

A Critique of the "China Threat": The Logical and Empirical Dimensions

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For the past few years, there has been a growing body of literature on the so-called "China threat." Most of them have valiantly tried to substantiate the China threat argument with a collection of "hard facts"--but often without a critical evaluation of its logical validity. These fact-oriented contentions, however, are often not sufficiently convincing because same facts can be interpreted in different and even opposite ways.

This article analyzes the China threat arguments in terms of their logical aspects: empirical basis (EB).¹⁾ This papers poses the following question: "How are the arguments of the China threat produced?" from the epistemological point rather than "What is the China threat?" from the ontological point, thereby re-examining the validity of the arguments.

The Rationale behind the China Threat Arguments

The deductive explanation of a phenomenon generally has three steps; First, the universal statement (theory) is suggested; second, various empirical facts related to the theory, so-called "initial condition," are inspected; and third, by adding such a fact to the theory, the explanation of the phenomenon is fulfilled.²⁾

Most arguments of the China threat are also founded on this line of logic.³⁾ First, such various theories as "power transition,"⁴⁾ "balance of power,"⁵⁾ "democratic peace,"⁶⁾ and "neo-liberal institutionalism"⁷⁾ are proposed as the

1) The concept of "empirical basis" is based on Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos.

2) Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Science Editions, 1961), pp. 59-62.

3) For this, see Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Winter 1997/8, pp. 62-71.

4) See A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New Your: Alfred Knopf, 1968), pp. 338-76; Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 2.

5) See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979), ch. 6.

universal statements. Second, the description of China's reality has been implemented. The following examples are typical: "China is a challenge or not"; "balance of power in the East Asia is stable or not"; "China is a democratic state or not"; and "a state's intention correlates with its capability or not." Lastly, from such theories and empirical facts, the future of China is inferred.

At this point, what should be focused on is the second step: the description of China's reality as an initial condition. It is because, although China as a physical entity is unitary existence, the description of China reality is different and even opposite due to the contender's position. Accordingly, it requires a standard to judge the validity of each description. Empirical basis works for it.

The Concept of Empirical Basis

Empirical basis is related to how the singular statement (observation), from which the universal statement (theory) is verified or falsified, gets its validity. Generally, empirical basis can be divided into two forms: "dogmatic EB" and "methodological EB."⁸⁾

First, dogmatic EB excludes the fallibilism of a singular statement; the singular statement, once gotten, must not be doubted because human observation is believed to be an unbiased indicator. But, this dogmatic EB essentially faces with the problem of theory-laden observation; there is no neutral observation in that observation is essentially embodied in the researcher's own values.⁹⁾ Accordingly, it is impossible to induce universal statement from such biased observation.

On the contrary, methodological EB recognizes the fallibilism of observation; the dogmatic and neutral observation does not exist. It means that the validity of a singular statement cannot be secured until researchers inter-subjectively promise that the observation is correct. The girder of knowledge, consequently, is not embodied in the rock bottom but in the swamp, and nothing could be better than to hit the girder into the swamp if the girder is unstable.¹⁰⁾ As a result, the research strategy built on this EB does not judge the universal

6) See Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 1986, pp. 1151-1169.

7) See David A. Baldwin, "Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics," in David A. Baldwin ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 4-8.

8) This division of empirical basis is implemented by Imre Lakatos in his brilliant work, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

9) Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific discovery*, ch. 5.

10) *Ibid.*, p. 111.

statement only by empirical facts but simultaneously consider the context in which the observation occurs.

Analysis of the China Threat Arguments

The discourses of the China threat arguments can be classified into two categories; one is built on the dogmatic EB describing the initial condition--i.e., China's reality, and the other is on the methodological EB to do so.

Dogmatic EB

First of all, the China threat arguments by historical facts are based on dogmatic EB. For example, traditional Chinese leaders' belief in the effectiveness of force and the will to use it for the national interest are suggested to verify contemporary China's aggressiveness or propensity for war.¹¹⁾ On the other hand, China's traditional defensive strategy or other historical facts is exemplified to falsify the arguments.¹²⁾

These claims, however, face with "the problem of induction"¹³⁾ beside the problem of theory-laden observation in that there is no logical basis to accurately predict the future of China by historical facts regardless of the number of occurrences in the past. As a result, an illogical basis like belief or customs in David Hume's sense must have been provided to justify such rationale. That is precisely the "self-fulfilling prophecy' of a China threat.¹⁴⁾

There are other types of the China threat arguments that avoid the problem of induction, but which still face with theory-laden observation. Although they induce the China threat not by mere historical facts but by simultaneously using theories and facts, the description of the initial condition (i.e., Chinese reality) is still based on dogmatic EB. For instance, such mere hard facts as the rapid and sustained increase of defense budget,¹⁵⁾ alleged theft of nuclear secrets from the

11) Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1997, p. 30; Denny Roy, "Consequences of China's Economic Growth for Asia-Pacific Security," *Security Dialogue*, 1993, Vol. 24(2), p. 182.

12) Li Jijun, "Traditional Military Thinking and the Defensive Strategy of China," an Address at the United States War College, August 29, 1997; Chen Jian, "Will China's Development Threaten Asia-Pacific Security?", *Security Dialogue*, 1993 vol. 24(2), pp. 193-94; Bruce Cummings, "The World Shakes China," *The National Interest*, Spring 1996, pp. 28-41.

13) Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, pp. 27-30.

14) Robert S. Ross points out the self-prophecy of China threat in, "Beijing as a Conservative Power," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1997, p. 33.

15) Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Conflict: East Asia after the Cold War," in Robert S. Ross, ed., *East Asia in Transition: Toward a New Regional Order* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 31-32.

U.S.¹⁶⁾ and the low-level participation in the international regimes in East Asia are introduced as the evidences justifying a China threat.¹⁷⁾ However, these claims also disregard the problem of theory-laden observation since, if new initial conditions of China were suggested, such hard facts could be observed and interpreted in the opposite way as well.

Methodological EB

Arguments on the methodological EB have the feature of considering various initial conditions and contexts about the Chinese reality in dealing with the China threat issue. For example, pointing out the inferential rashness of a China threat verified by hard facts like GNP as an indicator, they even regard China as an incomplete nation- state rather than a superpower.¹⁸⁾ In addition, China's economic problems--inequality, inflation, lack of law, and stultified political system--are proposed as a context to explain the Chinese reality, notwithstanding China's impressive economic growth since the late 1970s.¹⁹⁾

China's military issues are also exemplified. It is argued that Chinese military modernization is not a sudden phenomenon in the post-Cold War, but it has been incrementally developed since the 1970s.²⁰⁾

The ever-growing defense budget is interpreted as compensation to the military unit, despite its widespread involvement in commercial activities.²¹⁾ A deficient information system²²⁾ and a limited "power projection capability"²³⁾ also become a reason to qualify a China threat.

There is also some contention to confine the Chinese dispute behavior into a specific issue such as territorial issues.²⁴⁾ Moreover, China's assertive behavior is

16) Dick Lugar, "Threats From China," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1999, p. A23; John F. Harris and Vernon Loeb, "Spy Case Tests U.S. Openness With China," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1999, p. A 01.

17) Denny Roy, "Assessing the Asia-Pacific 'Power Vacuum,'" *Survival*, Autumn 1995, p. 51-52.

18) Lucian W. Pye, "China: Not Your Typical Superpower," *Problems of Post Communism*, July-August 1996, p. 14.

19) Sungyul Oh, "The Reality of the Chinese Economy," *Contemporary China*, Catholic University (in Korea), Vol. 1., no.1, 1997, pp. 69-70; Edward Friedman, "Why China Matters," *Journal of International Affairs*, Winter 1996. p. 305; Thomas L. Friedman, "China's Choices," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1999.

20) Paul H. B. Godwin, "Uncertainty, Insecurity, and China's Military Power," *Current History*, September 1997, p. 253; Peter Van Ness, "Addressing the Human Rights Issue in Sino-American Relations," *Journal of Internal Affairs*, Winter 1996, 49, no. 2, pp. 321-24.

21) Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon, "China's Hollow Military," *The National Interest*, Summer 1999, p. 56.

22) Joseph S. Nye, "China's Re-emergence and the Future of the Asia-Pacific," *Survival*, Winter 1997-8, pp. 69-70.

23) Taeho Kim, "The Myth of a 'Hegemonic China': The Military Dimension," in Tae-Hwan Kwak and Melvin Gurtov, eds., *The Future of China and Northeast Asia* (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1997), pp. 163-72; David Shambaugh, "China's Military: Real or Paper Tiger?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1996. pp. 26-28; Paul H. B. Godwin, "Uncertainty, Insecurity, and China's Military Power," pp. 255-56.

interpreted in the context of its indigenous Realpolitik rather than by mere hard facts.²⁵⁾

Besides, China's military behavior in the South China Sea is explained in terms of internal interest of bureaucracies such as the PLA Navy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁶⁾ Some point out the disjunction between capability and intention to use the power²⁷⁾ as well as the lack of central control of domestic problems.²⁸⁾

Accordingly, arguments on the methodological EB can be said to be more sophisticated than those on the dogmatic EB in that they consider the contexts as well as empirical facts--which are only emphasized by dogmatic EB approaches. At this point, a criterion, of course, must be suggested to judge the claim founded on the methodological EB is acceptable or not. The Lakatosian suggestion is one solution-- whether the new theory that is made of adjusted initial condition is progressive or degenerating.²⁹⁾

In this sense, the intention-capability approach would be degenerating if China's intention cannot be corroborated in an empirical way. Besides, the bureaucratic model to interpreting the China threat is difficult to be a progressive one if external researchers cannot empirically inspect the internal bureaucratic interest.

On the contrary, China's deficient circumstances--economic or military ones-- can be suggested as a suitably-adjusted initial condition since such explanation has more empirical contents than mere growth-threat causality and can be empirically examined and corroborated. In addition, the views limiting China's aggressive foreign policy to a specific issue-area such as sovereignty can be progressive. It is because such hypotheses can be confirmed in many cases and therefore increases the information of China's behavior.³⁰⁾

24) By using MID (militarized interstate dispute) data, Alastair Iain Johnston makes clear the type and the level of the Chinese aggressive behavior. For this see, Alastair Iain Johnston, China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behavior 1949-92: A first cut at the data, *The China Quarterly*, March 1998, no. 153, pp. 1-30.

25) Thomas T. Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1996, pp. 37-52.

26) 26) See John W. Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea: the Interaction of Bureaucratic and National Interests," *The China Quarterly*, Dec 1992, pp. 999-1028; William J. Dobson and M. Taylor Fravel, "Red Herring Hegemon: China in the South China Sea," *Current History*, September 1997, p. 260.

27) Taeho Kim, "The Myth of a 'Hegemonic China': The Military Dimension," pp. 172-74; Fei-Ling Wang, "To Incorporate China: A New Policy for a New Era," *The Washington Quarterly*, winter 1998, p. 69.

28) David Lampton, "Think Again," *Foreign Policy*, Spring, 1998. p. 23.

29) When a newly adjusted theory from a pre-theory has more empirical contents that must be corroborated, the adjustment can be said progressive and accepted. See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," pp. 116-18.

30) The recent test case is China's disputative response to so-called "Liangguolun(two state discourse)" proposed by president of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui. See *Renmin Ribao* July 13, 1999.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to analyze the logic of the China threat arguments and criticize the logical faults in them in terms of empirical basis. Below are the findings of the analysis.

First, the discourses built on dogmatic EB generally have the feature of inducing or refuting the China threat by using a collection of mere hard facts about China. These statements, however, are difficult to accept as they face with the problem of induction and the theory-laden observation.

Second, the claims built on methodological EB commonly appear in the anti-China threat voices. They exclude the rash justification of China threat, and instead introduce several circumstances China faces as a new initial condition. Although such discourses avoid the problems dogmatic EB has, they also should be checked by a methodological standard: "progressive or degenerating?"

To conclude, it is difficult to analyze the fact-oriented China threat arguments in that an empirical fact allows observers to look at the point they prefer. For this reason, to examine the logical form of the China threat rather than the contents of it will be more productive for a rigorous analysis on China's future.