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## #198: Power shift: A Chinese view of China - U.S. relations

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I'm Eric van Bommel, thanks for joining us. The rise of China as a global player has been one of the two most discussed trends in international affairs in recent years, the other one is the supposed decline of the United States on that same world stage. Are we seeing the momentary intersection of two lines on a graph, a red one inexorably ascending from once nether regions and a blue one following gravity's inevitable direction? No matter how much stock one puts in such perceptions, it's probably safe to say that China and the US and the sometimes difficult relationship between them will be at the forefront of international political discussion for decades to come. In this episode of Up Close, we hear from a Chinese expert on Sino-US relations and get his views on the potentially disrupting factors that threaten the relationship. We also ask him how the two governments might find a way to quell their mutual distrust and seek out ways of working together. Han Zhaoying is Professor of International Studies from Zhou Enlai School of Government at Nankai University in Tianjin, China. His principal research fields include US foreign policy, Chinese foreign policy and China-US relations. He's written two books on US foreign policy and public diplomacy and has also translated other books in this area. Professor Han is in Melbourne as a keynote speaker of the 2012 Melbourne Conference on China. Professor Han Zhaoying, thank you for joining us on Up Close.

HAN ZHAOYING

Thank you Eric.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Well Professor Han, to begin, could I ask you to describe for us the range of opinion among China's leadership of the position of the United States in world affairs and not just the official view, but there must be a plethora, a large range of opinion, even among the leaders.

HAN ZHAOYING

Well actually I think it's very difficult to read the opinions of Chinese leaders. What we can tell about their opinion is mainly from their speeches, from some of the government documents or the speeches the Chinese leaders deliver when they visit other countries in the world. I think that the Chinese leaders all recognise that right now the world is still dominated by the United States or they recognise the dominance of US power in world affairs today. It's something that I think for Chinese leaders, they have to accept that that is the reality, in many aspects, economically, even though China is developing at [a] faster or [an] amazing pace. But I think the US economy is still pretty strong. I don't agree that the United States is in decline. Actually if we look at the present stage of the GDP of the United States to world GDP, it's still almost the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago, around 24 per cent or 25 per cent. Of course 10 years ago China GDP was just about four per cent, but now it's eight or nine per cent. That is in economic terms, but in military and also in political aspects, the United States is much [more] influential, much stronger than China is today. Based on this kind of information, I think China or Chinese leaders all realise that the United States is still dominant in the world.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

You've written about the impact of US domestic politics on how the US conducts its foreign policy. How has the relationship with China been affected?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well I think China-US relations have been affected greatly by the domestic politics in the US. 2012 is the election year in the United States and the Republican candidates ? Romney for example, raised some of the issues about China in the US foreign policy. Also, because of the election in 2011, the current president of the United States, President Obama, some of his China policies are changing. One week ago Congress, the House of Representatives, Congress passed the bill.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

This is a bill passed in May of 2012?

HAN ZHAOYING

Yes. One part in this bill includes that US would sell arms to Taiwan ? F16 CD. So we can tell that the domestic politics influence on China-US relations - well not just that, even on the trade issues, many interest groups, some firms of different industries, some workers in different industries did also try to have their own lobbies in the Congress, tried to reduce the input from China to create jobs in the United States. So we can tell quite easily these domestic factors in the US which influence China-US relations.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Conversely, what impact does domestic politics in China have on its relations abroad and specifically with the US?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well for Chinese politics, I think probably there are two aspects to look at. One is the

political process in China is different from those Western political systems, but still there is a political process. We have the parties branch, we have the executive branch, sometimes there are some computations or sometimes they need coordination. For some other factors, like I think right now because of the communication technology, people in China are very interested in these world affairs or Chinese foreign issues. So they express their ideas on the websites, on the blogs or we call microblog, Weibo.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Which his like Twitter?

HAN ZHAOYING

Like Twitter or Facebook in the West. They express their opinions on the issue so I think the decision makers or high officials in China, they have to be confronted with the prattle from the public in China.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

You think they're actually listening to the microblogs then?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well, maybe not listening to all of them, it's very difficult to tell how much the decision makers of Chinese foreign policy are influenced by these public. But anyway, I think these public opinions do have some influence.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

You argue that in the global system US hegemony is well established, but that China's hegemony is developing quickly. Can you talk a bit more about how China's hegemony is taking shape and what it will eventually look like?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well China is growing, that is all true. But hegemony in Chinese is kind of words that we do not like. It means dominance. We can refer to the US as hegemon, but I don't think China is a hegemon, nor also will be a hegemon in the near future. It's going to be, I think, in the far future, probably Chinese is getting more powerful. But hegemon or hegemony is the dominance of power.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Even regionally you believe it's not a hegemon?

HAN ZHAOYING

Not hegemon, because even in the Asia Pacific area, the United States is still dominant. What is the influence of China in this area? Mainly economic and for trade issues; [On] political issues or security issues, Chinese are not dominant.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I'm going to just challenge you on that if I may. Recently the US political scientist Ian Bremmer has argued the China's already a hegemon when it comes to water and

water use in the Asian continent; not just east Asia, but in fact much of the continent. More fresh water flows across international borders that's coming from China than any other country. That's a geographical reality, of course, there's a lot of water coming from China, that's just the natural state of affairs. But China has built more dams than every other country in the world combined, which I suppose is its right. But that does threaten supplies to the surrounding countries and this is where perhaps the accusation of being a hegemon, from some quarters, comes from. Supplies to Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, India, even Russia, et cetera, are threatened. Those countries have issued formal complaints to China saying what about our water rights. This is where China has not really responded and this is where some people would argue there's perhaps a dominance being expressed. What are your thoughts on that?

HAN ZHAOYING

Oh I don't think that China is a hegemon, but another reality that we have to realise is China is scarce with water. Most of the middle cities have scarce resources of water. So I think with the development of China, when China needs more water, they might reduce those countries you mentioned just now, Thailand, Cambodia, these areas. You know, so far as I know, they have already some diplomatic talks and negotiations. These countries need to realise that China is developing in a rapid pace, is consuming more water but also for China, China also need to realise that the amounts are needed downstream of these rivers. Happily, I think we have already seen some cooperation between the two sides. Also, the local government in these river areas, they have the motivation to develop dams, mainly I think for power, also some for water reasons.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Those decisions were taken at a local level?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well many of them at a local level, but the central government in China need to coordinate with their neighbouring states also, of course, with Chinese own local governments.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I suppose that's an example of where local issues, local planning in fact, impacts on international affairs.

HAN ZHAOYING

Sure.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Probably accidentally in some cases.

HAN ZHAOYING

Yes.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

This is Up Close, coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Eric van Bommel. In this episode we're speaking about the complex relationship between the US and China with historian and international relations expert Professor Han Zhaoying. Now Professor Han, assuming China's continued growth to what some would say a superpower status, I won't use that word hegemon, but they'd be a very prominent player on the world's stage, could we expect a sort of a cold war-style rivalry between the US and China?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well that is really I think both China and the United States wouldn't like to see, because we know the Cold War has brought actually some really bad things to the people. I think for China and United States, there is going to be complications in some areas, but I think if China and the United States can cooperate, it will be better. In recent days, some of the scholars and the politicians in China tried to avoid the rivalry between the two countries. The United States is dominant but China is rising quickly, it's kind of a structural contradiction. Up to now in the world history, probably, we have not yet avoided such kind of contradiction. But because both China and the United States are huge countries with large populations, if China and the United States can work together and can settle the issues, it's going to be an historical making.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now of course if there were a rivalry that was akin to the old rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, that was more a political rivalry. Principally there was military one-upmanship, but with China and the United States, it's a very different relationship, isn't it?

HAN ZHAOYING

Yes. Just a couple of days ago I read an essay by Joseph Nye. He mentioned about the differences between China-US relations and the relationship between US and former USSR. The major difference is that US-USSR relations was mainly political, but US and China have social interaction, the people-to-people contact is huge. Also, economic intercourse, trade between China and the US is also huge. These forces have to stabilise the China-US relations. That is also very important.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

These interactions which are ongoing and immense.

HAN ZHAOYING

Immense.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

That existing interdependence then, between China and the US, particularly with regard to financial matters, we know that China's the largest creditor nation in the world and much of its credit is actually going to the United States which is the largest debtor nation in the world these days, so there's an enmeshment, there's an

interlocking relationship here, there are dangers there. But there must be benefits as well.

HAN ZHAOYING

Sure. The US reduced their risk of investment by borrowing money from China. It helps them. Many American scholars mention that. But also it helps the Chinese to find the resources to invest in. However, China, I don't think they intentionally seek the surplus in trade or account of capital flows. I think this kind of situation might contain for some time, but I think both, some of Chinese scholars and Chinese government want to change that. We do not want to have a huge surplus with the trade in the world. If the Chinese economy can enlarge or expand the domestic markets, we might reduce such kind of surplus in trade, of course, also the flows of capital. We don't want to have so much money as the American government; we call that a kind of financial security, it's not a good step if we do that.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

There's an imbalance?

HAN ZHAOYING

Imbalance, exactly.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

The US is now refocusing much of its security and foreign policy attention from the Middle East and Central Asia where they fought wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the Asia Pacific region. What might this mean for the China-US relationship?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well of course we can understand that when economically the Asia Pacific area is getting more important and also geopolitics' importance in Asia Pacific is rising. So we can understand that US want to engage in this area. We welcome the engagement of the US in this area, but we like the US to play a positive role to maintain the stability, the security of this area. I think if our leaders are intelligent, we cannot stop the US. To do that, why shouldn't we welcome their participation in maintaining stable, secure order in this region?

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now the United States and China are not the only countries in the world. There's also India which is also another rising power, certainly economically taking off as well. Also, in some respects, according to some people, sort of a rival of China in some ways, how does India fit into the US-China relationship?

HAN ZHAOYING

Actually many scholars mention that the United States also has a hedging strategy towards China; it's trying to have partnerships or to restrengthening the alliance with, for example, Japan, Southeast Asia, Australia, Singapore. I think that Indian relation is part of the hedging strategy of the United States towards China. For China and India, I think in the future the relationship of these two countries is going to be very,

very important for the peace, for the stability of this region. In recent years, the import of arms in the world, actually this area, the Asia Pacific area, accounts over 40 per cent. India accounts 10 per cent, also follows that South Korea, Singapore, China. So I think this is going to be really a kind of arms race in this area. We need to pay attention to that. Also there is rise of nationalism in India. I can understand that when China is getting more powerful the neighbouring states would get worried. Territorial disputes would emerge. However, I think for China, right now still mainly concentrating on the domestic issues. If China has some crisis with neighbouring states, that is going to be some distractions from the domestic development. In my opinion, I think the Chinese leaders, or most of the Chinese are still concentrating on domestic development. China still has a long way to go to match those counterparts in the Western countries. Probably in the future, 20 even 30 years, China is still going to be concentrating on domestic development. So with these issues with these neighbouring countries, the United States is hedging around China, but I don't think China can do anything. We just try to convince the neighbouring states that China really wanted to develop a friendly, peaceful relationship with them. However, with India and US getting closer and US and Japan, South Korea, it's building up their alliances, relationships, it's caused some worries in Chinese people. There's a lot of talk about that.

**ERIC VAN BEMMEL**

I'm Eric van Bommel and on Up Close this episode we're speaking with international relations expert and historian, Professor Han Zhaoying on the ins and outs of contemporary China-US relations. Up Close comes to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. Now Professor Han, there are serious long term problems like climate change that because of their cross border global impact require cooperation between countries, concerted cooperation, if they're to be addressed effectively. What did such global issues that require working together mean for the China-US relationship?

**HAN ZHAOYING**

Well I think actually China has played a more positive role than the United States. As we know with this kind of issues, Chinese leaders, they can concentrate their efforts of the whole country. They say, well we need to cooperate with the international community, we should do that. But for the US, I think it's more complicated because it's democratic, they need a consensus among the interest groups. In the US, I think it's very difficult to reach a consensus. I don't think that some Americans would like to abandon, like to give up their ways of life to drive smaller cars, to turn off the air conditioner. I have lived in the US for a few years, I think it's difficult for some of them to change their ways of life. But anyway, I think China, in contrast with the United States, is playing a more positive [role] than the US. In the future, if Chinese get more powerfully economically, probably we have more resources to spend or to invest in these common issues for people all around the world.

**ERIC VAN BEMMEL**

You mentioned the sort of wasteful consumer behaviour in the United States, for example. That's at a cultural level, I suppose, on some level, but there's also the

political issues in the United States and countries like it where their leaders are, in some ways, their hands are tied in terms of things they can do. Some people would argue that China's leaders are actually freer to pursue the national interest and to maximise national power because it's, well, less democratic. Whereas in democratic countries, Western countries primarily, their hands are tied because they have to worry about elections, worried about what the public thinks.

HAN ZHAOYING

Well I think it's partly true. But the Chinese leaders also have some limitations. Probably they are freer than their counterparts in the West to issue some new policies, but also they have another difficulty in changing some of the former policies left by the former Chinese leaders. So in that sense, I think probably the Western leaders are freer. With their elections they want to change the policies of former, for example, in the US, the former administration, well at least it's freer for them to do that. But for China, it is more difficult for the Chinese to change the policies by its former leaders. So in that sense, it's not really true.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now I want to talk about the notion of global leadership. With the enormous economic success of China, some would argue there comes a responsibility as well as they come to have a larger presence on the world's stage. The notion of global leadership, we've seen in the United States for many decades now not only taking part in, but responsibly leading multi-lateral, multi-national initiatives, be they trade focused or security focused or dispute resolution, et cetera, is China ready to take on such a role? Is it willing to?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well I don't think China is ready to take the leadership. Just now I mentioned that in China it's very difficult to change the policies. Well the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, mentioned China would never be seeking leadership in the world, would never be a hegemon in the region or in the world. So I think these we call heritages left by the former Chinese leader imposes some limits on the current leaders. I think most of the Chinese leaders, even future leaders, would follow the guidelines that had been set up by the former leaders. Also, I don't think China is ready. As I also mentioned just now, China is paying more attention, is more concentrated on domestic issues. It seems to me in China, not just the leaders, the officials or the decision makers, even the Chinese people are not ready, being regarded by the outsider as a leader in some aspects.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Leader is not a hegemon in a negative sense.

HAN ZHAOYING

Yes, not a hegemon. Even leader, they are not prepared for that. China is developing so fast and many Chinese people have not yet realised that, China right now is the second largest economy. They know the fact, but how China should behave as a major economy or the second largest economy in the world, many Chinese don't

know that.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Is that a matter of political maturity?

HAN ZHAOYING

It might be. If we look at history in the past 150 almost years, China actually is behaving as a risk-stimulus-response model. China is being a weak state. So suddenly, when China is getting powerful, people don't know how to get along, how to deal with the words. But of course for the elite, the social elite, those high officials realise the problem, we need to educate people, we need to take more responsibilities, but the precondition is that we need to do what we can do. We will not do what is beyond our capability.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Professor Han, finally, does China wish to be loved by the rest of the world, not just respected or tolerated? If they want to be loved, how would they go about it?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well I dream of being loved, China being loved, by other people, but I think right now probably China wants to make China understood by other states, by other peoples around the world. For the cultural products up to now, I can not think of any stuff like the American movie or even the Apple products that China can do now. It might be in the future. I think what people are interested in China is mainly historical. But I think if China want to be more influential or want to be more successful, China probably need to produce some more than stereotype or signal, those kind of products. But I think up to now I have not yet thought of any of those kind of items.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

We're sort of talking about soft power here, but that's not a term that you like. Why don't you like that term soft power?

HAN ZHAOYING

Well soft power was coined by Joseph Nye, as we all know. It described Americans should use soft power to coerce other peoples because the United States has used hard power too much. So to make the US more attractive, the United States should be soft, to use some softer powers. But for China, I don't think China has been hard, has used hard powers to other countries. To make China more attractive by softer power, softer power is a term for me, kind of still aggressive. It's something that you take it as a means to realise your foreign policy purpose. But China's foreign policies are mainly defensive. If we say Chinese softer power, people either were just amazed by why China is developing so fast, but that cannot be a soft power, in my sense.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Professor Han, thank you very much for joining us on Up Close.

HAN ZHAOYING

I'm glad to talk with you Eric, thank you.

#### ERIC VAN BEMMEL

That was Han Zhaoying, Professor of International Studies from Zhou Enlai School of Government at Nankai University in Tianjin, China. We've been discussing China, the United States and the complex relationship between the two that dominates world affairs. Relevant links, a full transcript of this and all our episodes can be found at our website at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au). Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 29 May 2012 and produced by Kelvin Param and me, Eric van Bommel. Our associate producer was Ji Ma and our audio engineer, Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by me and Kelvin Param. Thanks for joining us; until next time, goodbye.

#### VOICEOVER

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