



Striving for Long-term Stability in the China–U.S. Relationship

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Abstract

This article identifies the hallmarks of the relationship between China and the United States, examines the factors that have contributed to the evolution of the relationship in bilateral, regional, and world settings, and assesses the viability of the relationship in light of mutual misgivings that revolve around but are not limited to the issue of Taiwan.

More than 27 years have passed since the normalization of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America. Moreover, more than 15 years have passed since the end of the cold war. What are the hallmarks of that relationship after going through so many ups and downs? The author believes that at least several features can be identified.

First, the basis of the China–U.S. relationship is expanding continuously. Compared with the relationship that came into being at the beginning of normalization and the one that existed at the beginning of the 1990s, the present China–U.S. relationship has distinct features that delineate a much richer content and a much wider scope. Today relations are not limited to bilateral issues. They touch on regional and global issues more frequently than they did in the past. The United States is the largest developed country, whereas China is the largest developing country. Both are permanent members of the UN Security Council and shoulder significant responsibilities for the

international community. When major international security or economic issues arise, they play crucial roles in the settlement of those issues. With power comes responsibility. Every increase in China's national strength augments the role China can play. As China's role in maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and in the world grows, the international community will place more demands on China. That is an objective law and also an unavoidable responsibility that China must bear for the international community. Keeping pace with the continuing enhancement of China's influence in regional and international affairs, regional and international issues will become more prominent in China–U.S. relations. The common interests of the two countries in maintaining peace and stability in the region and in the world are increasing, not decreasing.

After the end of the cold war, a rise in non-traditional threats occurred. Those threats fall basically into three categories. The first consists of natural disasters and environmental deterioration such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, floods, global warming, sandstorms, the destruction of the ozone layer, and so on. The second category includes diseases such as AIDs, SARs, bird flu, foot-and-mouth disease, mad cow disease, and other maladies. The mobility of modern society makes it possible for those diseases to spread throughout the world at a speed never seen before, and it is harder for one country to contain them within its own boundaries. Bird flu has caused a 2 percent

reduction of GDP throughout the world and still poses a threat to mankind. Cooperation between China and the United States in the prevention and control of bird flu was a prominent issue discussed at the APEC summit meeting held in Seoul in November 2005 and during President Bush's subsequent visit to China. The third category contains transnational threats such as organized crime, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings, and so on.

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, made people throughout the world take international terrorism more seriously than ever before. But ever since then, terrorist raids have done a lot of harm to many countries in the world.

All of these threats are challenges of a global nature. No country is able to deal with each of them alone, and no country can remain distant from and immune to them. With respect to coping with such challenges, China and the United States share many common interests. The cooperation of the two countries in recent years in six-party talks aimed at the peaceful resolution of the Democratic Republic of Korea's (DPRK's) nuclear issue is the most notable example. The expansion of common interests is an objective reality, not a fabrication. The expansion of the basis for China-U.S. relations is beneficial to the stability of their relationship and will also develop their ability to withstand a storm in their relationship. In the early 1990s, human rights issues dominated China-U.S. relations, and in the mid-1990s, the Taiwan issue was responsible for plunging relations. In the future, should similar disputes occur, policymakers of the two countries will take the overall state of China-U.S. relations into account and consider cooperation and common interests from every angle. As a result, it is less likely that a specific concrete problem will result in an all-around decline in bilateral relations.

Second, bilateral ties between China and the United States are being institutionalized.

First, summit meetings of the two leaders have been institutionalized. Besides official visits to each other's countries, both leaders have met each other on many occasions since President Bush came to office in 2001. They can discuss all kinds of issues in a candid and open-minded way. Then there are various kinds of joint commissions formed by the two sides such as China-U.S. Joint Commissions on Science and Technology, the China-U.S. Joint Economic Commission, the China-U.S. Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade, and so on. Regular conventions of those joint commissions play a very important part in promoting cooperation in various fields and in diminishing differences between the two sides. They also serve as an effective means for preventing differences from getting acute and from hindering the further development of bilateral relations. In early 2006 trade protectionist sentiments in the U.S. Congress increased significantly as a result of the clamor over the U.S. trade imbalance, the RMB (*Renminbi*—the people's currency) exchange rate, and the protection of intellectual property rights (IPRs). A variety of bills directed against China were introduced, and the U.S. trade representative, the secretary of commerce, and others made speeches to put pressure on China. The Chinese government lost no time in adopting strong measures. One of the important ones called for holding the 17th session of the China-U.S. Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade. The meeting resolved some differences and alleviated others.

The two countries also set up cooperative mechanisms in various areas such as education, science and technology, energy, environmental protection, the reduction of the effects of disasters, and so on. In 2005 a mechanism for strategic dialogue between the two sides was established. By means of this mechanism, each side sets forth its views and concerns on wide-ranging bilateral, regional, and global issues. In particular, they expound their respective views and strategic intentions on relatively long-term issues.

In 2006 the two countries launched the strategic economic dialogue. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson led the whole economic team of the Bush administration to Beijing in December to engage in a dialogue with their Chinese counterparts. This is a new and significant development in bilateral relations. It has shown that U.S. policymakers have come to a new realization of the importance of Sino–American economic relations to the U.S. economy and are trying to look at the relationship from a long-term perspective. It also provides an opportunity to advance bilateral economic relations at a higher level and in a wider scope.

With these mechanisms in place, relations between China and the United States have developed some kind of predictability and will not suffer a major shock even if some unexpected incidents or crucial personnel changes occur. In the past, China–U.S. relations were very often affected by something that can be called the periodicity law involving a “political football” that made its mark in U.S. bipartisan strife during election campaigns. It became a common sense observation that with the change of U.S. administrations, bilateral relations would be set back to a certain extent. Relations would return to normal only after a period of time had elapsed in which China accustomed itself to the new administration. Such a scenario was evident in both the Clinton administration and the George W. Bush administration. Now the possibility of China–U.S. relations being affected by this kind of “periodicity law” has been reduced owing to the institutionalization of bilateral ties.

Third, the China–U.S. relationship is becoming mature. Both China and the United States held unrealistic views and opinions of each other in the past. In the 1980s many Americans looked through rose-colored glasses at China’s reform and opening up, believing that China was transforming itself into a Western-style democratic society and that America’s long-cherished dream would soon

come true. When political disturbances occurred in Beijing in 1989, many Americans went from one extreme to another and regarded China as devoid of any merit. Some Americans also held the view that since China was in dire need of access to the U.S. market and capital and technology to engage in economic construction, the United States could use such resources to put pressure on China to make it yield to U.S. demands on the human rights issue. As a result, the United States linked China’s most-favored-nation status with its human rights conditions. That approach is now perceived both as unreasonable and ineffective. In addition, some Americans believed that the international community could be galvanized to put pressure on China in order to force it to make compromises on the human rights issue. For that reason, the United States charged China with violating human rights at the UN Human Rights Committee as many as 11 times, but each time its contention was rejected by the committee. After making all those attempts, the United States developed and now holds a far more realistic view of China and China–U.S. relations. So does China. Nowadays both China and the United States have a better understanding of the positions of the other side on various issues. Although there are still some differences between them on certain issues, and differences will exist in the future, the two countries can agree to disagree. Existing differences will not become a fundamental hindrance to their cooperation. That is a remarkable sign that shows that their relations are evolving toward maturity.

In recent years President Bush and other U.S. policymakers have repeatedly said that the China–U.S. relationship is complex. The author agrees with that assessment. One of the complexities lies in the fact that in analyzing China–U.S. ties in the past, people separated relations into two areas, namely, an area in which common interests existed and an area in which differences remained. Now people think

differently. They believe that almost all the areas in China–U.S. relations reflect not only common interests but also differences. Complex circumstances surround various areas in which both common interests and differences coexist. Each area should be examined and analyzed painstakingly and specifically. On the whole, common interests are greater than differences in any of those areas. It makes no difference whether it is the Taiwan issue, an economic and trade issue, or an issue relating to the prevention of nuclear proliferation. In the spring of 2006, when economic and trade issues were dominant, there was no sign that a trade war between both countries was imminent. In fact, the economic and trade relations of the two countries are one of the important pillars in the overall China–U.S. relationship. They have created a beneficial and win-win situation for both countries. The economic and trade ties of the two sides constitute an organic part of economic globalization. As long as globalization continues, the deepening of economic interdependence between China and the United States will surely be an inevitable and irreversible trend.

Fourth, cooperation and mutual interdependence are deepening despite the persistence of mutual misgivings. As understanding between China and the United States grows, it would not be helpful to evade stating that mutual deep misgivings still exist. China's misgivings about the United States mainly stem from the way in which the United States treats China's development and the U.S. policy toward Taiwan. On the other hand, the United States is mainly concerned about whether China wants to weaken and ultimately drive out the U.S. presence from East Asia and whether China is going to challenge the U.S. position in the region and the world, just as the former Soviet Union did, even to the point of entering into rivalry with the United States over global hegemony.

U.S. misgivings found their full expression in some recently published documents. The

U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Report released in February 2006 regards China as a country that "has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages." In the U.S. Strategic Report on National Security published by the White House in March 2006, the space devoted to China is greater than that given to any other country. This shows the existence of misgivings on the part of both countries. Nevertheless, the China–U.S. relationship has developed amid the mutual suspicion that has characterized the relationship for more than 20 years.

The existence of mutual misgivings proves that the two countries need to increase exchanges and communication, to pay closer attention to the interests and requirements of the other side, and to extend their ties in various fields. China and the United States should and will increase their mutual trust and decrease their misgivings in the course of deepening their economic and strategic interdependence in the future.

How to realize long-term stability in the relationship between China and the United States? The author believes that the following viewpoints are worth mentioning.

First, China is a beneficiary of the existing international system, and together with the United States, it is a constructive participant in and an active protector of that system. The United States and some other countries harbor a kind of anxiety about what China's development means to the international system and whether China will challenge the existing international system. It is precisely for that reason that Robert Zoellick, the former U.S. deputy secretary of state, made a speech on September 21, 2005, to the effect that China should become a responsible stakeholder of the international system. In fact, the process of China's reform and opening up is, in a certain sense, a process of integrating China

into international society. As early as the beginning of China's reform and opening up, Mr. Deng Xiaoping stated that no single country is able to realize modernization in isolation from the outside world. That means that China should be integrated into the international system.

The United Nations is by far the most important, most representative, and most universal international organization. China is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the only developing country that is a member of that body. That's China's most important international role. China makes every effort to perform its duties. From 1988 onward, China has taken an active part in UN peacekeeping operations. At present, China's peacekeepers are operating in various parts of the world from Central America to the Southern Pacific.

At the end of 2001, China was formally admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the WTO review sessions in April 2006, China won praise for fulfilling its commitments to the WTO. With respect to the human rights issue, China has signed Convention A (on Economics, Society, and Culture) and Convention B (on Citizens' Rights and Political Rights). The National People's Congress has approved Convention A, and Convention B is undergoing careful deliberation and approval. In the field of environmental protection, China is a signatory to and a member of a series of regional and international organizations such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Asia-Pacific Partnership for Clean Energy Development. The Chinese government has made a clear and definite statement of its intentions to carry out the transformation of its economic growth model with the aim of building an energy-efficient and environmentally friendly economy. There is every reason to say that China is an active participant in the existing international system.

As a matter of course, China's development began as the result of a correct decision that

has allowed it to exist in an international system that provides the objective condition for China to pursue a peaceful foreign policy and secure a favorable peripheral environment. That conclusion is obvious from the economic perspective. Since the cold war ended, economic globalization has picked up speed. The Chinese government made a wise and correct decision to engage actively in globalization. By striving for what is profitable and keeping away from what is harmful, China has brought about a sustainable and rapid increase in its economy. In particular, after joining the WTO at the end of 2001, the average growth rate of China's foreign trade climbed to 28 percent, which was beyond the expectations of most economists in the world. For more than 10 years, China has attracted more foreign investment than any other developing nation. A rapid increase in foreign trade and a large input of foreign capital play a strong role in promoting China's economic development.

Because China is a beneficiary of the international system, it has no reason to challenge it and destroy it. On the contrary, China will protect and improve it. China works with the international community in preventing the proliferation of WMD. By the same token, China has assumed responsibility for maintaining the international financial system. During the East Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the widespread devaluation of the East Asian currencies directly affected China's export trade. The Chinese government, preferring to sustain its own losses, claimed that it would not devalue its currency RMB but would support the HK dollar, thus avoiding a new round of devaluations of East Asian currencies. In this way, the financial situation in East Asia soon stabilized, and adverse effects on the international financial system were avoided.

People often say that an individual country's foreign policy is the extension of its domestic politics. China's domestic politics are based on modernization. China wants to

develop itself and wants other countries and regions to develop. China wants stability at home and peace and stability in the region and throughout the world. China is building a harmonious society and is pushing to build a harmonious world. That is its long-term policy.

Second, China will not follow the old path of the Soviet Union and engage in competition with the United States for world hegemony. The reality of today's international politics is that the international scene consists of one superpower and various great powers. This kind of pattern is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. China's development is an arduous task, and the road is long. After more than 20 years of hard work that have brought about an improvement in China's national strength, its per capita GDP is still at a very low level, ranking below 100 in the world. Not only does China need to concentrate its attention on economic construction, but even after doing so successfully by the middle of this century, it will merely reach the level of a modestly developed country. Old problems may be resolved; yet new ones will occur. Some issues that China is facing today such as imbalances in development, the lack of resources, the deterioration of the environment, the lack of independent intellectual property rights, a surplus of production capacity in some industries, the protection of the rights of peasants turned workers, and so on are much different from those encountered during the 1980s. That is why Deng Xiaoping's teachings of "Hiding one's capacity and biding one's time" and "Never to be the head" still hold true today. Even in the future we should not forget them. China has neither the actual strength nor the willingness to compete with the United States for leadership.

Third, the United States should readjust its state of mind toward China's development. Its unhealthy state of mind is to a great extent caused by all the misgivings it harbors about China's development. The most evident expression of doubts about China can be found in a

book entitled *The Coming Conflict with China* published in the mid-1990s by two American correspondents, Bernstein and Monroe.¹ They claimed that China was aiming to replace the United States as the most influential power in Asia, that China was a rival of the United States in many aspects, and that China's interests ran counter to those of the United States. Although many farsighted people voiced their disagreement with those views during the nationwide debates on America's China policy that occurred in the late 1990s, many deep-rooted misgivings about China were expressed by U.S. policymakers and think-tank specialists. Once China does something, whether in its own region or elsewhere in the world, the first response made by the United States raises questions about whether China is trying to oppose the United States and do harm to its interests. In 2001, when China and the ASEAN countries agreed to the formation of a free trade zone in 10 years, some American scholars asked why China intended to work out a 10+1 formula in the region when APEC already existed. The idea of holding an East Asian summit meeting was first proposed by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Mahathir. At the preparatory stage of the summit meeting, the United States time and again raised the question of who would be the leader. The Americans suspected that China was behind the drive to push ahead with East Asian integration and join with other countries in the region in order to weaken the U.S. position there. In the summer of 2005 when the summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was held in Astana, Kazakhstan, a proposal that the United States remove its military bases from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was presented based on the contention that the war in Afghanistan was already over. The United States once again voiced the suspicion that China had manipulated the matter behind the scenes.

Accordingly, the United States has to adjust its state of mind regarding three developments.

First, the United States must be prepared to accept a stronger and more influential China in international affairs. The United States wants to develop, but it has to let others develop too. Time and again China has made it clear that taking the path of peaceful development is its strategic choice, not an expedient measure. However, because of the size of its population and territory and its economic scale, China's development is sure to bring about an impact on regional and international affairs. The right to develop is a right granted to every country.

No matter what China is doing, the United States concludes right away that China is doing something to threaten its position. That conclusion fails to take into account the fact that U.S. military expenditures constitute nearly half of the world's total and that its military hardware and facilities are much more advanced than those of the other developed countries, not to mention developing countries. According to the estimation of certain U.S. specialists, U.S. military technology and equipment have a 15–30-year lead over those of China. Now that China has increased a bit of its military spending and has improved a bit of its weaponry, the United States claims that “the pace and scope of China's military buildup [has already put] regional military balances at risk.”

That really is a great exaggeration. In this region there are alliances between the United States and Japan, between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and between the United States and Australia and New Zealand. In addition, the United States stations a large number of troops in Guam, and the number is often augmented. How can China “put the regional military balances at risk” with such a moderate improvement of its military? In the eyes of many Chinese, what the United States seems to be asserting is that the powerful can do whatever they want, and the weak are not allowed to do anything.

Second, the United States should get used to accepting the fact that other countries have

their own interests and ways of doing things and let them pursue different policies. As long as there are two countries, there are two different national interests, no matter how well both countries get along with each other as allies. Japan can be seen as the staunchest ally of the United States. But when it comes to the issue of dealing with Iran, Japan and the United States have different policies. Again and again, the United States tried to persuade Japan not to proceed with its investment plans in Iran. Nevertheless, Japan continues to invest in Iran on account of its energy interests. On the question of imposing sanctions on Burma [Myanmar], Japan does not see eye to eye with the United States. The ROK is another U.S. ally. With respect to the DPRK's nuclear issue, however, the ROK pursues a policy different from that of the United States. At the beginning of the crisis, the ROK resolutely rejected the possibility of using nonpeaceful means to resolve the issue. As for the question of Iraq, the fact that France and Germany were at odds with the United States is known to all.

Because China and the United States are different in many ways, it is natural that China has its own interests on some international issues and goes its own way in implementing its own policies. The starting point of China's foreign policy is to create a favorable international environment for building a well-off society in a comprehensive way. Very often China defines its foreign policy based on its domestic needs. In fact, many countries in the world do the same thing. China is developing ties with some South American and African countries, laying stress on mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Some countries among them, unfortunately, are not on good terms with the United States. Consequently, some Americans assert that China has set out purposely to improve relations with those countries in order to oppose the United States. That assertion distorts China's behavior.

Third, the United States has to change its overbearing and arrogant attitude and accept

a more diversified world in which it will still be far more powerful in terms of actual strength than any other country. But mutual respect for each other in a state-to-state relationship is still a basic principle. The United States has its own development model and its own values, and other countries have their own development models and value concepts based on their own distinctive histories, cultures, traditions, and other national conditions. A country like China, which is so large in population, vast in territory, weak in economic foundations, relatively poor in natural resources, and aspires to achieve reunification with Taiwan has to find a road of development for itself instead of indiscriminately copying the models of other countries. If Americans could place the United States in China's position, they would erase at least some of their misconceptions about China.

Fourth, China and the United States should develop a better understanding of each other's views on the Taiwan issue. Taiwan constitutes the one problem that cannot be circumvented. The great cause of national unification is China's core national interest. The Chinese people are firm and steadfast about achieving the goal of reunifying their motherland. Their resolve to do so is unshakable. On December 9, 2003, at a press conference held to welcome visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, President Bush openly criticized Chen Shui-bian for his intention to change the status quo of the Taiwan Strait unilaterally. Since then the United States has followed a policy of maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, which has common ground with China's policy of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. That will be counted as an element in restraining the Taiwan authorities from moving to obtain the rapid independence or the *de jure* independence of Taiwan. That, of course, does not mean that the Taiwan issue has been resolved. As far as China is concerned, the magnificent target of realizing the final reunification of the motherland within this century is set. Many Chinese scholars believe that U.S.

policy can be interpreted as meaning that it is in U.S. interests to maintain Taiwan's separation from the mainland forever. If that is true, China's policy goal is in conflict with that of the United States. The policy the United States is following may be a main obstacle to China's reunification.

The avowed U.S. policy is not to support "Taiwan's independence." In explaining the Taiwan Relations Act and its statement that "the United States does not support Taiwan independence," the United States has asserted time and again that it does not have an opinion about the final settlement of the Taiwan issue; the United States is concerned that the final settlement be peaceful and acceptable to both sides.

We may accept this statement at face value for the time being. Peaceful solution or peaceful settlement, as the United States has explained, simply represents three possibilities. One is so-called peaceful independence, a possibility that is not acceptable to the Chinese government and the Chinese people. Whether rapid independence or gradual independence, the Chinese government and people are against it, and therefore this is a blind alley. Another possibility is the maintenance of the status quo. But no matter how long the status quo is maintained, there must be a time limit. Besides, the status quo is changing. If the two sides across the Taiwan Strait maintain close contacts and exchanges, that could be seen as a sign of development in the direction of reunification. However, if things develop in a way that reflects Chen Shui-bian's behavior and statements issued in recent years such as the "rectification of the name," it would be moving precisely in the direction of independence. Consequently, the maintenance of the status quo is temporary. The third choice is to realize reunification step by step. If the maintenance of the status quo is pushed in the direction of peaceful reunification, it can be accepted by the Chinese government and people. Suppose that the U.S. nullification of the Taiwan Relations Act is unrealistic at the present time; suppose also

that the United States has difficulty in saying that it supports China's peaceful reunification. Then the statement that "[the United States] is not opposing peaceful reunification" must be contained in the U.S. policy because a "peaceful solution" does include the option of peaceful reunification.

If the United States really thinks that China and the United States are stakeholders of the existing international system and if the United States really thinks that "the prospect of violent conflict among great powers is more remote than ever" (a quotation from a statement made by Condoleezza Rice on January 18, 2006, on "Transformational Diplomacy"), then the United States should do something to stabilize great power relationships and dispel China's misgivings about the United States on the Taiwan issue. What the United States needs to do is simply to express that it does not oppose the peaceful reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. That should not be regarded as an excessive demand.

When we take a broad view of the future, we have trust and confidence in China–U.S. relations. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that peace will be beneficial to our people, whereas conflict will cause harm to both of us. When peace prevails, it will bring benefits to our people and peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and in the world. If conflict carries the day, it will not be beneficial to peace and stability in the region and the world.

At a time when the China–U.S. relationship was experiencing dark days, Deng Xiaoping, with his extraordinary wisdom and farsightedness, made a prediction that China–U.S. relations would get better. Now we have every

reason to believe that long-term stability in the relationship between China and the United States can be realized.

About the Author

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Note

1. Bernstein, Richard, and Ross H. Monroe, *The Coming Conflict in China* (New York, 1997).