



# Sino-American Relations During the George W. Bush Administration

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A thorough analysis of how 9/11 has affected U.S.–China relations

Sino-American relations experienced ups and downs during three and one half years of the George W. Bush administration. Some old issues have developed in new directions, and some new issues have emerged and to a great extent changed the shape of bilateral relations.

## I. Brief Review of Relations in the Past Three Years

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When this administration began its term, major policymakers wanted to break from what they perceived as President Clinton's excessive emphasis on China and shift the gravity of Asian policy to Japan and other regional allies because they had strategic suspicion about what China's growing power meant for U.S. interests. They did not agree with Clinton's definition of bilateral relations as "toward strategic partnership" and called China a strategic competitor or competitor. As Condoleezza Rice summarized, "It is important to promote China's internal transition through economic interaction while containing Chinese power and security ambitions. Cooperation should be pursued, but we should never be afraid to confront Beijing when our interests collide."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Bush supported the development of economic and trade relations with China. During the campaign in 2000, when Congress was debating China's permanent normal trade relationship (PNTR), Governor Bush published an open letter, appealing to both parties on Capitol Hill to support China's PNTR.

Then, unfortunately, the EP-3 incident hap-

pened and did some damage to the relationship. But both sides decided not to let the relationship drift, and on July 5, the day after the surveillance plane left China, Bush called President Jiang, urging that bilateral relations be improved.

In July Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan met with Secretary Colin Powell in Hanoi at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) foreign ministers meeting. Mr. Tang said that China welcomed the United States to play a positive role in Asia. After the meeting in Hanoi, Powell visited China. He conveyed a very important message to the Chinese leaders and people. He said that "We want friendship with the people of China," that China and the United States have "very, very important common interests," and U.S.–China relations would be "based on friendship, on trust, on working together, on working through problems, on being candid with each other when we have disagreements" and reiterated that President Bush was looking forward to his forthcoming visit to China very much, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States certainly did a lot to push bilateral relations forward. It is still debatable to what extent they changed the nature of the relationship, but I think at least they had a positive impact on the following aspects.

First, China was no longer viewed in the United States as a direct threat. In the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (QDRR) prepared by the Department of Defense before the September 11 attacks (and published on September 30, 2001), China was viewed as a potential threat. It was said that "maintaining a stable balance in Asia would be a complex task. The possibility ex-

ists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region.”<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, by competitor it meant China. The September 11 events showed clearly the threat to U.S. security. *The National Security Strategy Report* (NSSR), published on September 30, 2002, significantly redefined America’s principal security problem. The main security challenge that had been addressed in the QDRR—major states with “great armies and great industrial capability”—was now described as the challenge of the past. In its place the NSSR identified two new security challenges of the present and future: terrorism and “rogue nations” and regional disputes. The emphasis was put on great power cooperation to deal with unconventional threats. It has been said that great powers are “increasingly united by common values,” that they are “increasingly on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos”—and that there is “the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, the events expanded cooperation between the two countries. Now China actively cooperates with the United States in antiterror campaigns, in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and even on the Iraqi issue. Although it did not support the Iraqi war unilaterally launched by the United States without the authorization of the United Nations, China has been cooperating with the United States in passing all the Security Council resolutions—1441 on verification of possible WMD in Iraq, 1472 on adjusting the oil for food project, 1783 on lifting UN sanctions on Iraq, 1500 on welcoming the Iraqi Governing Council, 1511 on Iraqi postwar reconstruction, and 1546 on the handover of sovereignty to the Iraqi Interim Government. For a long time the United States asked to send a legal attaché to Beijing, and China “considered it.” Now a representative of the FBI is acting in that capacity in the U.S. embassy in Beijing.

Third, since the end of the cold war, U.S.–

China policy has been debated continuously. In the early 1990s, the prevailing trend was the theory of a “collapsing China.” Many people held that China was “on the verge of geographical fragmentation, political collapse, or democratic revolution.”<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1990s, the China threat theory emerged, and *Coming Conflict with China* by two former journalists in China was published. President Clinton’s successful visit to China was widely criticized by the Republicans, and there was a strong backlash from the Republican-controlled Congress. For the whole year of 1999, the House of Representatives debated the so-called Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, which seriously poisoned the atmosphere of the bilateral relationship. But the events of September 11 basically ended the debate. Moreover, in the past two years, the blue team has been relatively quiet. The U.S. media’s coverage of China has also changed. It is no longer generally negative. China’s image in the United States improved a lot. According to a poll conducted by CNN and *USA Today* last September, 9 percent regard China as an ally, and 46 percent regard China as a friendly country. The finding was 70 percent more favorable than that of July 2001.

Fourth, before 9/11 people in China and the United States were saying that U.S. strategic gravity was moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific and if such a transfer were to occur, it would have been undertaken to contain China. Now it is obvious that the U.S. strategic gravity is in Western Asia and the Middle East.

## II. Some Basic Features of the Bilateral Relationship

1. Sino–American relations are unique in the world today. By unique I mean that the two countries share broad and profound interests and experience differences concerning some fundamental aspects, which will remain in the near future.

People summarize their common interests, but former President Clinton listed six aspects over which the two countries' interests overlap.<sup>6</sup> Summarized in the following three aspects, they are, first, to maintain peace and stability in the region and throughout the world. Second, to achieve a mutual beneficial trade and economic relationship. Third, to counter terrorism, fight against organized international crime, crack down on drug trafficking, and so on. U.S. scholars used to consider the last one as low security, but since 9/11 it has become the highest security. The major differences between the two countries can also be summarized in three aspects, as I have done below.

2. The bases for our bilateral relations continue to be broadened. Not all our bilateral relations are purely bilateral. Because of content some regional as well as global issues have become important. The Korean nuclear issue serves as a good example. Since Assistant Secretary James Kelly visited Pyongyang in October 2002, the issue has surfaced again, and China has been making great efforts in mediating between the two highly antagonistic sides. After the common efforts of the countries involved, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is now committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the United States is committed to the peaceful solution of the issue, and all the parties have reached a consensus that six-party talks are the best way to solve the issue. Although there is still a long way to

go amid the absence of mutual trust, the purpose has been set, the direction is now clear, and the way has been found. The talks are now approaching the substance of the issue.

3. People-to-people contacts between the two countries have become very important to the relationship. Sino-American relations are not just relations between the two governments. They are relations between two societies. China's contacts with the United States are much more than China's contacts with any other country. The Sino-American relationship experienced twists and turns, ups and downs after the end of the cold war. But even during difficult times, these people-to-people relations never stopped. Instead, they helped the two governments to overcome difficulties and put the relationship on the right track again. These people-to-people contacts have served to balance the ship of Sino-American relations.
4. In spite of fluctuations in political relations after the end of the cold war, economic ties have continued to develop. And now the United States is China's second largest trade partner, next to Hong Kong, and the number one FDI country. China in 2003 surpassed Japan and then became the third largest trade partner of the United States. These mutually beneficial relations achieved new momentum after China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Although trade disputes happen from time to time, I am quite sure that economic and trade relations will

continue to develop and supply strong dynamics to the whole relationship.

### III. The Major Problems in Sino-American Relations

There are three major differences between the two countries.

First, they have different social systems and ideologies. Now there are only five socialist countries in the world today, and China is the largest one. The two countries have different perceptions about human rights, and they are in different stages of development. Every year the State Department publishes a human rights report, condemning China's human rights situation. Differences over human rights have become constant sources of disputes. People in the United States say that "we have to base our foreign policy on our values," whereas people in China argue that stability is the first and foremost thing for China's development, that China has its own agenda involving legal construction and democratization, and that outside pressure is often counterproductive. Although some American scholars pointed out a few years ago that "America's approach to the promotion of human rights in China had failed, not only has it failed to achieve any significant improvement in China's human rights record, but, equally important, it has damaged America's reputation in the eyes of many Chinese, including those who are committed to reform. They have concluded that the American position on human rights in China is ill-informed and insincere."<sup>7</sup> But the situation has not changed much, and the dispute will remain active for an indefinite time.

Second, because China is a developing country and the United States is the only superpower, the two countries harbor mutual suspicion toward each other. The above-mentioned CNN and *USA Today* poll has shown that more than 40 percent of people regarded China as a potential threat

or even as an enemy. According to John Mearsheimer's theory, a rising power is doomed to have a conflict with an established power. The Ep-3 event was, of course, an incident. But people asked different questions in the two countries. In China people asked why did American surveillance planes spy in so close to Chinese territory? What were their ulterior motives? In the United States people say that this is open sea, that American ships travel everywhere in open sea. Why did you want to deny America's access to open sea? The incident is over, but different interpretations remain. In the United States some people are still suspicious of China's strategic intention in spite of its repeated declaration that China will never seek hegemony even when the country becomes stronger. In China too some people doubt whether the United States is trying to contain China's development, whether the United States will let China enjoy two decades in a period of strategic opportunity to concentrate on economic construction. To answer this question, the two countries should have continual strategic dialogues to build confidence in each other and to discuss how they should accommodate their mutual interests. Professor Joseph Nye, Jr., once suggested that "The future of the U.S.-China relationship will be crucial in determining the shape and character of the international environment during the next century. For the United States, nothing is more important than integrating an emergent China as a responsible member of the global system."<sup>8</sup> Here seems the way of political and strategic accommodation between the two countries. The United States wants to achieve that; so does China. Actually, the process involving China's reform and openness is identical to the process of integrating itself into the world community.

Third, the Taiwan issue is the most worrisome in China-U.S. relations. If there is one issue in the gamut of bilateral relations that could possibly destroy the whole relationship, that is the Taiwan issue. I also agree with Alan D. Romberg, who argues that "the Taiwan question is the only issue in the world today that could realistically

lead to war between two major powers.”<sup>9</sup> The danger of the issue is rooted in the fact that, first, the Democratic Progressive party (DPP) in Taiwan has undertaken a campaign for Taiwan independence, and it remains so committed until the present day. Second, under Li Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, the Taiwan authorities have used all the means available to promote the so-called Taiwan identity, and they have been rather successful. Third, the Bush administration’s policy toward Taiwan has not succeeded in improving Cross-Strait relations.

The Bush’s administration’s policy is defined by some American scholars as “dual clarity” or “dual deterrence,” that is, no use of force from the mainland, no proclamation of independence from Taiwan, or deter the mainland from using force; deter Taiwan from independence. This policy seems balanced; actually it is not balanced at all. When the Bush administration wants to deter the mainland from using force, it does a lot of things: It strengthens its military ties with Taiwan, sells advanced weapons to Taiwan, and even tries hard to persuade Taiwan to buy those weapons, shares information with Taiwan, trains Taiwan’s military officers at the military academies and other universities in the United States, helps Taiwan expand its international space, and so on. But when it wants to deter Taiwan from independence, it basically uses lip service, and has done little of a practical nature. The implications are very clear. Being a shrewd politician, Chen Shui-bian is using the U.S. policy for his utmost purpose of incremental independence. China does not want a war with the United States. Neither does the United States want a war with China. But there is a real danger for both countries of being drawn into a war because of Taiwan. To put this worst case scenario ahead of us is to avoid the scenario. The two governments, as well as

scholars of the two countries, should have candid, frank, and deep dialogues to manage crises over issues. Also, the U.S. government should encourage Cross-Strait political dialogues if it really wants to keep peace and stability in the Strait, as well as in East Asia.

### **About the Author**

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### **Notes**

1. Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interests,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000, 57.
2. “Powell Stresses U.S. Wants Friendly Ties with China,” Embassy of the United States of America, *Washington File*, August 1, 2001, 2–3.
3. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 4.
4. *National Security Strategy Report*, 2.
5. See Harry Harding, “Red Star Rising in the East,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 1997.
6. William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the Asia Society and the United States—China Education Foundation Board,” October 24, 1997, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1997*, 1424–1429.
7. Harry Harding, “Breaking the Impasse over Human Rights” in Ezra F. Vogel, ed., *Living with China. U.S.–China Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (New York and London, 1997), 173.
8. Joseph Nye, Jr., “Foreword” in *The Nina Kung China Initiative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).
9. Alan Romberg, *Rein in the Brink of the Precipice* (Washington, D.C., 2003), 14.

