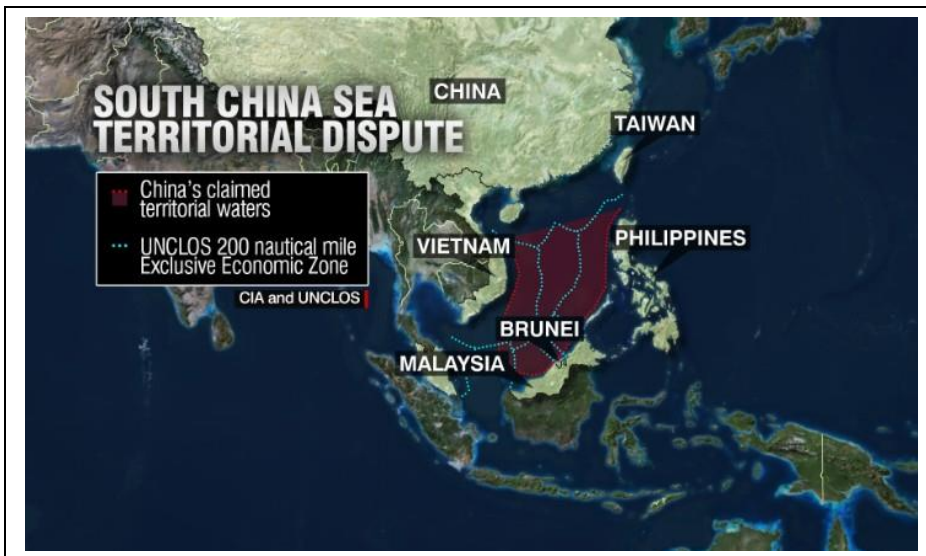


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## How Discourse Analysis Could Help Provide Insight into the Future of US-China Relations



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# How Discourse Analysis Could Help Provide Insight into the Future of US-China Relations

## Current Events

The future of the US-China relationship seems increasingly uncertain, to say the least. Increased tensions between the two international powers were seemingly ignited when US President Donald Trump (President-elect at the time) engaged in a telephone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on 2 December 2016.<sup>1</sup> The telephone call was a notable event, as it is believed to be the first reported official telephone communication between a Taiwanese president and US president (or president-elect) since the establishment of US-Beijing diplomatic relations in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, the US-Taiwan telephone call did not sit well with Chinese leadership, who were quick to express concern. The next day, China's Foreign Ministry issued a formal, public complaint in response to the call, stating that "... there is only one China in the world and Taiwan is an inseparable part of the Chinese territory ... The 'One China' principle is the political foundation of China-US relations ... We urge the relevant side in the US to adhere to the 'One China' policy, abide by the pledges in the three joint China-US communique, and handle issues related to Taiwan carefully and properly to avoid causing unnecessary interference to the overall China-US relationship."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, that same day, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked that, "the 'One China' policy is the cornerstone of a healthy China-US relationship. I hope this political foundation won't be disrupted or damaged."<sup>4</sup> Clearly the Chinese were not holding back in expressing their interests, and how serious they are about protecting those interests, through their use of discourse.

Despite the complaint and strong statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, US President-elect Trump was not deterred from provoking the Chinese side. On 4 December 2016, President-elect Trump tweeted "Did China ask us if it was OK to devalue their currency (making it hard for our companies to compete), heavily tax our products going into their country (the U.S. doesn't tax them) or to build a massive military complex in the middle of the South China Sea? I don't think so!"<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, about a week later in an interview on 12 December 16, President-elect Trump introduced uncertainty to whether or not the US would adhere to the One China policy in the future, claiming "I fully understand the One China policy, but I don't know why we have to be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade."<sup>6</sup> If China's initial response to the US-Taiwan telephone call increased tensions between the US and China, then President-elect Trump's subsequent tweets likely added fuel to the fire.

About a month after President-elect Trump's commentary regarding the One China policy, the Chinese side moved from somewhat aggressive



commentary to somewhat aggressive gray zone action. On 11 January 2017, a Chinese aircraft carrier and a group of escorting frigates moved through the Taiwan Strait, causing Taiwan to deploy fighter jets, surveillance aircraft, and navy frigates in response.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese fleet eventually sailed through and back to mainland China, but the action seemed to illustrate further Chinese provocation.

Upon President Trump's official inauguration as US President on 20 January 2017, the aggressive back and forth discourse continued between the US and China. In response to commentary from the US administration regarding Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, on 24 January 2017 a Chinese Foreign Ministry official suggested that the US should not get involved in the sovereignty disputes of the South China Sea, arguing that it is not international territory, it is Chinese territory. The same official also emphasized that the one China policy touches upon China's core interests and is by no means negotiable.<sup>8</sup> Once again, the Chinese, through their discourse, illustrated how serious they are about protecting their core interests.

It did not take long for the aggressive Chinese language to once again turn into aggressive and provocative Chinese gray zone action, this time directed at the US. On 8 February 2017, a Chinese military aircraft and a US Navy aircraft engaged in an unsafe close encounter near the contested Scarborough Shoal islands in the South China Sea—a territory claimed by China.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, on that same day, President Trump reached out directly to his Chinese counterpart, President Xi Jinping; however, this time the US communication came via a letter that wished the Chinese President a happy new year and expressed interest in constructive development of the US-China relationship—notably, President Trump had met with and spoke to numerous foreign leaders since his inauguration, but the letter represented his first direct, official communication to the Chinese president.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the next day, President Trump called President Xi Jinping and expressed that the US would honor the One China policy—representing a clear shift from some of the earlier discourse President Trump provided on the topic.<sup>11</sup> While it is impossible to know if the shift in President Trump's discourse toward the Chinese is a result of some of the Chinese aggression and provocation that came in response, it is entirely clear that President Trump's discourse did evolve.

Where the US-China relationship goes from here is uncertain, but this example of an initial action that led to a chain of back and forth commentary, provocative gray zone actions, a softening of language, and the occurrence of seemingly productive communication illustrates the important role discourse plays in diplomacy, particularly when it involves multiple strong actors.

### **Relevant Prior NSI Discourse Work**

A war of words, such as that between China and the US, often contains clues to future actions that adversaries may take. NSI's approach to discourse analysis is designed to uncover these clues and provide advance indicators and warnings (I&W) of impending political actions. Discourse is defined as language in use, involving not only what is said, but how it is said and how the broader political and cultural context influences its interpretation. Caution must be used when interpreting discourse for a variety of reasons: our interpretation of discourse is heavily influenced by our own biases—we may not be receiving the same message that adversaries are trying to convey, a statement in one context may take on a different meaning in another context, and adversaries may be purposefully deceptive and manipulative in their use of discourse. NSI's approach to discourse analysis combines analysis of cultural context, coding of subtle themes and ways of using language of which speakers are often unaware, and quantitative analysis of discourse in order to mitigate the challenges of this field of study. The result is a

culturally and contextually sensitive analysis of meaning that can capture I&W that an adversary is unaware he/she or they are revealing.

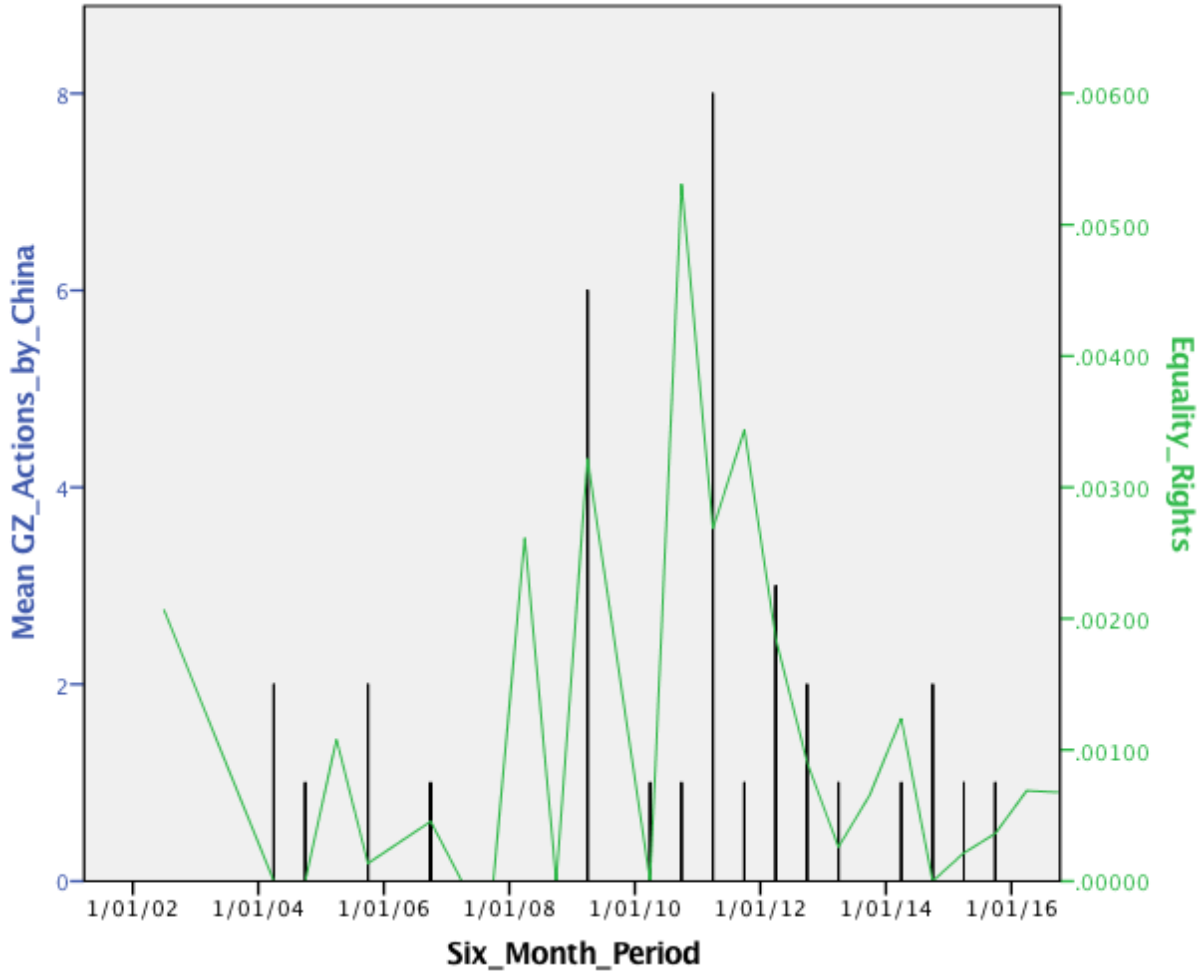
The South China Sea disputes have a long history. The protagonists frequently issue statements, and actions are a veritable fire hose of gray zone activities. This creates a large volume of data, permitting the statistical analysis of correlations between discursive I&W and the amount of gray zone activity occurring during any period of time. The key metric of discursive I&W is the density of themes (issues, culturally and psychologically salient concepts) and rhetorical devices (ways of using language such as metaphors, sarcasm, repetition, pejoratives). Correlations between discursive I&W and the number of gray zone activities (Island building, aggressive nautical maneuvers, fly overs) over the next six months were monitored from 2002 to 2016.

A number of discursive I&W emerged and were very strongly correlated with subsequent gray zone activities by all parties. This blog post will focus on those that predict Chinese actions.

**Table 1. Leading Indicators of Gray Zone Activity: China**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Statistics</b>	<b>6 Month Lag</b>
<b>Conspiracy</b>	<i>R</i>	0.639
	sig.	0.001
<b>Self-Defense</b>	<i>R</i>	0.435
	sig.	0.034
<b>Equality and Rights</b>	<i>R</i>	0.397
	sig.	0.055
<b>Gray Zone Activities</b>	<i>R</i>	0.418
	sig.	0.042
<b>Rhetorical Question</b>	<i>R</i>	0.648
	sig.	0.001
<b>Sarcasm/Irony</b>	<i>R</i>	0.503
	sig.	0.012

Six months prior to an escalation of gray zone activities, Chinese leaders increase their mentions of conspiracies, their right to self-defense, their right to be equal to other nations (namely the US), and prior gray zone activities they perceive to have been committed against them. Chinese leaders also employ rhetorical devices such as rhetorical questions and sarcasm more than six months before they escalate gray zone activities. The correlations are very strong and highly statistically significant. The following figure depicting the density with which Chinese leaders mention their national rights and the subsequent escalation of Chinese gray zone activities illustrates the predictive quality of discursive I&W.



### What Might We Expect To Come

The question remains: in the escalated war of words, what might we expect for the future?

In these recent events, the Chinese invoked their national rights, perceived President-elect Donald Trump's call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen as a gray zone activity, and voiced their grievances concerning the US's perceived incoherence with their One China policy. The Chinese followed up with gray zone activities, including sending frigates through the Taiwan Strait. Similarly, following a January exchange in which China once again asserted its rights and perceived the US's rhetoric as aggressive, there was an unsafe incident involving US naval and Chinese military aircrafts. Interestingly, and perhaps coincidentally, that very day, President Trump had a communique with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

This sequence of current events accurately reflects the trends observed in NSI's previous discourse work. China's reiteration of their national rights and their perception of the US's actions as gray are examples of common Chinese indicators and warnings of future gray zone activity. So, although we have already seen some gray zone activities on China's end, we can expect to see more in the coming six months.

Intensifying rhetoric and rising tensions are following the patterns that we have identified. The US currently has an aircraft carrier cruising through the South China Sea,<sup>12</sup> which was followed by a Chinese assertion of sovereignty and the need for peace,<sup>13</sup> and all the while, the Chinese finished work on buildings on the Spratley Islands that are capable of housing missiles.<sup>14</sup> And the drama continues.

We expect future gray zone activities to be signaled by escalations in rhetoric. Namely, we expect China to continue to assert their rights in the region and to cite US gray zone activities in advance of their own gray zone activities. We also expect escalations in US rhetoric to lead to further escalations in Chinese rhetoric and subsequent gray zone actions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/us/politics/trump-speaks-with-taiwans-leader-a-possible-affront-to-china.html>;  
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/03/trump-angers-beijing-with-provocative-phone-call-to-taiwan-president>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/02/politics/donald-trump-taiwan/> ; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/03/trump-angers-beijing-with-provocative-phone-call-to-taiwan-president>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/02/politics/donald-trump-taiwan/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/02/politics/donald-trump-taiwan/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-04/trump-takes-on-china-in-tweets-about-currency-south-china-sea>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/11/politics/donald-trump-china-taiwan/> ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN1400TY>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/11/asia/taiwan-deploys-fighter-jets/index.html?sr=twCNN011117taiwan-deploys-fighter-jets0951PMStoryPhoto&linkId=33293182>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/beijing-strikes-back-white-house-draws-red-lines-over-south-n711401>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/09/politics/us-china-aircraft-unsafe-encounter/> ; <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/10/us-china-military-planes-come-inadvertently-close-over-south-china-sea.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-reaches-out-china-s-xi-jinping-letter-n718746>

<sup>11</sup> [https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/world/asia/donald-trump-china-xi-jinping-letter.html?\\_r=0&referrer=https://t.co/siSzSTbEAU](https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/world/asia/donald-trump-china-xi-jinping-letter.html?_r=0&referrer=https://t.co/siSzSTbEAU) ; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-phone-call-one-china-policy-south-china-sea-taiwan-xi-jinping-a7572651.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/02/19/us-deploys-carrier-contentious-south-china-sea/98126274/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-usa-idUSKBN1600V0>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-southchinasea-exclusive-idUSKBN161029>