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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **David Firestein**

Episode 89: Differing Perceptions in U.S.-China
Relations

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Haenle: Recently, I was happy to sit down with friend and foreign policy expert David Firestein to discuss the different strategic perceptions of the United States and China with respect to regional and global security challenges. David spent nearly two decades in the foreign service from 1992 to 2010, including roles at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and Moscow. Now the Perot Fellow and a Senior Vice President at the EastWest Institute, he recently released a report entitled “‘Alternative’ Strategic Perceptions in U.S.-China Relations.” During our conversation, David and I discussed our experiences working in the U.S. government on China and the findings of his latest report, which exposes how differing perceptions between the U.S. and China inform and exacerbate policy and can fuel mistrust and strategic suspicion. I hope you enjoy our conversation and I encourage you to use the EastWest Institute’s website to view the full report entitled “‘Alternative’ Strategic Perceptions in U.S.-China Relations”, as well as leaving the China in the *World* podcast a rating and comment on iTunes.

Haenle: David thank you very much for being with us today on the China in the World podcast, we’re glad to have you joining us and I’m very much looking forward to discussing with you your recent report, which you released with the EastWest Institute, entitled “‘Alternative’ Strategic Perceptions in U.S.-China Relations”. As I mentioned to you earlier, I read the report, thought it was fascinating, and thought to myself, “We should have written this report!”, because at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, we bump into these different strategic perceptions on a daily basis. But let me just ask at the beginning: You explore in the report many of the areas of contention in the U.S.-China relationship, ranging from specific topics like cybersecurity and THAAD deployment to broader ones like the U.S. “Rebalance,” [otherwise known as] the “Pivot to Asia.” Maybe just to open, if you could just share with our listeners, why did you decide to write the report and how—why did you think it was important?

Firestein: Well, Paul, thanks so much. It’s an honor to be with you and we’re huge fans of what you do and it’s always great to be able to compare notes on these kinds of really important topics. The “alternative perceptions” construct is something that we, too, bump into a lot in the work that we do at the EastWest Institute in U.S.-China relations and on other issues that we work on as well. And it stems from the basic notion that one of the things we see is that there are differences of policy, but undergirding those differences of policy between the United States and China. There are often very different perceptions of, in some cases, the same set of facts, and in some cases, sets of facts that are not even agreed upon. And sometimes, it’s the perceptions that end up driving some of the biggest differences and policy responses, and we feel like it’s difficult—it’s not as fruitful as it can be to talk about policy unless you have an understanding of the underlying strategic, perceptual issues that undergird those policy choices. So whether it’s with respect to the issue of North Korea and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, or with respect to the issue of the South China Sea or Taiwan or East China Sea or the Pivot or Rebalancing to Asia, we found again and again that two countries are looking in many cases at the set of facts but just truly not seeing them the same way. What we hope to do in this report is to surface those differences so that the ensuing discussion about policy and about the relationship can take place on the basis of at least a mutual understanding of where those differences lie.

Haenle: You know, you said it, your institution, [the] EastWest Institute has been engaging with China on these issues for a long time, and I've been fortunate to be part of some of your activities. You write in the report that every major security policy difference between the United States and China has as its core—at its core—a divergence in strategic perceptions. Many of our bilateral tension points emerge from the different ways in which we see the world. How do we then—given this understanding—and your report actually lays out examples in a number of different areas, which is really quite useful. What are the mechanisms that we can use to ensure these perceptions don't lead to greater misunderstanding, or to lead basically to the U.S. and China talking past each other?

Firestein: Well, I think that phenomenon of talking past each other is very pronounced in the U.S.-China relationship, and it's a good way to put it. I think the premise of our work is that when we look at, for example, from a U.S. perspective at why China does what it does, let's say, with respect to North Korea, unless you understand how they're perceiving the issue, it sometimes is hard to make sense of the policy choices that they make. And in order to be able to have a fruitful discussion about what the policy differences are, we just feel that it's important to really understand why they're viewing the matter the way they do. So with respect to North Korea, for example, the question of who is really to blame for the tensions gives rise to a very fundamental perceptual difference. We may not change the perception, but we need to be aware of it so that we can address the underlying concerns. And that's why we've tried to lay out the different kinds of perceptual lenses that are applied. And we've gone one step than—in the interest of trying to show a fair and, kind of, balanced way of looking at these issues, by actually sourcing all of the characterizations that we make to primary sources that are authoritative from the two countries involved, so that when we say that China perceives the facet of the North Korea issue in this way or that way, we document that with an authoritative statement. Likewise for the United States. By surfacing that, we think that we can at least increase the quality of the dialogue, and that creates the possibility of generating solutions.

Haenle: You know, I tell this story often here in China, and I think it highlights the strategic perceptions that you've laid out in the report. I often felt—and you also served in government and policy positions—that we would come to China with delegations, whether it was part of the Pentagon or other government agencies, our delegation would sit across the table from our Chinese counterparts, our principal would deliver the talking points that we put together, and maybe during the session which lasted several hours, he might decide to pound his fist on the table and make some emphatic points. And the Chinese side would sort of do something very similar, they would use their talking points, pound their fist on the table. We would then leave, our delegation would then go to the "hold room," and we would then tell our principal that he did a great job, "I think the Chinese are really starting to get it." And I could just imagine in my own head the Chinese delegation in their hold room, basically telling their principal the same thing: "I think the Americans are finally starting to get it." How do we—basically, how can—what recommendations would you have for policy makers, given what you've laid out about these strategic perceptions, in terms of engaging or changing the behavior in order to deal with the mutual strategic suspicion. What are the kind of solutions?

Firestein: Well, I think the main solution, from the standpoint of the communications process, which you're talking about, I think, very accurately, is that in my experience, I have found that I

think representatives of our two nations as we come together around the table to talk about issue A or issue B, are typically not as honest with each other as I think we need to be on matters of real importance and urgency. We lay out our talking points, the Chinese lay out their talking points, it's kind of set pieces and it's often very scripted and we don't always say what we really think. And there may be a sense of decorum, a sense of diplomatic protocol, a sense that we don't want to cause discomfort or awkwardness, and we often don't say what's really on our mind. For example, and I'll just use one example to illustrate this point, and it's a point I've made in a broader context about U.S.-China relations, and I think it's what I call an inconvenient truth in the relationship that is very often overlooked and avoided.

But I think that undergirding the U.S.-China relationship is a fundamental—a fundamental mutual perception that is never discussed. Namely, that from a U.S. perspective, there is a primal anxiety about China that undergirds our thinking about China that is rooted in the fact that we wittingly or unwittingly as a nation see China as the only country in the world that can fundamentally change our way of life for the worse, primarily in an economic and trade sense. And that sense of existential competitive threat from China is not something that we give full play to in our discussions. On the other side of the ledger, if it were my judgement, if we're being honest, I think there is an underlying primal anxiety on the part of the Chinese towards the United States that is rooted in the fact that the United States, in my judgement, is viewed by the Chinese as the only country on the planet Earth that can fundamentally change the Chinese political and social system. And, not that the U.S. tends to do that, seeks to do that, wants to do that, but that it does have a capability that could essentially end China's way of life the way that it knows it. And those very profound anxieties about each other are not talked about but rather, and I'll conclude with this point, but we often say we have so many mutual interests, there are so many things we can do together, everything is fine, we just need to work together. But I think that by not recognizing and validating the understandable fears that we have toward each other, we miss an opportunity to elevate the level of our dialogue, and I think it's an absence of what might be called "strategic honesty."

Haenle: It's fascinating, and I think I would agree with you on the two examples that you gave for the United States and China. I think the anxiety Americans feel, in my own sense, can be seen in the way we responded to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. You know, when I served in government, we were pushing Robert Zoellick's famous phrase, "China should be a responsible stakeholder," and encouraging China to do more to contribute to international public goods. They stepped forward with this Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and we tried to get our best friends not to join it, which showed our insecurity. They ended up joining it, which showed our weakness, we were isolated in the end. The Chinese anxiety about the United States trying to damage—or change China's political system—I think can be seen in the accusations that the United States was behind the demonstrations in Hong Kong. And you know, that the U.S. was the evil black hand, trying to cause the Chinese Communist Party or the government in China problems, and ultimately to lead to an overthrow of the Chinese government. And I think it's fascinating because you—in those two examples—I think you can see the kind of dynamics that you're talking about and the perspectives, both Chinese and American perspectives. How—I mean, one suggestion you've made is just being more honest, being more candid and frank about how we see these issues. The case of the Hong Kong demonstrations, I know President Obama raised it with President Xi Jinping and said he has seen evidence—he has seen articles that talk about a black hand of the United States in those efforts, and if the Chinese leadership has proof, they

should bring it to President Obama and he'll do something about it because, according to his view, we're not involved in that. And so, that seemed to have a positive impact. What other kind of things can the two governments do to deal with these two anxieties that each side has going forward.

Firestein: Well, I think we certainly have a lot of contact between our governments. We've had the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, we've now had this comprehensive dialogue with these four substantial elements to it. I don't think—

Haenle: They've just announced today, by the way, that next week, they'll have the first diplomatic and security dialogue.

Firestein: Indeed. And I think the other elements of that will play out this year in the run up to probably a late 2017 Trump-Xi Summit in Beijing if I understand correctly. And I think, you know, there's a lot of contact, there's a lot of engagement. There has been for a long time. I think there probably aren't two governments in the world that engage more extensively than the United States and China. And yet, these fundamentally different perceptions exist, and I think the fundamental primal fears or concerns in the relationship are generally seen as too awkward or uncomfortable to raise. So you know, I think oftentimes, and it's kind of a standard talking point on both sides, "We just need more engagement." And what I'm saying is that I'm not convinced we need more engagement. What I think is that we need higher quality engagement, more honest engagement. I think at a broader level, or maybe a more fundamental level, public diplomacy—in the sense that citizen-to-citizen and people-to-people exchanges are very important. One suggestion that I've made—a friendly piece of unsolicited advice I've made to our Chinese friends is, perhaps it's time for China to emulate a best practice in terms of U.S. public diplomacy, and that's the International Visitor Leadership Program that we have that brings a large number of Chinese to the United States every year. When I worked at the U.S. Embassy here in Beijing about 20 years ago, I used to administer that project, and I saw the impact that sometime in the United States had on some people who had never been to the United States.

Haenle: Yeah, knocking down preconceived notions and things like that.

Firestein: Absolutely. And I think that creating a more nuanced and accurate understanding about this country. And I think it might be time for China to have that type of engagement with the world where they really bring people over and give people a chance to understand this country as we would say it in the United States, "warts and all." So I think there are a number of different things at the broad level, but I think that in the short term, this is a pretty difficult issue to get appreciable progress on. We have to keep after it to increase the quality and the honesty of our dialogue in a very broad sense.

Haenle: What can scholars and experts do in this regard? For example, I know that you have the distinction of being the first foreigner to write a regular column in a Chinese newspaper, going back to 1995. And so, you know, Americans can write in Chinese publications, Chinese experts can write in U.S. publications. How can that help, and how should scholars and experts think about approaching it in that way in terms of helping to knock down these strategic—different strategic perceptions?

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Firestein: Well I think that plays—that kind of communication, that kind of publishing, plays a very important role because obviously in different ways, the mass media in both countries, and now the social media in both countries, play a very substantial role in shaping perceptions and I was really appreciative of the fact that as early as 1995, I had the chance, even as a sitting U.S. diplomat in Beijing, to have a column in the Beijing Youth Daily. And I didn’t—

Haenle: *Qingnianbao*, right?

Firestein: Yeah, this is the *Beijing Qingnianbao*. And I had—I had the opportunity to address two different kinds of issues. One was, from an American perspective, looking at interesting things that were happening in China. And here I’m not speaking about policy, but about social and cultural issues and values, and things like that. And what I was hoping to do was help Chinese understand how Americans look at some of these things because sometimes you have to get outside yourself to see things more clearly. And there’s a Chinese idiom about that about *Mangshan*. But by the same token, I wanted to help Chinese readers understand the United States. And the basic model I tried to use—and here I wasn’t talking mostly about foreign policy, but rather some of the social and cultural debates that were happening in the United States at that time, whether about physician assisted suicide, or gun control, or even gay marriage. And I was struck by the openness by which the editors and the leadership at Beijing Youth Daily allowed me to delve into those issues in a very—a very open way. There I was talking about the United States and there was space to do that. Obviously, that space exists for Chinese to utilize to try to help Americans try to understand China. And I think that kind of exchange makes a lot of sense and is very valuable. But the key is to be honest, to be authentic, to be real, and to not create a perception that it’s not mere “propaganda” or “talking points,” because readers on both sides see through that, and it undermines the value and the effectiveness of that kind of communication.

Haenle: Well, David, congratulations on the report, and congratulations on all the great work that the EastWest Institute is doing. I know you’ve been out here all week for a number of meetings with Chinese scholars and experts and government officials. I hope those were helpful and very fruitful. We look forward to having you back in China. Maybe next time you, you visit the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center and do another *China in the World* podcast.

Firestein: Absolutely. Paul, thank you so much. We are huge fans of the Center, and we really applaud the work that you do, and I look forward to staying in great touch.

Haenle: Thanks very much.

Firestein: Thank you.

Haenle: That’s it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our site and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening. Be sure to tune in next time.