somehow the United States is trying to contain China, or that things that we choose to do in this region are directed at China. Let me emphasize to you today the United States does not seek to contain China. We welcome the emergence of a peaceful, stable, prosperous China that contributes to the stability and the development of the region, and that chooses to play a responsible role in world affairs...

Kerry's statement is in keeping with a long list of American leaders and policy analysts who express similar exasperation at being accused of containing China, or even that US policy in Asia is driven by concern about China. So what's going on here?

First of all, a Clintonian reading of the above could exonerate Secretary Kerry from charges of lying. (Mearsheimer may characterize Kerry's performance as ambitious "spinning," not lying.) In particular, the clause where he describes the US goals as being aimed at a "peaceful, stable, prosperous China that contributes to the stability and the development of the region, and that chooses to play a responsible role in world affairs" is doing a lot of work.

What he means by this phrase is that China can get as rich as it wants as long as its foreign policy resembles Switzerland's. Other key phrasings of this sentiment include where US officials express support for Chinese growth "as long as it doesn't seek to change the status quo" in East Asia. Of course, the status quo in East Asia means "American dominance of East Asia," and everything we know about international politics leads us to believe that if Chinese growth continues, it's not going to like American dominance of East Asia and likely will try to change it.

So I think a passing familiarity with both the English language and international politics would lead a neutral observer to conclude that Kerry is hoping listeners won't poke very hard at the mumbo-jumbo about the sort of China that Washington seeks, and will focus instead on the fact that he said Washington doesn't seek to contain China.

For years, I have puzzled over why American elites say this sort of thing. Surely they realize that Chinese elites, and even Chinese citizens, see American behavior, have a hard time squaring it with American rhetoric, and use the behavior rather than the rhetoric to inform their decisions about what's really going on. Right?

But I've decided that's the wrong question. One has to hope that American leaders know the Chinese don't believe the song and dance about not seeking to contain China. (If they hope the Chinese will believe it, US China policy is in deep trouble.) A better explanation is that this rhetoric is aimed at third parties.

If the United States forthrightly explained that it seeks to contain China's military power—and not its economic growth—countries in the region from which Washington seeks cooperation would have a harder time providing it. (In addition, various constituencies in the United States including the business community would begin to raise all sorts of questions about the policy.) The misdirection from U.S. elites allows these third parties to declare to China—with which all of these states have enormously important economic and in some cases development ties—that their relationships with the United States aren't about China. The potential risk to these states of declaring themselves arrayed against Chinese military power may make them less likely to cooperate at all. In this sense, the fiction about not seeking to contain China helps Washington get cooperation from risk-averse third parties.

Again, it's almost certain that the Chinese do not believe this, but differentiate in some way between a scenario in which countries in the region admitted they were cooperating in containing China and the present condition of slight plausible deniability.

Perhaps the biggest danger would be if U.S. policy elites began believing their own rhetoric about not containing China. If they do, they're going to have terrible trouble figuring out, let alone responding to, Beijing's reaction.

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