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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **John Garver**

Episode 52: How China's Rise Affects Its
Neighbors, Part II

July 20, 2015

Zhao: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy located in Beijing. I am Tong Zhao, an associate in Carnegie’s nuclear policy program based at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. I will be your host today.

I am very delighted to be joined by Professor John Garver, who is a professor at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He specializes in Asian international relations, specifically China’s foreign relations, and has written considerably on this subject. He is the author of 11 books and over 100 articles dealing with China’s foreign relations. His book “The Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China” is one of the most widely used textbooks in the United States on China’s foreign relations. Dr. Garver has served on the editorial boards of a number of journals. He is a member of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and the U.S.-China People’s Friendship Association. In the past, Dr. Garver lived in China for six years and facilitated various college exchange programs. He enjoys discussing China’s foreign relations in various forums, and has today joined us in Beijing to talk about the impact of China’s rise on its relationships with the United States and its neighbors. So, welcome, Dr. Garver, to Carnegie–Tsinghua. I’m very thrilled to have you here today.

Garver: Thank you very much.

Zhao: Now, let’s talk a little bit more about China and the United States. Of course, the U.S. is a major player in the region, the United States is paying a lot of attention to China’s so-called periphery diplomacy. Many Chinese neighbors are actually U.S. allies and friends. So, the United States, naturally, is closely monitoring what is going on in the Asia-Pacific. So, given all the new developments in the region in recent years, how do you think this has affected, or has changed, American calculations, and how has this affected Sino-U.S. relations?

Garver: The fundamental geopolitical objective of the United States in Asia, I believe, is to prevent the domination of Asia by a single power or coalition of powers. That was established as the U.S. strategic objective in 1898, when a guy named William Rockhill, who was, I think, an assistant secretary of state, devised the logic of the “open door” policy. Rockhill said, “Well, look, there’s the Russian Empire, coming into northeast China, and we have a lot interests there, and they’re being threatened by Russia. The Japanese are also coming in. And they, both the Japanese and the Russians, think that there should be a special Japanese or Russian sphere of influence.” Of course, this was the rivalry that would evolve into the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and 1905. William Rockhill thought this through and said, “You know, what the United States should do, is support *bao qind di guo*, support the Qing empire, support China, because a strong and united China will be able to resist Russia, be able to resist Japan, and balance them. And, by supporting a strong and united China we can prevent the domination or prevent the encroachment on our interests in China by Russia and Japan.” So, this was the origin of a long-term American policy of supporting a strong and united China as a bulwark of a balance of power in Asia. From the American perspective, as long as power was divided in east Asia among several centers of power, it would not threaten the United States, the United States’ security, home territory, or its interests. But, if Asia became dominated by a single center of power, then it would constitute both a threat to our interests in Asia and a threat to the homeland of the United States. This, I think, has been the guiding principle of the U.S.-Asian policy since 1898.

Now, in 1971-72, the United States and China came together on the principle of anti-hegemony. Both sides said that neither sought hegemony in east Asia, and both would oppose the efforts by any power to achieve hegemony in east Asia. The anti-hegemony understanding between the United States and China had been the basis of a very fruitful 30 year period of cooperation between the countries. I think it was a return to the older U.S. tradition that existed prior to 1949. Warren Cohen, who wrote the most well-used history of U.S.-China relations, "U.S. Response to China," argues that the 22 years between 1949 and 1971 was a great aberration and that the broader pattern to which the two, which the United States returned in 1972, was of cooperation with China to maintain a stable balance of power in Asia.

What's happening now, I think, in Sino-U.S. relations is that China's increasingly assertive use of its power towards its small neighbors, and the insistence by China that the United States stay out of these conflicts is increasingly raising the specter in the United States that China might achieve hegemony over east Asia.

Now, it's not a question of intentions. When countries drive for hegemony, curiously enough, in many cases, they don't actually seek hegemony. The United States rise to global preeminence started 1940, when the U.S. leadership under Franklin D. Roosevelt decided we had to use American power to support Britain in standing alone in Europe against Nazi Europe, and China in east Asia in standing alone against the Empire of Japan. And, the United States began mobilizing its resources for an all-out confrontation with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. And, the consequence of that, of course, was that by 1945 those empires had been destroyed and the United States was the global hegemon, challenged only by the USSR. But global hegemony was not the objective of the United States in 1940. That was the result of American policies, that was the outcome of American policies, but the objective for the United States in 1940 was to prevent the domination of Europe by Nazi Germany and prevent the domination of Asia by Imperial Japan. And by the way, when those two powers, Nazi Germany and Japan, came together in the Tripartite Treaty in September, 1940, that was the greatest threat to American security that ever existed, maybe since the British burned Washington in 1812.

So, when I talk this matter over with my Chinese colleagues, and I have, many times, the response is, "We don't seek hegemony." And of course, but that's not the point, of course you don't seek hegemony, but the outcome of China's responses could be hegemony. For example, if, in conflicts between a powerful China and weak neighbors, the Americans abide by the principle of, "well, we'll stay out of these; these are purely bilateral countries and you, Philippines and China, work out your own problems." And, of course, in that purely bilateral cooperation, what can the Philippines do but *ketou*? Well, the result could be a major step towards hegemony. It's not that China intends this or imagines this; the Chinese self-perception is "We're not threatening anything, we don't have any aggressive territorial demands." First of all, that's not the perception of China's neighbors, and secondly, the unintended consequence of the successful implementation of Chinese policy could well be Chinese hegemony. If Japan agrees to stay non-military, a minor military power, if Taiwan is assimilated into the *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo* on the basis of *yiguo liangzhi*, and if all the little countries of southeast Asia basically say, "All the South China Sea belongs to China, and we don't have any 200-mile EEZ, and any security issues we have with China we'll discuss with China only," I think that goes an awfully long way towards looking like Chinese hegemony. And, this is the specter I see that's confronting China and the United States.

Zhao: So, talking about U.S.-China relations, we cannot really avoid discussing the so-called new type of great power relations. President Xi Jinping himself is very much committed to this

concept, and during the APEC summit last year in Beijing, President Xi met with President Obama and they had in-depth exchanges on related issues. So, what's your opinion of China's proposal for a new type of great power relations, between China and United States? You have talked about the U.S. perspective on the need to balance the geopolitics in Asia-Pacific, to avoid the emergence of hegemonic power in the region, but if we look at the current proposal from the Chinese side, do you think this new type of great power relations model is a practical one for managing the so-called most important bilateral relationship in the world?

Garver: On the one hand, the answer is not simple. I think that the inspiration for this notion of a new type of great power relationship was inspired by the understanding of the tragic history of the rise of great powers, the Thucydides trap, the fear of rising powers inspired in the minds of incumbent great powers, and an ardent desire to avoid that, to avoid a confrontation between the United States and China. And, who could object to that? So, I think that that is the fundamental origin of it.

On the other hand, if the United States agrees to respect China's core interests. The crux of this new type of great power relationship, as I understand it, is a promise by both sides to respect the core interests of the other. If the United States makes that promise—as I understand it, President Obama did—then whenever China says, "This is in our core interest and you promised to respect our core interests, therefore you have to do what we want you to do on this," why, two things follow. One, an invitation to China to say, "This is our core interest, you better promise to obey it," and secondly, it provides China with a ready-made negotiating leverage of insincerity.

There's a fundamental asymmetry in the governmental—well, there are many asymmetries in the governmental structures of China and the United States. One, is that Chinese officials stay in office for long periods of time, 10, 20, 30 years, and accumulate immense experience, whereas the leading officials in the U.S. executive agencies rotate through those on a two or four, or at most, eight-year schedule. So, what happens is the Chinese officials know the negotiating record, they know it very well, but you might have an American official—an assistant secretary, deputy secretary of state—that's been in office for a year or two years, and they don't know it. And what the U.S. has found in negotiating was that the Chinese would, from the American perspective, manipulate the negotiating record to say, "You promised this and that," when, in fact, the Americans hadn't promised this and that. It was a negotiating tactic.

So, what the U.S. State Department did was commission a study by a prominent American-China specialist, a guy named Richard Solomon, who I believe now is the head of the U.S. Institute of Peace, to do a study of China's negotiating strategy, and Solomon issued a very good two-volume study, one was analysis, the other was a chronology, of China's negotiating strategy. And, one of the basic conclusions of that study, was that the common Chinese negotiating strategy was to get their opponent, or the other side, to agree to a principle, and then to use that principle to lever the other side. And, if you agree to the principle, and then if you're in a situation and the other side doesn't comply with China's view of that that principle, then the charge is insincerity. If the other side is insincere, then they have to prove their sincerity. So, the conclusion of Solomon's study—it was in the early '80s maybe, it's called "Negotiating Strategy of the People's Republic of China," something like that—was to abstain from making these commitments, to negotiate the issues. "What are the issues on the table? We'll negotiate these issues, but we don't need to put it in a large, principled framework," because to do that gives China the negotiating advantage. And, of course, it's exactly to secure that negotiating advantage that China pushes for principles at first.

So, if you put the new type of great power relationship in that framework, China is pushing for a principle which it then will use as leverage with the United States on issue after issue. When President Obama made that commitment—again, my understanding, I’m just a professor—but my understanding is that there was a lot of opposition within the U.S. government, especially from within the defense department; they thought that was a bad idea exactly for the same reason that Richard Solomon alluded to. It’s not as though the American military wants a confrontation with China, but they don’t want to encourage or to create a situation in which China might be invited to say, "This and this and this are our core issues, and therefore, the United States, to prove its sincerity, had better do what we say."

Zhao: It’s a very interesting point. Even though I may not call that a Chinese strategy, rather, I think it more reflects the Chinese way of thinking, it more reflects a Chinese philosophy that has deep roots in [Chinese] culture. China is inclined to first clarify the general principles—

Garver: Good point.

Zhao: —the general guidelines, and that reflects your sincerity in the negotiations. And then, it’s easier for us to discuss the practical issues, the operational issues, the technical issues. So, I think that more reflects the Chinese way of thinking, but I think that’s a very interesting point and you also point out that China and the United States have different government structures and that also influences the way that they talk to each other; I think that’s a very good and interesting point.

In your writing, you have mentioned the great power transition that seems to be underway. Do you think that the most recent confrontation between the United States and China over China’s land reclamation activity in the South China Sea is a result of such a great power transition? And, if so, what can China and the United States do to ease the tensions associated with the great power transition?

Garver: Thank you. I think you framed the question very well at the very beginning. What’s happening is that China’s power is greater and greater and China’s leaders have decided to use that power with some degree of assertiveness to defend China’s claims, to secure China’s claims; and that’s very popular with the Chinese people and that popularity is a factor in inspiring that. And, you have a growth of Chinese naval capabilities. A Chinese aircraft carrier, for example, is not a major concern to the United States Navy. It is a major concern to the Philippines; it is a major concern to Vietnam.

A major factor constraining Chinese air capabilities in the Spratly areas has been the great distance from Chinese airbases. The fact that to reach those distances in the Spratly Islands Chinese airplanes had to carry a lot of fuel, which means they don’t carry many munitions, and it means when they get there they have about five minutes and then they have to turn around and go back. But, an aircraft carrier and landing strips in the South China Sea will greatly increase China’s ability to assert control over that area. So, their land reclamation, together with the aircraft carrier and, in general, the whole broader growth of Chinese military capabilities, I’d agree with your formulation that China is using its greater and greater military capabilities to assert its claims—you can say to defend its claims—in these disputed regions.

There’s a couple of points. One, is the freedom of navigation. Since its founding, the United States has been a commercial republic. It has seen commerce, sea-based commerce, as central to American vitality, to American wealth, American power. The United States is a

commercial republic; it is and always has been a commercial republic. So, navigation, freedom of the sea is important, and the South China Sea is a major transportation corridor. But, I don't think that's the fundamental thing—all ships can go around there—but the more fundamental thing is the Philippine alliance with the United States. The Philippines and the United States have had this alliance since, I guess, '47—the Philippines became independent in 1946, before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, before the Soviet Union arrived in Asia. But, we have this traditional relationship, and the Philippines feels that its vital economic interests, its vital territorial interests are being threatened by China's activities in the South China Sea.

And so, a weak Philippines and a strong China, what do they do? Well, they're turning to the Americans, and saying, "Will you support us?" And so, the Americans are given the choice of supporting the Philippines and participating in the encirclement of China, or not supporting the Philippines, thereby telling the Philippines, "You're on your own;" and the Philippines can go to Japan and India—and they are going to Japan and India—but Japan and India might not be adequate, and so the Philippines' choice will be to rely on maybe an additional untrustworthy partner like India or Japan, or *ketou* to China. Then we're back to this basic security dilemma of Chinese geo-hegemony in east Asia.

If the whole South China Sea is China's territorial sea, and Vietnam doesn't have a 200-mile EEZ, and Taiwan is incorporated into the PRC, and Japan agrees to minimal military power, and maybe to, you know, dissolve its alliance with the United States or allow that alliance with the United States to be conditioned by China, that looks an awful lot like hegemony. And then you put in the political consequences of these very ambitious road-building projects, *yidai yilu*, and you have a scary outcome from the standpoint of the United States.

Zhao: I also think that Chinese territorial claims over South China Sea are not very clear. But, it did officially state that it does not claim the entire South China Sea as its territorial water. You also mentioned the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and I don't think the civilian shipping in the South China Sea is affected at all, and I think that China has no intention—I think China has made it very clear that civilian shipping will never be affected. What might be affected is the activity of some military vessels or airplanes in some areas of water in the South China Sea, but that's totally different from civilian shipping. But, in either case, I think the tension over the South China Sea is just one example or one indication of the concept of the so-called great power transition that you mentioned. So, at the strategic level, especially between the U.S. and China, what should the two countries do to manage this great power transition, to make it less confrontational and make it a smooth transition, if it is going to happen at all?

Garver: Given that what's underway in the world today is this profound power transition and the emergence of a new global power, and the challenge that that necessarily presents to an incumbent power, it's remarkable to me that China-U.S. relations are as good as they are. The economic relationship is very strong, the cultural relations are very strong, and what's going on here, this cultural relationship, growing interaction between the people in the two countries; there's a strength, a remarkable strength to U.S.-China relations based upon, I think, cultural and economic factors. And, the leadership of both sides, and the mainstreams of public opinion on both sides, have committed to avoiding confrontation. I think that the leaders of both sides and the people, the mainstream political thinking and popular thinking on both sides recognize that a confrontation would be disastrous for both regardless of who wins at the end.

Just how you [manage that transition], well—the standard rubric is to increase dialogue, and increase mutual trust, and eliminate strategic mistrust, and, for example, this podcast and things like that. [This podcast is] followed by a thousand and I wouldn't disparage that, I think it's useful, but, again, I come back to thinking that the greater danger, perhaps the greatest danger, is that China's people, and maybe even their analysts, don't really understand how China's behavior and China's action is perceived by its neighbors. From Japan's perspective, from the Philippines perspective, from the Indian perspective—which we've not talked about—from the Vietnamese perspective, China is an aggressor. And, China is claiming territory and asserting its control over territory that it hasn't asserted [control over] before. That's not the case in India, but it is in the case of the Philippines and Vietnam and Japan. So, there's no easy solution. I'm afraid I can't provide the magic solution to the deepening security dilemma.

Zhao: This is the toughest geopolitical question everyone is facing today. But, I do agree with you that it's really important that everyone try to put oneself into the shoes of the other, and try to develop more sympathy towards the other's position and perception, and that is really important.

Garver: Let me just give one other answer. I think the one way to build, to strengthen the U.S.-China relationship is to enhance our cooperation on areas of common concern. The American idea has been that—the Chinese idea, I think, under Mao and Zhou, was that we set aside areas of disagreement and find areas of common agreement, and cooperate in those areas. And, I think that China is, in the last several years, becoming more and more willing to do so.

Earlier we referred to China's increasing activity, the proactive diplomacy, and I think that one manifestation of that is increased Chinese willingness to actively cooperate with the United States. In Afghanistan, you see that. I think you see that in the Iran nuclear talks. China has played a very—in 2012, '13, '14 China has played a very interesting role in the Iran nuclear talks trying to mediate between Iran and the United States to peacefully resolve the Iran nuclear issue, and I think that's a great thing; it's a very important manifestation of Chinese-U.S. cooperation. If China and the United States can cooperate on issues like the Iran nuclear issue and Afghanistan, or the maintenance of peace and stability in Pakistan, or managing the whole series of problems related to that, that I think would go a long way towards less strategic mistrust.

Zhao: Great. On that optimistic note, Dr. Garver, thank you very much for spending time with me today, and for offering very insightful comments. I deeply appreciate it.

Garver: You're welcome. It's been a great pleasure seeing you again and being here today. Thank you very much.

Zhao: That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read or learn more about the U.S.-China relationship, you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. I encourage you to visit and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.