Commenting on the impact of the September 11 attacks on the international strategic landscape, a leading Chinese strategist asserted that the terrorist strikes “changed the world for the United States, but for China, it is the U.S. response that has changed the world.” Indeed, the policies pursued by Washington since September 11 to counter the threat of terrorism around the globe have radically affected China’s security environment in both positive and negative ways.

On the negative side, Beijing is uneasy about the U.S. establishment of 13 military bases in Central Asia since September 11, one outside Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, that is only a few hundred kilometers from China’s border. Although China appreciates the U.S. need to conduct military operations from countries in close proximity to Afghanistan, there are misgivings that gaining access to regional bases is part of a long-term U.S. plan to encircle and contain China. The recent dispatch of U.S. troops to the Philippines to help local troops flush out terrorists and increased American influence in India and Pakistan also are causing consternation in Beijing. Many Chinese think the United States is using September 11 as an excuse to increase its influence around the world. The new tenor of cooperation in U.S.–Russian relations also has created misgivings in Beijing that collaboration between Moscow and Washington could be harmful to Chinese interests.

Japan’s decision to take advantage of the opportunity created by the war on terrorism to increase its security role also is disconcerting to China. Recent actions by Tokyo that have aroused Chinese concern include the dispatch of three destroyers and two supply ships to the Indian Ocean, the launch of an H-2A rocket that could be converted into a missile, and the sinking of a suspected North Korean spy ship in China’s exclusive economic zone. In addition, Chinese experts and officials are nervous that once the United States attains its goals in Afghanistan, it will “wantonly” use military force against other targets, such as Iraq, Somalia, or Sudan, which would increase regional tensions and, more important for China, undermine the trend toward development of a multipolar rather than a unipolar world.

The positive consequences of the war on terrorism for Chinese security balance, to some extent, the negative effects. International concentration on antiterrorism has provided Beijing with an opportunity to gain a degree of understanding for its efforts to crack down on the small Uighur radical independence movement in Xinjiang, which has been blamed for occasional bombings and the killings of some local officials. In addition, the counterterrorism campaign has enabled China to boost its image as a responsible international player that is making a contribution to regional peace and stability. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Beijing voted in favor of antiterrorism resolutions in the UN Security Council. China also helped persuade Pakistan’s President Musharraf to support the Bush administration’s decision to eradicate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.
addition, China supplied a significant amount of food relief for refugees from Afghanistan and later donated $150 million in aid to Afghanistan for reconstruction.

Most important, September 11 and the counterterrorism campaign that followed provided a chance for China to improve relations with the United States. Sino–U.S. ties were rocky in the first six months after President Bush assumed office, especially during April, when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. surveillance plane, forcing the damaged American aircraft to land on Hainan Island, where its crew was held for 11 days. In that same month, President Bush approved a robust $5 billion arms package for Taiwan, the largest since his father sold F-16 fighters to the island almost a decade earlier. Bush also infuriated Beijing when he publicly declared that he would do “whatever it took” to help Taiwan defend itself, including deploying U.S. military forces to defend Taiwan.

Relations took an upward turn in July, with the visit by Secretary of State Colin Powell to China, but the main issues on the bilateral agenda—such as human rights, the proliferation of missile technology, missile defense, and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan—were predominantly irritants in the relationship. The terrorist attacks and President Bush’s subsequent call to all countries to forge a coalition against the evildoers presented both Beijing and Washington with a new framework for limited security cooperation that had been absent since the Soviet Union imploded in 1991.

Experts Debate the Impact of September 11 on Sino–U.S. Relations

Both Chinese and American analysts agree that Sino–U.S. relations have progressed in the wake of September 11, but they continue to debate the nature and extent of the improvement in bilateral ties and whether the cooperative trend in the relationship will render persisting areas of friction more manageable or ultimately be undermined by them. American skeptics say that cooperation in fighting terrorism has not spilled over into other areas, citing the continued Chinese refusal to implement their November 2000 commitment not to help other countries build missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons and to publish a list of missile components barred from export as well as establish a system for enforcement. They also note that the two nations remain far apart on issues relating to human rights and religious freedom. Moreover, some U.S. experts emphasize that Jiang Zemin’s reluctance to discuss fighting terrorism beyond the Afghanistan campaign during President Bush’s February visit to Beijing does not bode well for future cooperation.

The existence in both countries of important constituencies that remain wary of the other’s long-term intentions also is cited as a factor limiting security cooperation between the United States and China. Many Chinese are doubtful that September 11 can be the catalyst for a strategic transformation of Sino–U.S. relations. There is notable frustration among institute researchers and officials over what they perceive as the Bush administration’s unwillingness to take steps to address priority Chinese security issues, especially Taiwan, while expecting Beijing to do its utmost to cooperate in the war on terrorism. Despite the agreement by Presidents Bush and Jiang to pursue a constructive, cooperative relationship, Chinese experts claim that neither the United States nor China is convinced that the other country is not a potential, if not a realistic, threat to the other’s interests and therefore cannot develop their relationship on a sound basis. One Chinese security analyst described the changes in Sino–American relations since September 11 as “atmospheric” and “temporary.” There also is widespread criticism in China of the
continuing “unilateralist” and “hegemonist” tendencies of the Bush administration. “The United States has not given up its demand for world hegemony or its progressive tendency toward geopolitics due to its fight against terrorism,” wrote the director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs research arm, the China Institute of International Studies.

Only a minority of Chinese and American experts are optimistic that bilateral relations will maintain the current upward momentum. They maintain that expanded contacts and cooperation between the United States and China in the wake of September 11 have provided a new impetus for developing the bilateral relationship. “Changes in U.S.–China relations in the wake of the September 11 incident were not temporary and had their profound international background and internal cause,” asserted two Chinese scholars from Shanghai. The sanguine expectations of those who foresee continued improvement in Sino–American ties are based partly on their conviction that the two countries share important security interests, even while they have differences on many issues. Moreover, these experts believe that the counterterrorism campaign will not be short-lived and that the United States will continue to need China’s support. These “optimists” also are hopeful that concern about the China threat in the United States will recede as the U.S. focuses on immediate threats from failed states and nonstate entities such as terrorist groups and on medium-term threats from rogue states. Some American and Chinese scholars contend that President Bush has already made a drastic adjustment in his China policy. Just prior to Bush’s departure for China, a prominent U.S. expert contended that the U.S. president had positioned his China policy squarely in line with that of his six predecessors, having accepted that “a China engaged by Washington and integrated into the world community is in the national interests of the United States as well as a stabilizing force in international affairs.”

What Has Changed and What Has Not

It is undeniable that some features of Sino–U.S. relations have changed considerably in the past year, but it is also true that in other ways the relationship has changed little. In the category of what has changed, the most significant is the increase in high-level contacts and the expansion of the agenda of cooperation between the two countries. President Bush has visited China twice since September 11 and held in-depth discussions on a broad range of bilateral, regional, and global issues with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Vice President Hu Jintao’s trip to the United States this spring will be followed by a visit by Jiang Zemin in the fall. Both nations are conducting an irregular but sustained bilateral dialogue on counterterrorism, human rights, nonproliferation, and missile defense. Discussions of global and regional security issues also are taking place between the policy planning departments of the U.S. Department of State and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Vice foreign minister level consultations also are being held periodically. At the February summit, the two presidents agreed to carry out bilateral exchanges and cooperation in economy and trade, energy, science and technology, environmental protection, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and to conduct strategic dialogue on regional economic and financial matters.

Bilateral coordination and cooperation have increased markedly as well. China is sharing intelligence and information on terrorist networks with the United States and is taking measures to interdict the financing of terrorist groups. Beijing also has agreed to open a Legal Attaché Office, run by the FBI, in the American embassy in Beijing to aid in the efforts of law enforcement agencies to combat organized crime, money laundering, and other criminal activities. In South Asia, the United States and China have coordinated efforts to ease tensions between India and
Pakistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and Secretary of State Powell exchanged views via telephone at a tense juncture in early January, when Premier Zhu Rongji was visiting Pakistan and on the eve of Secretary Powell’s departure for the region. Cooperation also is being stepped up on matters relating to Korea, as demonstrated by President Bush’s entreaty to Jiang to urge North Korean President Kim Chong-II to accept the U.S. offer to hold discussions without preconditions.

To the extent that the September 11 terrorist attacks have influenced Sino–American relations, they have affected the U.S. side more than the Chinese side. The need to enlist China’s cooperation on an urgent national security threat compelled President Bush to adjust his approach and priorities in dealing with Beijing. Instead of portraying China as a “strategic competitor,” the phrase favored by candidate Bush and his foreign policy advisers, the president endorsed the pursuit of a “constructive, cooperative, and candid” relationship with China at the APEC summit in Shanghai. According to National Security Council Adviser Condoleeza Rice, at the February summit President Bush accepted his part of joint responsibility for building a constructive relationship between the two countries given the importance of both the United States and China in the international system. In addition, Bush reached out to the Chinese people in a speech delivered at Qinghua University in which he offered them the respect and friendship of the United States.

China’s efforts to stabilize relations with the United States predates the September 11 attacks and reflects its recognition of the centrality of the United States in world affairs for the foreseeable future. Beijing’s relatively conciliatory approach to the United States also stems from its preoccupation with two key domestic challenges: (1) the smooth conduct of leadership succession that will eventually transfer power to the “fourth generation” of Chinese leaders, and (2) the task of accelerating economic reform while containing the social and political pressures that reform will inevitably generate. Chinese leaders have concluded that there is much to be lost and nothing to be gained in confronting Washington as long as China lags far behind the United States in most, if not all, key indices of comprehensive national power.

What has not changed in Sino–U.S. relations since September 11 is persisting mutual suspicion and differences on a multitude of issues. Both countries are uncertain about how much of a long-term threat each poses to the other. Despite assurances by Jiang Zemin to President Bush that China does not challenge the U.S. military presence in the Asia–Pacific region and views the United States as playing a stabilizing role, most Americans remain wary of Beijing’s long-term intentions. The Chinese are similarly skeptical of Bush administration officials’ assertions that the United States does not view China as an adversary. Their doubts have been reinforced by the release of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and leaks to the American press about the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). In an obvious reference to China, the QDR held out the possibility that an unnamed military competitor with a formidable resource base would emerge in East Asia. The NPR was even more explicit, identifying China as one of seven nations against which the United States needs to be prepared to use nuclear weapons. “Due to the combination of China’s still developing strategic objectives and its ongoing modernization of its nuclear and non-nuclear forces, China is a country that could be involved in an immediate or potential contingency,” the report noted.

Long-standing areas of friction in Sino–U.S. relations have been largely unaffected by the new context of cooperation on counterterrorism. President Bush underscored differences on human rights in his speech to Qinghua University students, in which he urged the nation’s future leaders to tolerate dissent, permit religious freedom, and build a society based on the rule of law. Although both countries have a shared interest in curtailting the spread of weapons of destruction and their means of deliv-
ery, little progress has been made toward resolving the dispute over the November 2000 agreement. China argues that weapons programs begun before the understanding was reached must first be “grandfathered” before it will implement the agreement. The Bush administration is unwilling to make this concession. Missile defense also remains a point of contention, although Beijing has steadily toned down its antimissile defense rhetoric over the past year and has gradually come to tolerate—while still opposing—the U.S. missile shield effort.\footnote{16}

Differences over Taiwan, perhaps the most sensitive and potentially explosive issue in Sino-U.S. relations, remain acute. Beijing continues to object to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, closer U.S.-Taiwan military ties, U.S. backing for greater participation by Taipei in international organizations, and what it perceives as Washington’s tacit support for Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian’s policy of “creeping independence.” President Bush is unwavering in his support of the U.S. pledge to provide aid for Taiwan’s defense. During his February visit to China, Bush publicly mentioned the U.S. commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act twice and never once referred to the three Sino-U.S. communiqués. Just before arriving in Beijing, Bush told the Japanese Diet that “America will remember our commitments to the people on Taiwan.” Beijing refuses to discuss Washington’s concerns about China’s buildup of short-range ballistic missiles against the island, insisting that military deployments on Chinese soil remain an “internal affair.” Neither Washington nor Beijing is clear about the other side’s redlines and therefore both run the risk of inadvertently crossing them and triggering a crisis.

**Limits to Cooperation**

Enduring suspicions of each other’s long-term intentions and persisting differences on high-priority issues for both sides will place limits on the extent of security cooperation and the degree of improvement possible in Sino-American relations. Domestic constraints also will constitute a limiting factor. On the American side, the Republican party is deeply divided in its approach to China between national security hawks and probusiness engagers. The president can hardly be expected to reject the viewpoint of one in favor of the other, given that both constitute his political base. Within the administration there also is a schism between those who back engaging Beijing with the objective of integrating China into the world community and promoting Chinese adherence to international norms and those who seek to punish China for its proliferation activities, human rights abuses, and military buildup. While Secretary of State Powell favors engagement, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld prefers to maintain distance in relations with China, as evidenced by the virtual freeze on contacts between the Department of Defense and the People’s Liberation Army despite improvements in other areas of the relationship.

Chinese leaders also face domestic constraints. President Jiang Zemin has been widely criticized for being too “soft” on the United States. In past years Beijing is seen as having accommodated itself to Washington on a host of issues, whereas China has been compelled to swallow continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and accept stringent terms for accession to WTO. Jiang also is charged with badly handling the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy because he failed to persuade the United States to punish those responsible and to provide generous compensation for the Chinese loss of lives, injuries, and loss of property. Chinese Foreign Ministry officials relate that they frequently receive packages of calcium from average citizens who express hope that they will fortify their backbones when dealing with the United States.

Although Jiang Zemin is slated to relinquish his titles of state president and general secretary of the Communist party at the 16th Party Congress this fall, he appears determined to
retain his post as chairman of the Central Party Commission. Jiang also hopes to see his top protégé, Zeng Qinghong, promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee, where he could serve as a counterweight to Hu Jintao, who is likely to succeed Jiang at least as head of the party. Jiang’s chances of arranging the leadership transition according to his wishes may be boosted by the upward turn in Sino–U.S. relations and his two reasonably successful summits with President Bush. If he can secure an invitation to visit Bush’s ranch in Crawford, Texas, in October 2002, the visit would enhance his stature and ability to fend off criticism that he has gotten nothing in return for his accommodation to U.S. pressure.

Looking Ahead

In the next few years, Sino–U.S. relations could develop in several different directions. If Washington extends the war on terrorism by using military force against other targets or opts to attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power, Beijing may distance itself from or even condemn U.S. actions, especially if the international coalition supporting Bush begins to fray. Senior Chinese officials have warned against “random expansion of the scale of the war on terrorism on the basis of one’s own needs and strategic interests.”17 In Jiang’s talks with Bush in Beijing, he emphasized that, with regard to Iraq, “peace is to be valued most.” The perception in the United States that China is ambivalent in its support for the fight against terrorism could create a setback in Sino–American relations.

In a second scenario, the emergence of a perceived common threat could strengthen the basis for Sino–U.S. cooperation. This could occur if, for example, the terrorist threat to China or to Chinese interests were to increase, thereby increasing Beijing’s willingness to buttress its support for the war on terrorism. A direct threat to both nations from a common foe would enhance the possibility of greater cooperation and enable the political leadership in both countries to stifle domestic opponents of better relations. Mutual distrust of long-term intentions would be pushed further into the background as both countries focused on ways to intensify security cooperation.

A third scenario is the eruption of a crisis in Sino–U.S. relations triggered by a U.S. policy step toward Taiwan (such as the sale of a major offensive weapon system or the granting of a visa to President Chen Shui-bian to visit the United States) or by a policy decision in Taipei that is deemed by Beijing as too provocative to go unanswered (such as disbanding the National Unification Council and discarding the National Reunification Guidelines, holding a referendum on reunification versus independence to change the status quo, or openly declaring independence). China could respond by retaliating against the United States in other areas of the bilateral relationship—for example, by suspending talks on nonproliferation and human rights—or could opt to downgrade relations temporarily. The PLA could mount a major military exercise against Taiwan or employ force against the island with the goal of forcing a return to the status quo ante. An ensuing U.S.–China military confrontation could not be ruled out.

The final and most likely scenario for Sino–U.S. relations in the next few years is the continuation of a modicum of cooperation between the two nations in the war against terrorism and modest progress in collaboration on nontraditional security issues such as HIV/AIDS, environmental protection, and energy. Trade and economic ties, including high-level exchanges and commissions (combined with new challenges that are bound to arise during China’s implementation of its WTO obligations) would be mixed. Bilateral discussions on contentious issues such as human rights and proliferation would continue, but results, consisting of some steps forward and other steps backward, would be piecemeal. Mis-trust of each other’s long-term intentions also would endure. In other words, Sino–American relations would muddle through.
About the Author

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Notes


5. See, for example, Ralph Cossa, “Asia Changed Little by 9–11,” Japan Times, March 12, 2002.


12. Press Briefing by National Security Adviser Dr. Rice on President’s Meetings with President Jiang Zemin, Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, February 21, 2002.

13. Remarks by President Bush at Tsinghua University, Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, February 22, 2002.


