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Sino-American Relations: In Search of Direction

The Sino-American relationship is under serious stress. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States are grappling with issues to which there are no easy solutions at a time when each is wary of the other's motivations and future intentions. At a recent Institute for the Study of Diplomacy Conference at Georgetown University, Chinese and Americans gathered to discuss the relationship and agreed on the list of difficult current issues:

- Taiwan
- Human rights
- Intellectual property rights
- Weapons sales and nuclear nonproliferation
- Chinese membership in the World Trade Organization

But it became clear during the meeting that they approached these issues across a vast perceptual gulf, one exacerbated by history, culture, and ideology. Starkly put, reality as seen from the Great Wall is not identical to reality as experienced on the Potomac. That said, participants agreed that it serves the interests of both nations to seek a stable relationship within which differences can be addressed in a predictable manner.

The purpose of the conference was to look at the climate of opinion in each country and the interests driving decisionmaking in an effort to expose underlying areas of mistrust and disagreement. The Institute asked Chinese presenters to

analyze opinion and decisionmaking in the United States and American presenters to analyze the same in China. This somewhat unusual reversal of the customary seminar format inspired early and lively discussion and clearly illuminated some of the different perceptions each has of the other and of the relationship.

The Role of Domestic Politics

In the United States, China has become a political football. The President has avoided the issue in an election year and the Congress has stepped into the leadership vacuum, forcing the administration to take a harder position on some issues than it would prefer.

—Chinese participant

In China, succession politics affects the relationship. Chinese leaders want to outdo each other in upholding Chinese interests as they jockey for positions in the post-Deng era and prepare for the 1997 Chinese Communist Party Congress. In this atmosphere, the Chinese leaders do not wish to make concessions to the United States. As an example, they keep in check any impulse to improve human rights to humor the United States.

—American participant

The Chinese participants expressed concern over the lack of American understanding of and empathy for Beijing's point of view. Several anti-Chinese members of the U.S. Congress, as well as the

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About the Conference . . .

On May 8, 1996, approximately fifty-five Americans and Chinese identified and examined issues of importance between Washington and Beijing under the auspices of the INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY. The conference was chaired by retired Ambassador CHAS. W. FREEMAN, JR. and attended by scholars, government officials, and business and NGO representatives. All participants spoke in their personal rather than official capacities. The session was "not for attribution."

While the quotes are verbatim, the summaries of participants' remarks reflect a compilation of individual comments. This report attempts to capture faithfully the events and mood of the day, but any conclusions must remain the responsibility of the sponsor.

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Taiwan Lobby, wield inordinate influence on U.S.-Chinese relations because most members of Congress have little interest in or knowledge of the country and the executive branch has not provided leadership. Especially egregious, in their opinion, is the congressional tendency to overreact on individual issues, abstracting them from the larger bilateral context. They attributed much of what is wrong in the relationship to congressional action, especially the dispute over the Li visit, when President Li Teng-hui of Taiwan was granted a U.S. visa to attend his college reunion despite the protest of the Chinese government. As they see it, the Congress acts out of ignorance and then the Clinton Administration bends to congressional pressure, leading to a vacillating policy that harms relations. One Chinese participant said that China must try harder in the future to make its case clear to members of Congress.

A large concern for American participants was that China does not seem to appreciate that its "actions have consequences." Nor does it appear to fully grasp the functioning of the U.S. democratic system and the role various government branches and public opinion play in the policy-making process. China's behavior on trade, intellectual property rights, human rights, military exercises, arms sales, and nuclear non-proliferation troubles many Americans and cannot be ignored. In addition, saber rattling aimed at an increasingly democratic Taiwan is seen as provocative and turns sympathetic congressional ears toward Taipei's lobbyists, increasing their influence.

Domestic politics affects Chinese decisionmaking too, the Americans pointed out. One American participant discussed the difference between crisis and routine decisionmaking in China: Under Mao, decisions were personalized, but in the post-Mao era, Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues have institutionalized bureaucratic decisionmaking. Routine decisions are made by highly educated officials, and as a result, China does not flip-flop as much as it did in the past. One downside is that bureaucratization has led to a lack of bold initiatives, perhaps making the downward slide in relations more

difficult to reverse. Crisis decisionmaking in China, on the other hand, is pushed above the bureaucratic level to the Politburo Standing Committee, which is more sensitive to domestic concerns and less knowledgeable of specific issues, and is where various individuals may look for opportunities to score political points. Decisions in this group are collective. There is no tie-breaking decisionmaker as there once was with Deng Xiaoping. Within the Standing Committee, the Peoples' Liberation Army has a greater voice than it has in the bureaucracy.

While the Chinese did not respond to this analysis, several called for routinely scheduled meetings between Americans and Chinese at the highest levels. Another pointed out that one of the greatest accomplishments of the older generation was the agreement between the United States and China on the one-China policy—which must continue to be held sacrosanct. Issues involving Taiwan do have serious domestic implications, he stated.

Assessing Goals

America's strategic interest is to ensure its national security and establish a new world order under U.S. leadership. U.S. goals include stopping nuclear proliferation; calming down ethnic conflicts; and stemming new threats to its power from Japan, Germany, Russia, and China.
—Chinese participant

The question is whether China? I could see a China that did not want to be integrated with the rest of the world and decided to play by its own set of rules. This outcome is conceivable but not inevitable.
—American participant

Comments throughout the day indicated that Beijing believes that Washington wishes to "weaken" China, at least in relative terms, so that China can never equal—and therefore challenge—U.S. strength. Some in China hold an even harsher view and entertain the possibility that the United States seeks China's dismemberment. Pointing to the way the Tibetan and Taiwanese issues have been handled, they find no comfort in Washington's "ritualistic" denials of this intent. Other U.S. policies, including trade and support for democracy and

human rights, are often interpreted against the backdrop of this negative view of ultimate U.S. goals.

Chinese participants saw the U.S. government and public as being split between those wishing to “engage” the People’s Republic of China in mutually beneficial ways and others whose main goal is to “contain” China. Some Americans, one Chinese argued, could be labeled “conditional engagers,” positing that the PRC can be contained only if it is also engaged. In this category, he included Secretary of Defense William Perry, Department of State East Asia and Pacific Affairs Assistant Secretary Winston Lord, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Pure containment has some champions in the executive branch, but it is a position held most strongly on Capitol Hill, according to another Chinese analyst.

The American participants, on the other hand, did not voice the opinion that China is a threat to U.S. interests, although the fact that China has nuclear weapons that can reach the United States was mentioned. Several, however, did question where China is headed and whether it will be a peaceful or disruptive force in the region. One participant pointed to China’s assertiveness in pursuing its territorial claims in the South China Sea despite the competing claims of its smaller neighbors. China is also asserting itself in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, raising Japanese concerns. These developments, plus China’s aggressive military operations in the Taiwan Strait before the March presidential election in Taiwan, have given many American analysts reason to wonder how China sees its future role in the Pacific.

American participants rejected the apparent Chinese view that the United States is trying “to keep China down.” On the contrary, several participants argued that the United States has a major interest in fitting China into the world and encouraging China’s full participation in multi-lateral institutions and adherence to international rules and standards.

Public Opinion

Conservatism and isolationism in the United States are on the rise and this trend is reflected in Congress.

—Chinese participant

A dominant theme in the Chinese media is a U.S. conspiracy against China and this appears to be influencing attitudes.

—American participant

One Chinese participant argued that as long as there is no strategic framework for U.S.-Chinese relations, public opinion and policy will continue to be buffeted by contentious issues. In the current atmosphere, Americans are obsessed with human rights and Chinese arms sales, he maintained, when preservation of the environment and cooperation for peace and stability in Asia are the larger questions. Members of Congress both reflect and influence public opinion, making Sino-American relations more issue than strategy oriented. According to one Chinese participant, public support for the U.S.-China relationship comes mostly from the American business community because of commercial opportunities in China.

An American participant cited a Chinese opinion survey that showed increasingly negative views of the United States among Chinese youth. In 1994, according to the *China Youth Journal*, 56 percent of those queried believed that the United States was the country *most* unfriendly to China; by 1995, this figure had grown to over 80 percent.

According to the same American analyst, the older Chinese generation has more positive memories of the United States, remembering from their history lessons that when the European powers were carving out spheres of influence in China, the United States upheld the Open Door policy. They recall that during World War II, the United States fought successfully against Japan, whose occupation of China is remembered mostly for its brutality. But today’s youth will most likely remember China’s ill-fated bid to host the 2000 Olympics. Despite the fact that Beijing had little hope—for purely practical reasons—of besting Sydney, Australia, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution opposing China’s bid on political grounds. Today, many Chinese students still think Beijing would have been chosen, but was not because the United States blocked its final selection. Add to this the U.S. opposition to immediate World

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Trade Organization (WTO) membership for China, the U.S. withdrawal from the Three Gorges Dam project, and disputes over Taiwan and Tibet and it becomes easier to understand the hardening belief among thirty and forty year olds that the United States wants to keep China down.

Taiwan

If the United States does not make efforts to keep Taiwan in its sphere of influence, the United States and China can avoid severe conflict.

—Chinese participant

The Taiwan issue is now in remission, but it may come back in a nasty way.

—American participant

The conference took place soon after the election of Li Teng-hui as President of Taiwan. Beijing tried to influence the election by pursuing military exercises around the coast of Taiwan, and in response to this attempt at intimidation, the United States dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups, one steaming in from the Middle East, to stand by near the Taiwan Strait. It was a tense episode in Sino-American relations and undoubtedly influenced the conference participants, who seemed—whether Chinese or American—to believe fairly uniformly that the Taiwan issue could lead to military conflict.

To Beijing, it is key that the United States accept that Taiwan's ultimate fate is an internal Chinese matter. An emotive issue, the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland touches on the historically sensitive questions of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, according to the Chinese participants. It also bears on whether the United States is seen as a trustworthy partner. Repeatedly, the PRC participants argued that the United States has ignored its commitment to the one-China policy set forth in the 1979 normalization agreement and subsequent communiqués. As evidence, the Chinese pointed to U.S. arms sales (especially F-16s) to Taiwan, unspecified high-level exchanges, and support for Taipei in international fora. Most galling, however, was the issuance of the visa to President Li Teng-hui (after Beijing was apparently told this would not happen)

and the administration's decision not to invite President Jiang to Washington, D.C., for a state visit in the foreseeable future. This was followed by the "very risky" U.S. interposition of the two carrier battle groups.

The Chinese stressed that peaceful reunification is their goal and that it need not occur immediately. Nonetheless, Beijing will not waiver from its position that there is only one China and cannot accept maneuvering by President Li and some "foreign forces" to create two Chinas. Some of the "foreign forces" allied with Li are in the U.S. Congress, the Chinese lamented, and these forces do not appear to appreciate just how dangerous the path is that they advocate.

U.S. participants generally recognized the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue, underscoring the desire to avoid confrontation on this matter and the need for its peaceful resolution. No support was offered for outright Taiwanese independence, although one American urged that Taiwan be given full United Nations membership. Several Americans urged the mainland to do more to encourage rapprochement with the estranged island. They noted that Taiwan has evolved into a democratic and prosperous entity. PRC leaders, it was suggested, must change their thinking and tactics to take this into account. Washington's support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict will continue, the Americans said, including messages to both sides to avoid inflammatory actions and statements.

Human Rights

The United States has maintained a constant attack on Beijing over human rights despite the progress China has made since 1979.

—Chinese participant

While the Beijing government looks upon our concern about human rights in China as foreign interference, in fact, American NGOs are working with the Chinese themselves, many of whom care deeply about human rights. We do not wish to impose U.S. views on China.

—American participant

The Chinese asserted that the United States is "sanctimonious" and "self-righteous" in pushing human rights. While

critics in the United States often charge that human rights take a back seat in American decision-making circles, the Chinese did not seem to share this view. They pointed to the impact of human rights concerns on such issues as renewing the PRC's most favored nation (MFN) status, the U.S. withdrawal from the Three Gorges Dam project, and the continuation of post-Tiananmen sanctions. In addition, one Chinese participant stated, human rights concerns are one reason given why no U.S. President has recently visited the mainland.

None of the Chinese participants seemed to accept the human rights situation in China as a genuine American concern. They saw it, instead, either as flowing out of domestic U.S. politics or as part of the overall conspiracy to weaken China. As proof, one Chinese participant pointed to recent local elections in China that were broad-based and democratic and were never mentioned in the U.S. Congress or in the American press. Another added that China does attach importance to human rights and that many charges made against it, including the charge that babies are not fed in orphanages, are baseless. Along these lines, they added that the United States fails to recognize that a country's history and culture must be taken into account when discussing human rights. For the Chinese, for example, the "right to subsistence" is a key right, one largely ignored by the West.

Given the differences in criteria and recognizing advances already made, sanctions and "report cards" should be avoided and the dialogue maintained, as the Chinese see it. One participant asked what the reaction in the United States would have been if the Chinese government had issued an official opinion on the results of the O.J. Simpson trial. He added that he recently saw an American map that divided the world into free, half-free, and not-free countries, with China placed in the not-free category. China once kept a similar world map that divided the world into liberated and non-liberated countries, and the United States was put in the latter category. Now, he said, the Chinese see such ideological categorizations as ridiculous and harmful.

The American participants did not re-

act strongly to the Chinese argument on human rights, seeming to accept either implicitly or explicitly that it should not be the sole focus of U.S. policy. Some agreed that Washington seemed to have a double standard in that it criticized some nations more than others. One American participant noted that Beijing's actions against prominent dissidents and writers heightened international concern and attention while the lack of a free press gave grounds to the criticisms. Another American, using the Chinese categories, said that human rights issues are of concern to both "engagers" and "containers," showing that the concern was broadly based rather than narrowly confined to those who have a negative view of China. One American stressed the need for a cooperative human rights relationship and said the United States could play a helpful role in such areas as the rule of law, the education of judges, and the structure of the court system and by trying to assist China in other non-threatening ways.

Trade

U.S. support for the Sino-American relationship comes mostly from the American business community. They would prefer to separate trade from political issues in the relationship.

—Chinese participant

Economically, China and United States are closely linked. From 30 to 40 percent of China's exports go to the United States. The American consumer benefits from Chinese imports. If these imports are reduced, the American poor will suffer.

—American participant

The Chinese participants saw U.S. trade policy as influenced by extraneous political factors. They saw the American business community on their side in the U.S. debate on China, but saw limits to its influence. One Chinese participant cited the business community's support in helping to maintain China's MFN status, but pointed out that it could not help on human rights issues, the intellectual property rights (IPR) dispute, or in matters of U.S. domestic law (such as penalties in response to alleged proliferation of nuclear material.)

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If those factories now pirating CD-ROMs were publishing material the government considered subversive, China would shut the factories down . . .

Linking MFN renewal to human rights progress clearly rankles the Chinese, who mentioned it several times as a major irritant in U.S.-Chinese relations. They claimed that the U.S. trade deficit with China is artificially bloated by the inclusion of Hong Kong in U.S. statistics. They also argued that "if the MFN problem were resolved and restrictions on trade removed, the deficit would diminish."

U.S. objections to China's membership in the WTO and possible IPR sanctions were also cited by several Chinese participants as irritants. China is attempting to crack down on IPR "pirates," one Chinese participant said, but this takes time. Any U.S. sanctions would be met with retaliatory sanctions.

Several U.S. participants expressed their hope that China would become fully integrated into the world market. But they rejected any special treatment for China, arguing that China must fully meet its internationally recognized trade obligations. "If those factories now pirating CD-ROMs were publishing material the government considered subversive, China would shut the factories down," one American said, referring to the IPR dispute. Another said that China would clearly achieve WTO membership when qualified and would be an asset to the organization, given that China may have the world's largest economy in the next century. Though dialogue continues to be key to resolving trade disputes, several Americans predicted that the tattered atmosphere surrounding Sino-American relations will make MFN renewal more difficult, though not impossible. One American participant argued for keeping trade disputes in perspective: "We have trade problems with all countries. We can haggle through them."

Weapons Sales

From the Chinese point of view, the latest proliferation issue, the ring magnet sale to Pakistan by a Shanghai company, was a small deal.

—Chinese participant

As for the Persian Gulf, China will consume more oil and will want access to the region. Will it make sense for China to sell more Silkworm missiles to Iran?

—American participant

The Chinese clearly feel unjustly criticized by Americans concerned about nonproliferation, nuclear tests, and weapons sales. The 1993 case of the United States boarding a Chinese vessel it had apparently wrongly accused of transporting chemical arms to Iran was cited, as were the recent ring magnets sale to Pakistan. On the magnets sale, it was noted that the item was not on the International Atomic Energy Agency restricted list and suggested that U.S. concerns should have been addressed multilaterally.

In response, one U.S. participant suggested a dialogue on sales that are technically legal, but potentially destabilizing. These discussions would complement talks over other problematic technology and arms transfers and the Missile Technology Control Regime. In general, the Americans argued that the area of nonproliferation and arms sales is extremely serious to the United States and cannot be lightly glided over. Silkworm missiles sold to Iran, nuclear assistance given to Pakistan, and plutonium manufacturing equipment sold to Iraq point out the need to address this issue seriously.

Areas of Cooperation

Both sides want to keep the relationship free of trouble and both see the need to cooperate.

—Chinese participant

It is possible to have a common agenda of positive issues. The United States and China need each other.

—American participant

While tensions currently characterize Sino-American relations, the conference participants were united in the view that the two nations have much to gain from cooperation, both regionally and globally.

One Chinese participant pointed out that when the two sides exchange views on strategic issues, their positions are close in many areas or at least not too far apart. He cited as other important areas of cooperation the environment, military-to-military exchanges, agriculture, and telecommunications, as well as talks on counter-narcotics activities. China and the United States coordinate on a range of issues at the United Nations, and

“while they have some problems there, they work together better than might be expected.” North Korea is another area where he said the United States and China found mutual interests and cooperated in helping to formulate the agreement whereby Pyongyang would suspend its nuclear program, and in return, the United States would provide oil as a short-term fix to North Korea’s energy problems and create an international consortium to provide proliferation-resistant, light-water reactors to North Korea.

On the U.S. side, emphasis was placed on the desire of both nations to avoid conflict and maintain a peaceful climate in the Pacific in which each can prosper. China and the United States have two major, common interests in Asia: a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula and a Japan that foregoes both significant remilitarization and nuclear weapons. One participant pointed to Cambodia and stated that China’s important role there in helping bring about a settlement showed the positive role China could play in resolving regional problems. The two nations have clear economic interests in maintaining healthy two-way trade. Also cited on the American side were cooperation in the areas of energy, environment, counter-narcotics, alien smuggling, counter-terrorism, and non-proliferation.

Where do we go from here?

The two sides need to talk about shared interests and keep in mind the larger picture, with a view to the 21st century.
—Chinese participant

China will be a great power and will affect global stability. China and the United States must develop a mutual understanding of the importance of the strategic relationship.
—American participant

The world, or at least most participants’ impression of it, is in transition. Depending on how the future unfolds, the emergence of China early in the next century as a key actor may be the seminal event of the coming foreign policy era. Just as the postwar generation of foreign policymakers came of age in a world where the central question was “What shall be done about the Soviet Union?,”

the next generation of leaders—in government, business, academia, or elsewhere—may have to grapple with the query, “What is to be done with China?”

The ISD Conference on Sino-American relations was a small step in this unfolding process. It represented an effort to learn through dialogue, illuminating some of the key issues between China and the United States and placing them in a perceptual context. In the Cold War era, policy was hindered on each side (albeit to varying degrees) by ideological blinders. If the “Pacific Century” really does come to pass, caution will be needed on both sides of that ocean lest ideology and misconceptions overwhelm analysis and goodwill. Given the perceptual gulf manifested at this conference, as well as the very real differences in culture, ideology, and national interests between China and the United States, this will be a difficult, though not impossible, task for policymakers in the years to come. ♦

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