Interview with Professor Avery Goldstein

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Q. This year marks the 100th anniversary of WWI. Some people find some similarities in between the world before WWI and the world today. We could see that the technology is developing fast, people’s lives are progressing, but conflicts are accumulating. Do you think this analogy is appropriate? Is there any possibility of a major crisis or even war breaking out today, especially in East Asia?

A. I do worry a little bit. One of the similarities between the situation today in East Asia and the situation in Europe just before 1914 is that there was some uncertainty about alliance commitments — who would support whom in the event of confrontation or crisis. People sort of knew, but weren’t exactly sure. People did not realize that as a crisis developed, by making their statements supporting one side or the other, or preparing for the possibility of military conflict, they were beginning to take positions that made it difficult for both sides to back away.

The situation today in East Asia is different for two reasons. One is that it’s pretty clear who the allies are, who is committed to whom, especially that everybody knows about American alliances in East Asia. But I do think there is a lot of uncertainty about how serious these commitments are on both sides. On the American side, many Americans believe: well, the Chinese wouldn’t dare push the Japanese and Philippines too hard because they know the United States has treaties. On the Chinese side, the view is that the Americans have to understand we are very serious about these things. They don’t fully appreciate that the Americans are also very serious about supporting American allies. So the concern is that you can have a crisis developed in which both sides make stronger and stronger statements, maybe even moving their military forces in ways that increase the possibility for an
accident, or even for a limited conflict which then can escalate.

Another big difference is that there was no nuclear weapon before WWI. Both China and the United State have nuclear weapon now. No matter what kind of crisis or conflict takes place, both sides understand that if the conflict becomes serious enough, they have to worry about it escalating to a certain point that one or both sides begin to think about using nuclear weapons. That’s an incentive for both sides to be more cautious that didn’t exist in 1914. As you may know, in 1914, military technology led political leaders to believe that war would be quick and easy. I think today we understand wars are rarely quick and easy.

Q. Some people argue that with intensive economic interaction within the region, there is little possibility of major conflict. Do you agree? Was it the same one hundred years ago?

A. A hundred years ago, there was a lot of economic interdependence among the European countries. But when the states found themselves in crisis, they decided that other issues, their national security interests were more important than economic interests. I think the same thing is true today in East Asia. Everybody benefits from economic interactions, international investment and trade, and that’s a good reason why states want to avoid conflict if possible. But if the issue is serious enough, if for the Chinese the issue is about territorial sovereignty, or for the Americans the issue is about America’s reputation for supporting its allies, they may decide that is important enough, that this is what they focus on, not economic issues. For example, in the early 2000s, there were some people, especially in Taiwan, who believed that the Chinese wouldn’t do anything provocative because Beijing didn’t want to ruin the Olympics – that if China acted against Taiwan, the Americans and others wouldn’t go to the Olympics. The Chinese said, “We don’t care. If Taiwan provokes us, we will do these things to Taiwan.” And I believe the Chinese would have. So, yes, there are costs you don’t want to pay, economic costs, but there are some issues that are important enough that countries overlook or discount the economic costs. We’ve seen this today in Russia; sanctions are imposed, but the Russians care more about some other things than economic costs.

Q. What about public opinion? What’s the role of nationalism in contributing to or preventing crisis?

A. Nationalism exists everywhere. It’s potentially more influential in affecting the
decisions that China’s leaders make on foreign policy issues, for two reasons.

One is that the average Chinese, *Laobaixing*, who go through the Chinese school system and see the Chinese media. The official history they learn is strongly nationalistic. It portrays foreigners like the Japanese, and to some extent like the Americans, as having treated China unfairly, and this cultivates an attitude of victimization and the desire to not ever let that happen again. So the Chinese are especially easily offended by actions of others that touch on nationalist concerns.

The other thing is that I think that the Chinese Communist Party leaders worry that if they don’t take a strong position that satisfies the nationalistic public opinion they have helped create, their ability to maintain their positions of unquestionable authority would erode, or be challenged. Because today they can’t say the CPC should rule because we are building communism. They say we are building a rich and powerful China, a Chinese nation that can stand up for its interests; they feel they have to demonstrate that they are doing that.

**Q. It sounds like a trap set for themselves.**

**A.** I don’t know if it’s a trap, but it certainly limits their freedom to maneuver.

**Q. A new challenge for today’s world is transnational terrorism. What’s the role of China and the US in fighting against terrorism?**

**A.** Part of the answer is this is an area where China and the United States can cooperate, because they share some common interests in fighting against transnational terrorism and crime. The risk for China is that its leaders include too many different things under the category of transnational terrorism. So if China cracks down on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, accusing them of terrorism, the United States will support that counter-terrorism operation as long as China doesn’t label everybody in Xinjiang who is Muslim as terrorist, and as long as China clearly identifies the transnational connections in these groups. I think there is a risk for the Chinese leadership to go too far and then this becomes not an area of cooperation with the US and Europe, but becomes yet another area of disagreement. Because for Americans and Europeans, they have mixed views. On the one hand, they agree that you cannot tolerate terrorism, so the Uyghurs who engage in terrorist activities should be punished. But they also believe that the real roots of terrorism in China are the policies toward Xinjiang. So this issue are is not quite a win-win situation for
the US-China relations, but it’s an area where there is more cooperation than some other areas.

**Q. There is a catchphrase “peaceful rise” in China, which seems to be a good wish but not the reality. We have seen tensions between China and neighbor countries. Do you think it’s possible for China to rise peacefully?**

**A.** I think it’s more difficult now than it was 6 years ago. Before 2008, China had pretty successfully presented to the region and the world that it was determined to be different from other rising powers; that China's rise would not only be peaceful but also benefit the development of Asia and the world economy. And China's behavior was consistent with that kind of vision.

After the global recession in 2008 and 2009, China became much less focused on cooperative endeavors within the region and much more interested in preserving or insisting on China’s rights and interests in the region. Scholars disagree about why this happened. But this is the period when you see the territorial disputes getting more intense with Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan. And I think a lot new suspicions developed among countries like Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and ASEAN countries generally, who had welcomed China’s peaceful rise in the early 21st century but became very suspicious after 2008. Some of these countries then tried to convince the US: we’re worried about China, please come and help us, back us up. And the Americans answered that call with the rebalancing strategy.

I think the Chinese understood that maybe its shift was a mistake, so they tried to emphasize: no, no, no, we are still determined to rise peacefully. Dai Bingguo and people like him said: no, no, no, we haven’t changed. But China’s actions made its neighbors nervous.

**Q. What’s your explanation of such change?**

**A.** I agree with those people who make the argument that China was surprised by a few things about the world after 2008, and didn’t think they had to be quite as cautious and careful. For example, most economies were suffering from recession, but China didn’t suffer much. I think that China believed that its role in the international economy was growing much faster than even they had expected. I think they believed that the Americans were busy in Iraq and Afghanistan, and didn’t have time to pay attention to the region. I think there are some people in
China who believe that since China is richer and stronger, it should be able to do more. The expectation that some people and some military have is that, well, what’s the point of being rich and strong if we can’t defend our interests in the Diaoyu Islands? The surprising, unexpected speed with which China thought its capability had increased while others were struggling led it to believe that, well, maybe it didn’t have to be as cautious, that it was not as tightly constrained. What happens to countries when they are not tightly constrained? They do stupid things. United States does it all the time. There is no more Soviet Union. We want to invade Iraq, we invade. That was stupid, but we did it. I think in the Chinese case, the feeling was that there was nobody that could stop it if it pushed a little bit. China did. And then others pushed back. Now I think China is trying to figure out: how does it manage the situation. I don’t think they can go back. They can still say peaceful rise, but I don’t think China can really go back to that same approach.

Q. Do you think there is disagreement among the political leaders?

A. Almost certainly. Every country’s leaders have disagreements. I don’t think there is a big division between military and civilians. I think there are civilians who are more hawkish or hardline, and there are military who are more hawkish and military who are more diplomatic, the same as the civilians. I think the military in China still does take its orders from the civilians. The Party controls the military. And I think that, on the evidence we have, Xi Jinping is a stronger leader than Hu Jintao was. What that means is that the Party’s control over foreign policy and military is stronger.

Q. Another catchphrase: building “new type of major power relationship” with US. China proposed it, but it seems that the US government didn’t respond to it. Is there any concern or worries about this concept among the American decision makers? Why?

A. Part of the problems is that Americans don’t know what it means. It's konghua. Then the concern is that the US might be agreeing to something that it doesn’t want to agree to. An example is, China says with this new type of major power relationship, we must respect each other’s core interests. But we are not sure what the core interests are. Do the core interests include the claims in the South China Sea? Do they include the claims in East China Sea? The Americans don’t agree to that, for a lot of reasons. If it turns out that the core interests are just the Mainland – Xinjiang,
Tibet, then it’s not much of a problem, but I don’t think the Americans believe that’s the case. So I think there is still some reluctance, unless it’s made clear what it means.

It was formally introduced at Sunnylands in California. It will probably be discussed again in November in Beijing.

Q. Do you have any prediction of President Obama’s visit to China in November? What else will be discussed?

A. I suspect that the Americans would like an announcement that the Chinese will resume attending the talks over cyber security. I suspect the Chinese side would like the Americans to say something about limiting close-in surveillance near China. Those will be hard to achieve, though. My guess is that the statement most likely to come out will be something about peace and stability, and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

I think the purpose of the meeting, honestly, is to take the temperature of the relationship. The meeting at Sunnylands went very well. But things have been pretty rough since then. I think part of this meeting in one room with the two leaders will be to see whether they still think, on a personal level, they can work together, whether they trust each other, or whether American interests and Chinese interests at this moment are hopelessly divergent.

Of course on the Chinese side they will be thinking, all right, we understand President Obama, but after two more years somebody else will be president. That affects the nature of this kind of summit. I think the Chinese side is very concerned about who is likely to follow Obama.

Q. Do you think Sino-US strategic competition is inevitable? If so, what’s the core issue? If not, how to solve the competition or even opposition?

A. I guess it depends on what we mean by strategic competition. I think there is a competitive aspect in US-China relations, which reflects the uncertainty about the future, and about what kinds of preparations each side think they have to make just in case the relationship turns out not to be so good. That doesn’t mean that the relationship has to be like the old US-Soviet relationship during the cold war. But it means we should always be careful about what could go wrong.
There will be competition – I don’t know if it’s strategic competition – on economic issues. It’s inevitable that US and China, just like US and Japan, are going to compete over markets. That’s normal.

I don’t think that US and China have to wind up in an adversarial relationship, like the US and Soviet during the cold war. But it’s unrealistic to expect that US and China will only have a purely cooperative, win-win relationship.

Q. Since the beginning of this year, Sino-US relations are not going quite smoothly. There have been some conflicts regarding Internet security, freedom of navigation in South China Sea. I heard that some of the actions were done by some departments in their own way and do not represent the will of the White House or the Department of State. For example, the decision to charge five Chinese military hackers. In China, we also see that the influence of non-diplomacy departments on diplomacy is increasing. How do you think of this phenomenon? If it’s bad, how to prevent?

A. I do not think it was done without the support of the White House. There was a lot of pressure from the business community that China was stealing trade secrets, engaging in economic espionage, with the backing of the Chinese government, using Chinese military assets to do this. And the Obama administration had been saying, “we are going to work on this problem, try to get the Chinese to limit or stop various Chinese government involvement with economic espionage.” And I think the Obama administration decided that the recent indictments were a way to warn the Chinese more seriously. I think the Obama administration preferred to settle this in cooperation with the Chinese government. But they didn’t think this was going to happen.

In China and US, you have some connections between business and military interests. But you have to recognize some distinctions. The US government’s objection is only to commercial espionage that is state sponsored. The US government understands that there will be cyber attacks on the Pentagon computers; trying to steal American military secrets. Every country does that. That’s not an issue. The real concern is government support for commercial espionage.

Also, another thing to keep in mind: it would have been a lot easier for the Obama administration to put pressure on China over these issues if there had been no leaks from Snowden.
Q. In your article “China’s Real and Present Danger”, you mentioned that Chinese analysts seem to overestimate how easy it is to send signals through military actions and underestimate the risks of miscommunication. How do you think of the role of communication in determining the International relations?

A. Ideally what you want is direct communications using words in a way that’s credible. One of the problems of just using words is sometimes people don’t believe them. If it’s a threat, they don’t think it’s a credible threat, it may be bluffing. So sometimes you feel you have to take some action to signal that you are serious. But if the action you take is military action – even if it’s very limited, sending the right message is pretty complicated. Because, if Xi Jinping says, “we need to signal the Americans”, giving and order to the military guys, the military guys have to translate that message into some action. Then the military leader has to have some soldiers or pilots carry out the action. Are they going to carry out the actions exactly as ordered, not make any mistakes? And when the other side sees the action, whoever sees the action has to tell his leaders, “we saw them doing this, this is what we think it means.” It has to be interpreted. Every step in the way, there is possibility for miscommunication, not to mention accident. One of the risks you run when using actions rather than just using words is something could go wrong and lead to an incident or crisis. Communication through actions is often necessary, but never easy.

Q. So the better way is?

A. Two things. One is direct communication at the local level. The hotlines between the Pentagon and Zhongnanhai or between the White House and Zhongnanhai is not always reliable. Partly because the Chinese side doesn’t often like to pick up the line until they’ve made their decision – that’s what the experience tells us. How do you get direct communication at the local level? Often it depends on developing relationship between Chinese and American officers. That’s one of the reasons why military to military cooperation is important. They get to know each other, trust each other when they speak to each other. It makes a difference. That’s a useful way to deal with some of the problems that can be rooted in poor communications.

In addition, you can set up working groups to talk about so-called “rules of the road”. How to behave around each other? If both sides have a sheet that says: here is what you do, if you bump into each other in the sea, or if you engage in close area maneuvers near each other. Then they know what the rules are, and can tell if the other side is doing something different than expected.
Q. In addition to economic reforms, people also talk about transitions in China’s diplomacy. Do you see the transition during last three decades?

A. Sure, you do see some changes. Certainly today’s diplomacy is very different from the way it was in the 1970s early 1980s. Chinese diplomats are much more professional. The embassies are more fully staffed with people who know something. I would say in some places their performance is very good, and some not so good. That’s true for American embassies too.

I think one of the problems sometimes is that the Chinese representatives at the embassies don’t do a good job of presenting China’s case. For example, they write columns for local newspapers to try to present China’s view on some issues. Sometimes they can be pretty stridently nationalistic. I understand that the diplomats have to present the Party’s view, but sometimes I don’t think it serves China’s interests, especially when these columns emphasize China’s a hundred years’ humiliation, China’s victimization, and things like that. That doesn’t always go over well in Europe, or the US, or other places. The view is that yes, you were victimized in the past, but now you should be over that. A mature, emerging great power. So not everything should be taken as hurting the feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese people. And I think diplomats should be able to present your country’s message in a way that is more appealing to the host population. Not the one that simply says, “No you don’t understand, listen to me.”

So, there has been a transition, but there is still work to be done.

Q. What do you think Fu Ying? She is often taken as good example of diplomat.

A. I think she does a pretty good job. You may not convince anybody, but at least you don’t antagonize them.

Q. What’s the impact of domestic reform, mainly economic reform, on International relations issues?

A. In fact that’s more important than any of the international relations issues. I assume when Xi Jinping or Li Keqiang wakes up in the morning, the first thing they think about is not international relations. They worry about huge problems on reform issues. The big one is corruption. Also rebalancing Chinese economy,
environmental issues... These things are more important than international affairs. As I say to Chinese friends and colleagues, when they say the US wants to contain China and hold China down, my response is always: the US cannot contain China. The only country that can contain China is China.

These domestic issues do have connections with international relations, though. The international community now has expectations about what role China can play in international economy and other affairs globally. They expect China to shoulder more burdens, be a responsible stakeholder. It’s not easy for China to do more things internationally when it’s also tackling problems at home.

**Q.** There are plenty of great scholars on Sino-US relations and strategies. But it seems that Chinese leaders and diplomacy departments only know Kissinger, Brzezinski and Scowcroft. Some even say that once these three people die, there will be no one who truly understands China in America. How do you think of it? How to make more voices from American scholars be heard by Chinese leaders?

**A.** I think a wise Chinese leadership will realize that those guys you just mentioned are not going to be around too much longer. Frankly, they are no longer influential that much in the US. But there are plenty of other scholars, and people working in think tanks in Washington, they already have plenty of influence in terms of presenting their ideas to either the White House or the congress. For the Chinese, I think what they need to do is to build on the kinds of contacts and exposure that the American scholars who work on China issues get in China. Unfortunately, from what I have read on the newspapers and heard from other people, the Chinese are becoming less interested in cultivating exchanges with American and foreign scholars in general. They are cautioning think tanks in China that they shouldn’t engage in so much collaboration with foreign scholars. That’s not a good idea. The Americans also should have more Chinese scholars coming to the US to share their perspectives. I think to the extent that you build up these kinds of exchanges, new people will naturally emerge and be recognized as influential and respected intellectual leaders on US-China relations.

On the American side, when they look at China, they think which scholars in China are the equivalent of Kissinger and Scowcroft? The first one most Americans think about is Wang Jisi. He is now semi-retired. So it’s got to be more than just Wang Jisi. There are people that are a little bit younger, in their forties. There are also young scholars in US: Evan Medeiros, who is at the National Security Council now, before that he was at Rand, he was trained as a scholar; Tom Christensen; Taylor Fravel at
MIT... There are people the next generation down. But it's not enough to be a scholar who focuses on US-China issues, it also has to be a scholar who is interested in participating in the policy world. Like Kissinger, from the moment he was at Harvard, he wanted to be in Washington. Not all scholars want to do that. I think Evan Medeiros does, and Tom Christensen at some point will probably go back to the government again. And Kenneth Lieberthal, a well-respected scholar, spent some time in the government during the Clinton administration. But many scholars just don't have an interest in playing this kind of policy role.

**Q. In order to do research about US-China relations, I guess you have to have some connections with both American and Chinese governments.**

**A.** I’ve interacted with Chinese officials. But for the most part we only get to interact with academics. I’ve been to Waijiaobu, Guofangdaxue, Junshikexueyuan. But do I meet with real top political leaders? No. But we meet with scholars and analysts who are consulted by the Chinese government.

**Q. Is the lack of connection with political leaders a problem in the research?**

**A.** No. To be honest, most American scholars don’t need to talk to Vice President Biden or President Obama to know about American policy... There are people below that level and there are resources scholars really need to do their research on such matters. It’s not just access to individuals. It’s access to information. Obviously it’s easier to get information about American policy making than to get information about Chinese policy making. So we do suffer a bit of a disadvantage in studying China. I’ve been going to China regularly since the 1990s. The Chinese scholars we meet with now in think tanks and universities, and even military think tanks and universities, they are much better informed, much more sophisticated, much better educated. In this regard, things are much better now than they used to be.

**Q. Talking about think tanks, Xi Jinping is promoting the “new type of think tanks” in China.**

**A.** It’s like the “new type of major power relationship”. What does it mean? If it means that think tanks are really encouraged to do independent thinking, and to conduct international exchanges freely, that will be great. If it’s just a matter of saying everybody should set up a think tank, then it’s a waste of resources and time.
I am hoping that Xi Jinping and those around him realize that for example the Shehuikexuyuan has not been really useful recently. I hope they don’t want that old kind of think tank, that instead what they want is new ideas, better ideas, more reliable and valid ideas. I think the government may be disappointed with the forecasts they have gotten from the older think tanks. I think, for example, they were genuinely caught by surprise when North Korea executed Kim Jong Un’s uncle. Their feeling probably was: why didn’t you tell us about these problems? Part of the answer is that these think tanks are really trying to please the Party rather than do research.

Q. How did you become interested in China?

A. By accident. When I was a college student, I did not have a special interest in China. I did not plan to become a professor. But one of the last courses I took was an independent study with a professor who happened to be interested in China and gave me a stack of books about China. I found them fascinating, but I did not immediately go to graduate school. I was a teacher in Philadelphia. I knew that the city was planning to cut back and I might get laid off. I thought, “Well, I was interested in China, so why not apply to graduate school. If I get in and they give me money, I’ll go.” I got admitted and they gave me money. That’s how it happened. My interests changed somewhat in graduate school. I went to Berkeley, thinking I was interested in domestic Chinese politics. But given the professors there, I became very interested in international relations. So I combined my interests in China and international relations.

Q. Could you explain your major research focus in plain words?

A. The reasons why some people want to become a professor in the US is that you control you own time and you choose what you want to study. There is a risk there. If you choose something that no one else finds interesting, you may not get tenure and lose your job, or others may ignore your work.

My interests are always driven by what I think are important questions. Not all political scientists have the same approach. But my interest is always: am I asking something that everybody should care about? Fortunately, usually when I think about questions involving China and international relations, there is good reason why everybody should be interested.
After graduate school, my next research project focused on the potential role of nuclear weapons in the international relations and learning lessons from the Chinese and American experience. After that, the next project dealt with questions in general about the security order in Asia and China’s role in it. Clearly that was a big and important interesting question.

I am not trained in formal modeling and game theory. And I’m not trained in statistical analysis, which in the case of China’s international relations research is not necessarily useful anyway because there is not enough data. The methods I use mainly focus on analyzing the content of documents, interviewing people in the US and China who have their individual views and trying to compare their views to what I have seen in documents. But the research that I undertake, gathering evidence or data, is always guided by my research questions, which are really framed by various theories of international relations or political science that I think look like they may help us to answer these questions.

Q. How to describe today’s China in a few sentences?

A. I think today’s China stands at crossroads. The problems China faces today are serious. But they can be solved. However, I think that the current regime in China has only got five or maybe seven years to begin solving some of these problems they face – economic problems, environmental problems, ethnic problems in minority regions. If they fail in the near future, there is a very serious risk that China will enter a period of stagnation. I think Xi Jinping and the leadership group are the last ones who have a chance to try to successfully reform. If they don’t progress, the next leadership, the sixth generation, will be under a lot of pressure and won’t have free hand to make decisions about which way to reform. Events rather than their decisions will push the process.

Q. Could you recommend a researcher and his work on Chinese politics?

A. To be honest, I think the best work that has been done on China over the last five to ten years, other than very technical research in academic journals, has mostly been done by people who are not university-based scholars. For example, Age of Ambition by Evan Osnos is a brilliant introduction to China today.

In the area of understanding China’s economy, Nicholas Lardy, and Barry Naughton are the two people I trust. In terms of China’s international relations, the best people
are probably Iain Johnston and Taylor Fravel.