



U.S.-CHINA AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS: HOW STABLE?

**A CONFERENCE WITH THE PRC TAIWAN AFFAIRS OFFICE ON
U.S.-CHINA AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS**

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THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

MAY 16-17, 2011

By Donald S. Zagoria

The NCAFP met in New York with a group of PRC officials and scholars led by Vice Minister Sun Yafu of the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office to discuss recent developments in U.S.-China relations as well as the current situation in relations between China and Taiwan. The meeting was part of an ongoing NCAFP dialogue with the Taiwan Affairs Office that meets semi-annually, once in New York and once in Beijing. A list of participants is included in the appendix.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The NCAFP meeting took place at an important point in U.S.-PRC relations. 2010 was a particularly bad year for U.S.-China relations, but there was a clear effort by both sides to reset the relationship in 2011. President Hu and President Obama met for a summit meeting in January 2011 and hundreds of officials from both sides met for the third Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Washington, DC in May 2011.

The following report is divided into several sections: Introduction; Is the year 2011 a Positive Turning Point in U.S.-China Relations?; Developments in China-Taiwan Relations on the Eve of the 2012 Taiwan Presidential elections; and a Conclusion.

This is not a consensus document. The observations are those of the author.

Moreover, in this report, the author is drawing on his impressions not only from this meeting but from a number of recent Track II meetings with American and Chinese colleagues, as well as meetings with colleagues from Taiwan, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Therefore, this does not purport to be a detailed account of the May session but rather an attempt to distill its main themes and its recent context.

Finally, the author wishes to express his gratitude to all the American, Chinese and other colleagues who assembled for these meetings and shared with each other their insights.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2010 was a particularly bad year for U.S.-China relations. There were differences over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan leading to a suspension by the Chinese of military to military exchanges with the United States; a Chinese contention that the U.S. lacked respect for China's "core interests"; differences over how to react to North Korea's provocations against South Korea; Chinese complaints about U.S.-ROK exercises in the Yellow Sea and U.S. air and sea reconnaissance close to China's borders; differences between China and Japan over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands; differences between China and some of the Southeast Asian nations as well as the U.S. over territorial issues in the South China Sea; and continuing economic frictions. In addition, there were serious differences over human rights; the Obama Administration and American observers criticized the harsh Chinese crackdown in the aftermath of the "Arab spring." Finally, there was much American unease at continuing double digit increases in the Chinese military budget and the lack of transparency in China's military doctrine. (For a discussion of what went wrong in 2010, see the papers by Stapleton Roy, Chu Shulong and David Lampton in "Sweet and Sour", parts I and II and the reports on our meetings.)

There were also signs of a fundamental strategic debate occurring in China with some advocating an abandonment of Deng Xiaoping's policy of "keeping a low profile" in favor of China adopting a more assertive role. (See Yan Xuetong, "How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?", International Herald Tribune, April 1, 2011. For a Chinese response to such calls for assertiveness, see Wang Jisi's article in a recent issue of Foreign Affairs, Mar/Apr 2011.)

In the United States, there were concerns about what was perceived to be a more assertive and even arrogant China, fueled by its rising power, solid performance during the global financial crisis and nationalist voices. This view was shared by several U.S. allies in the region. At the same time, many Chinese were concerned that the United States was using these developments to strengthen U.S. alliances in Asia and to contain the rise of China.

Many in the United States also began to fear that the two great powers were drifting into a new Cold War in Asia that would greatly harm both sides and worsen the prospects for maintaining global peace and stability. (For an eloquent summation of both the challenges and opportunities in Sino-American relations, see the new book by Henry Kissinger, On China.)

In any event the Obama Administration stiffened its posture toward Beijing; Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia reacted with concern; the U.S. flexed its military muscles; and Asian alliances were strengthened.

In the face of the serious downturn in Sino-American relations and blowback from Asian countries, sometime between the middle and the end of 2010, the Chinese leaders took a series of important steps designed to repair relations with the United States and their Asian neighbors. In April, 2010, President Hu Jintao attended a nuclear summit in Washington, DC sponsored by President Obama. It was probably at this meeting that plans were made to have Hu come to Washington for a State Visit in January, 2011. The Chinese also sought to rein in North Korea. The North Koreans did not respond, as many thought they might, to live fire exercises conducted by South Korea and to U.S.-ROK joint military exercises in the aftermath of the North Korean torpedoing of a South Korean corvette and the North Korean shelling of a South Korean island. Several Chinese told us at our meetings in November, 2010 and again in May 2011 that the PRC had made it clear to Pyongyang that China would not come to North Korea's aid in the event of a new Korean war.

In September, 2010, the Chinese received two high ranking U.S. officials, Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor and Larry Summers, then the Secretary of Treasury. These discussions were clearly intended to help chart a new path towards resetting the U.S.-PRC relationship; the two U.S. officials were received at very high levels.

Finally, in December 2010, China's chief spokesman for foreign and security policy, State Councilor, Dai Bingguo, made an important speech reaffirming Hu Jintao's policy of "peaceful development." This speech, doubtless authorized at the highest levels, was clearly intended to quiet critics of Hu's foreign policy, at home and abroad. It reaffirmed the importance of good relations with the United States and other major powers as well as China's Asian neighbors. The speech also made it clear that China's primary task was to focus on its numerous domestic challenges and that to do this China requires a long period of "peace and development."

It was also in this period towards the end of 2010 that both sides drew up a calendar of important high level visits and exchanges that would take place in 2011. These included: Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States in January, 2011; the third round of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in May, 2011; Vice President Biden's forthcoming visit to China in July 2011; a series of meetings later this year between President Hu Jintao and President Obama at several multilateral meetings – the East Asian summit, the G-20 and APEC; and a visit by Hu Jintao's presumed successor, Xi Jinping, to the United States in early 2012.

IS 2011 A POSITIVE TURNING POINT IN U.S.-PRC RELATIONS?

We will begin with the case for an affirmative response to this question and then offer some cautionary notes.

The Affirmative Case

First, the summit meeting between the two Presidents in January 2011 was very successful in resetting the relationship. One authoritative Chinese participant at our April 2011 meeting said that the summit “reshaped” U.S.-China relations, “reassured both sides” about the strategic intentions of the other, “redefined” the framework of relations to one of a “cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit”, (a formula later to be repeated by many high ranking Chinese officials) and laid out a “roadmap for cooperation in every field.”

For their part, American participants, both at our April and May meetings in 2011, concluded that both sides now have a more sober and realistic view of what they can expect from the other. The Obama Administration set out expecting a more positive mix of cooperation on many issues and was disappointed in the Chinese response on various issues. Now Americans are talking about a “new normal” in U.S.-China relations which sees a mixed relationship - competition within the framework of a need for cooperation on many global, regional and bilateral issues.

A second reason for optimism is that the calendar for high level exchanges in 2011 and 2012 should ensure that both sides consult frequently and intensively on matters of mutual concern. This should help avoid misunderstandings and miscalculations and will help both sides manage their differences in a more constructive fashion. It can also lead to closer cooperation in certain areas.

Third, the Strategic and Economic Dialogue on May 9-10, 2011 was pronounced a success by both sides. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said at the end of the meeting that there was “a lot of progress,” that the list of agreements and understandings reached is “quite long,” and there was “concrete progress on a wide range of shared challenges.”

Secretary of the Treasury Tim Geithner said that the two great powers made “very significant progress” in our economic relationship over the past two years, that U.S exports to China reached \$110 billion last year and are growing about 50% faster than our exports to the rest of the world, and that he saw “very promising shifts” in the direction of Chinese economic policy.

China’s Vice Premier Wang Qishan said that the two sides signed a comprehensive framework to promote strong, sustainable and balanced economic growth and economic

cooperation and that China is committed to building “a more open trade and investment system.”

China’s State Councilor Dai Bingguo said that he and Secretary Clinton focused on the agreement of the two leaders “to build a cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit.” He said that the U.S. had “reaffirmed that it welcomes a strong, successful and prosperous China that plays a greater role in international affairs and does not seek to contain China.” And he said that the new “Strategic Security Dialogue” which includes military leaders from both sides “is a very important outcome.”

Another important development is the establishment of a dialogue on security in Asia, where many of the challenges and opportunities in relations occur.

A fourth and particularly important reason for optimism is that senior U.S. and Chinese military leaders participated in the Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD). These high level dialogues have progressed from economics during the Bush Administration to the addition and integration of the political and now military dialogues as well during the Obama years. Also, the week after the SSD, General Chen Bingde was the first PLA Chief of Staff to visit the U.S. in seven years. He and Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, held a joint press conference at the Pentagon in order to stress their determination to work together in the future. Admiral Mullen said that “we spent the bulk of our time trying to understand the security environment from one another’s perspective and trying to gain a better sense of the common interests we share, not just in the Asia-Pacific region but around the world.” General Chen said that “enhancing military-to-military relations between China and the United States serves the interests of not only the Chinese and American people, but also the people in the world.” He said, too, that China “does not have the culture nor the ability to challenge the United States.”

In response to a question about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Chen warned that new U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan would damage military ties. But, in an intriguing remark (to be discussed more fully in the following section on cross-strait relations), Chen said: “as to how bad the impact will be, it will depend on the nature of the weapons sold to Taiwan.” This seemed to leave the door open to some U.S. arms sales to Taiwan which the Chinese might respond to in a lower key fashion than has been the recent norm.

The two sides also agreed that Chinese and American navies will engage in a series of joint exercises to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden, cooperate better on natural disasters and improve their communication and cooperation in times of emergencies.

Both sides also highlighted the fact that “a healthy, stable and reliable military-to-military relationship is an important part of the China-U.S. relationship.”

These developments are particularly important because in the past the military to military relationship has been the weakest link in the overall relationship.

Fifth, at all of our recent meetings with Chinese colleagues, both sides agreed that the leaders of our two countries, and the foreign policy mainstream in both countries, are pragmatic and understand the importance – indeed the necessity – of developing a stable and cooperative relationship. As two former U.S. officials said during our May meeting, the Sino-U.S. relationship is likely to be a mixed one over the coming decades. The two countries will not be allies but there is no reason that they need to be adversaries. They should build on their common interests and manage their differences. Both Chinese and American participants welcomed the comprehensive agendas and exchanges on bilateral, regional and global issues agreed to at successive meetings as providing a framework for cooperation, a vehicle to prevent misunderstandings and a means to build constituencies on both sides for positive relations.

This is not only what Americans and Chinese want. It is also the outcome that all the Asian countries want. No country in Asia wants to be forced to choose between China and the United States, especially at a time when China is becoming the largest trading partner for many of them, and the U.S. continues to provide a balance to growing Chinese military power.

Sixth, there is widespread agreement on both sides that the two great powers need a stable international environment in order to focus on their many growing domestic challenges. Many Americans expressed the view that America's chief challenge in the years ahead is to get its own house in order, both its economic situation and the political discourse needed to fix it. The Chinese, for their part, have long expressed the view that their principal challenge is building a just and "harmonious" society in the face of major challenges, including widespread corruption, inequality and the lack of political reform. China also faces a huge demographic problem in the years ahead as it grows old before it reaches a high level of per capita income comparable to that of the West.

Some Cautionary Notes

Although a strong case can be made for greater stability in Sino-American relations in the immediate future, a number of caveats are in order.

First, the relationship is inherently complex and becoming more so. There will inevitably be disagreements over a number of issues from human rights to the Taiwan Straits. On other questions there will be different national perspectives and tactics if not interest. It will be essential, but difficult, to manage these differences.

Second, economic frictions and insecurities, along with domestic politics in both countries, will compound the challenges in constructively managing the relationship. Positive commitments on economic issues, often made before, need to be seriously implemented to head off growing frustrations. These include, for Americans, intellectual property rights, government procurement, unfair treatment of foreign investors and

currency valuation. For China they include U.S. exports of technology and Chinese investment in the U.S.

Third, the United States will need to do a careful balancing act in its relations with China on the one hand and American allies on the other. America's allies in the Asia-Pacific want reassurance from the United States that it will remain committed to the region. Beijing wants reassurance that the purpose of America's alliance system is not to contain China.

Fourth, unforeseen events which cannot be controlled by either power can lead them into disagreements. Several factors in the downturn in relations in 2010 were the result of events on the Korean peninsula, in relations between China and Japan, and in relations between China and the Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN.

Fifth, there have been no serious exchanges on, let alone discernible progress, in key areas of the relationship such as space, strategic systems and doctrine, and cyber warfare.

Sixth, as both sides pointed out, there are many more actors in China shaping foreign policy (PLA, economic agencies, netizens, think tanks, etc.) and often there is a lack of effective coordination.

Seventh, it will be very difficult for the United States to overcome the "three obstacles" that China holds out as impeding military to military relations – arms sales to Taiwan, close-in reconnaissance, and liberalization of laws limiting the transfer of certain types of technology to China. The U.S. in turn is concerned about China's apparent challenges on certain law of the sea issues.

Eighth, as David Lampton pointed out in a paper written for an earlier meeting, there are three worrisome dynamics in the relationship: 1) the pluralization of Chinese society and the policy process show that hard-line views are increasingly apparent and the domestic security and propaganda organizations have gained strength; 2) China's views of its growing capabilities lead it to want to "renegotiate" prior bargains struck with the U.S., such as the one on Taiwan; and 3) Expanding Chinese interests and capabilities into new areas such as air, naval, missile, space and cyber capabilities means that China is slowly moving from being an insular, continental power to becoming a more regional and even global power and this is creating anxiety in the U.S., Japanese and other Asian security establishments.

Ninth, it remains to be seen how China acts on key U.S. international priorities. Will it continue to shield North Korea, dilute pressures on Iran, exploit US-Pakistan tensions, and accuse the West of instigating the Arab Spring?

Tenth, ideological differences are again on the rise as China cracks down on dissent at home in the wake of the "Arab spring." Secretary Clinton has publicly stated

that China is “on the wrong side of history.” Beijing in turn accuses the West of trying to subvert its domestic political system.

Finally, there are differences on each side in identifying accurately the real strategy and strategic intentions of the other. Many Chinese continue to believe that the United States is determined to contain China or, at least, to diminish its influence and power; some believe it is also trying to undermine China’s domestic political system. Many Americans believe that China seeks to erode U.S. influence in Asia, and over time poses a global threat.

On the whole, in recent meetings the Chinese side seemed more optimistic than the American for near-term bilateral relations.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS ON THE EVE OF THE 2012 TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The Case for Optimism

In several recent meetings with Chinese colleagues, both American and Chinese colleagues expressed complete agreement that the past three years in cross-strait relations, since the election of KMT President Ma Ying-jeou in 2008, have been the most stable and peaceful period in the Taiwan Strait for many decades and a huge blessing for both sides. The question is whether or not this situation can be maintained. Presidential elections will take place in Taiwan in January, 2012 and the current race between President Ma and opposition leader, Tsai Ing-wen, head of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is, according to most polls, too close to call. (There is also a 2012 succession in China and Presidential election in the US, but they seem unlikely to have great impact on the Taiwan issue.)

There is a strong case for optimism. First, the two sides have agreed to a formula of taking the easy economic and cultural issues first while postponing the more difficult political and security issues till later. This formula is essential because there is no consensus within Taiwan on the political and security issues and no political leader in Taiwan could rush into such talks with the PRC in the foreseeable future. The economic issues, on the other hand, while somewhat controversial at the beginning, have become less so. As one American pointed out at our May meeting, the DPP used to condemn the Economic and Framework Agreement (ECFA) as a sellout to the mainland. But more recently it has changed its tune and is now arguing simply that the effects of ECFA on the Taiwan economy are uneven. This is clearly a DPP recognition of the fact that ECFA has in fact been an overall positive factor for the Taiwanese economy and is approved by a majority of the Taiwanese public.

Second, there has been major progress in cross-strait economic and cultural interaction, fueled by 14 agreements. According to one Chinese scholar at our May meeting, ECFA has contributed to “landmark progress” in the cross-strait relationship. There was, he said, \$140 billion in trade in 2009 and Taiwan’s investment in the mainland is growing significantly. All of this, he argued, contributed to a double digit 10.7% growth in the Taiwan economy in 2010. There has also been considerable progress in tourism and educational exchange. According to the same Chinese scholar, 1.5 million Chinese tourists visited Taiwan last year and he himself had spent one month at a Taiwan university. This rapid economic integration between China and Taiwan, he continued, could eventually lead to a Common Market.

The progress in economic interaction also has political implications. An American participant at our May meeting pointed out that the two sides have now reached agreement on an Economic Cooperation Committee which creates a forum in which officials of the two governments can deal with each other at the Vice-Ministerial level. This “institutionalizes” direct dealing between the two governments. And it creates a process for further integration.

Third, China has adopted a very pragmatic and patient approach to the cross-strait issue. As one Chinese scholar put it at our April meeting, (see Chu Shulong, “Mainland China’s Perspectives on the Cross-Strait Issue,”) Mainland China is “basically satisfied” with the current state of cross-strait relations. The PRC government and people believe that there has been a state of peace and stability since 2008 and that the two sides have ended their confrontation on independence-reunification which they had engaged in for almost 20 years since 1988. To be sure, Chu continued, the Mainland is aware that Ma and his KMT government in Taiwan are not working for reunification. But neither are they working for Taiwan independence, as the DPP government did during the eight years it was in power from 2000 to 2008.

Ma’s three no’s, “no independence, no reunification, no war”, are “not desirable” for the Mainland, Chu continued. The Mainland would prefer that Taiwan accept the reunification goal. But the current situation is “acceptable” because “the Mainland understands that Taiwan is not ready, even under the KMT, for reunification with the Mainland.”

The Mainland’s major agenda for the next several years, continued Chu, is to implement ECFA and continue to discuss with Taiwan economic issues such as an investment agreement. The two sides, he went on, are also working on cultural, educational and law enforcement exchange and cooperation. These views were generally echoed by the Chinese side in the April and May conferences.

On the political and security issues, the Mainland side would like to start such talks with Taiwan “as soon as possible” because Beijing believes that only with these talks and agreements can the two sides stabilize their relationship “for the long term.” But the

Mainland understands that political, security and international space issues are highly conflictual issues inside Taiwan between the Pan Blue and Pan Green forces. And it also understands that President Ma is not ready yet to even start political talks. The Mainland side understands this and “can live with it until the Taiwan side is ready for those talks.” The Mainland, Chu concluded, believes that Taiwan may be ready to start political talks if Ma is elected to a second term in 2012.

Fourth, the PRC’s pragmatic approach to the cross-strait issues appears to extend even somewhat to the DPP. An authoritative Chinese participant at our May meeting said that Beijing was prepared to be “flexible” in finding a formula on “one China” that both it and the DPP could accept. Several Chinese participants referred to the “constitutional one China” formula first floated by a prominent DPP leader, Frank Hsieh, many years ago. Such a formula would allow the two sides to accept one China but differ on its interpretation. This is essentially what has happened during the past three years in the relationship between the PRC and the KMT government on Taiwan. They have both agreed on the formula called the “1992 consensus,” according to which both sides recognize the existence of one China but differ on its interpretation.

A fifth reason for optimism is that the DPP also seems to be moving in a pragmatic direction. At a trilateral U.S.-China-Taiwan meeting in April, one DPP leader indicated that the DPP had learned a lesson from the Chen Hsui-bian era and it now understood that it could not afford to alienate both China and the United States. (See the summary of the NCAFP trilateral meeting from April 14-15, 2011) It would therefore seek to be “predictable, stable and consistent” if it is returned to power. And it would seek common ground when possible with the PRC. It has rejected the 1992 Consensus, but seems to be open to finding some other approach, perhaps based on the ROC constitution.

Sixth, the U.S. has continued to make clear that it supports cross-Strait reconciliation and that it will accept any peaceful outcome agreed to by people on both sides.

Seventh, U.S.-Taiwan relations are solid, although a beef export issue has slowed contemplated positive steps on trade, visas, and cabinet visits.

A final reason for optimism is that U.S.-China relations are now moving back towards stability. Positive relations between the United States and China, good cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan and solid U.S.-Taiwan relations all can reinforce one another.

What Could Go Wrong?

Of course, there are many things that could go wrong in the cross-strait relationship. It would be unwise to be complacent.

First, if Ma wins reelection in 2012 and there is little subsequent progress on political and security issues, China's impatience might well grow.

Second, if the DPP wins the election in 2012, and the two sides fail to find an agreed formula for engagement, the result could be a serious reversal in cross-strait relations.

Third, the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan still looms as a serious impediment to stability in the cross-strait triangle if it is not properly managed. As mentioned earlier, the PRC General Chen Bingde signaled in his recent trip to the United States that there is some room for flexibility in Beijing's approach to this issue. Chen said, when asked what the impact of arms sales to Taiwan would be on U.S.-China relations, that "it depends" on "the nature of the arms sales." This seems to leave the door open for some U.S. arms sales to Taiwan that Beijing would condemn but at a lower decibel level than before. But there seems no end in sight of what one American has labeled the "1 choice, 3 compulsions" cycle: The PRC increases its military posture toward Taiwan and then Taipei is compelled to ask Washington for arms; Washington is compelled to sell them; and Beijing is compelled to denounce the sales.

Fourth, the two sides remain far apart on the issue of "international space" for Taiwan. China has not only withheld support for further expansion of Taiwan's international space, it has also continued longstanding efforts to squeeze Taiwan's existing roles in international organizations. It is not clear whether Beijing might be tolerant of Taiwan trade agreements with other countries if nomenclature and process satisfy its "one China" principle." The PRC contends that it cannot become more flexible on these issues until Taiwan joins the PRC in political talks or at least is clearer concerning "one China." This stance is likely to increase friction between the two sides in the future. It is a key issue for Taiwan – its economic future depends on greater integration with other Asian economies and its sense of dignity and ability to contribute to some of the world's global challenges is also at stake.

Finally, and most fundamental, the two sides remain far apart on how to define their relationship for the long term. The Mainland insists that reunification must be the long term goal while a great majority of the people in Taiwan want to preserve the existing status quo. Without some agreement or at least movement will the two sides be able to stabilize their long term relationship? Will the PRC continue to show patience? Will China's repressive political system reinforce Taiwan's desire to separate indefinitely?

CONCLUSION

In a recent magisterial commentary on U.S.-China relations over the past several decades, Henry Kissinger concludes that “the future of Asia will be shaped to a significant degree by how China and America envision it, and by the extent to which each nation is able to achieve some congruence with the other’s historic regional role.” For these two societies, he goes on, “the road to cooperation is inherently complex.” But the leaders of the two countries “have an obligation to establish a tradition of consultation and mutual respect so that, for their successors, jointly building a shared world order becomes an expression of parallel national aspirations.”

Hopefully the resetting of U.S.-China relations during the past several months and the continuing positive momentum in cross-strait relations during the past three years will contribute to the establishment of such a tradition.

History has yielded both benign adjustments and costly clashes between rising and established powers. In the current context the United States needs to make clear in word and deed that it genuinely welcomes China’s ascendancy, and does not seek to keep it down, impossible in any event. China in turn needs to make clear in word and deed that it will become a responsible stakeholder, not a free rider, in the international system.

With these approaches, the two nations can cooperate in shaping, rather than disrupting, a world order that is mutually beneficial.

APPENDIX

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