



Long-Term Visions of Regional Security: A U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue by Ralph A. Cossa

The Pacific Forum CSIS is pleased to publish the first Special Annual Issue of the Comparative Connections ejournal, which is designed to focus on a particular bilateral relationship and its impact on other relevant sets of bilateral relations. This article draws from the Foreword of the Special Annual Issue.

The Sino-U.S. relationship, among all the key Asia-Pacific bilateral match-ups, has experienced the greatest swings in recent years, from the highs after the Clinton-Jiang summits to the lowest low immediately after the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, with many upward and (mostly) downward cycles in between. It is also the bilateral relationship which, if not properly managed, could most likely plunge the region into a new cold, and perhaps even actual, war.

Believing that better communication and understanding are essential to building a more cooperative relationship, the Pacific Forum CSIS and the American Studies Center at Fudan University, Shanghai have instituted a series of strategic dialogues. The second took place in Honolulu in April 2000, co-sponsored with the Asia Pacific Center for Strategic Studies. A special annual issue of Comparative Connections prepared by Bonnie S. Glaser provides a summary of this meeting. What follows are my own observations and conclusions.

Major Power Relationships: Alliance or Partnership?

The U.S.-Japan alliance relationship, from an American perspective, provides the foundation upon which American security strategy in the Asia-Pacific is built. However, some Chinese specialists view the effort to revitalize the alliance, and especially the 1997 Defense Guidelines revision, as specifically aimed against China. Meanwhile, Sino-Russian efforts to use their strategic partnership to promote a more multipolar world have been interpreted as a direct challenge to U.S. influence in Asia and globally. From Beijing's perspective, strategic partnerships rather than military alliances provide a model for future security relationships.

Each sees its own key bilateral relationship as promoting regional stability. But, are the security alliance and strategic partnership approaches compatible? I would argue that they are, but only if U.S.-China relations can be managed successfully and if all sides can avoid "zero-sum" mentality.

Few in the U.S. feel seriously threatened by the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Each side's willingness to support the other in areas that remain bones of contention with the West – Chechnya and Taiwan being the most obvious – have helped to bring China and Russia closer together, as have mutual concerns over U.S. unilateralism, NATO expansion, theater and national missile defense (TMD/NMD), etc.

However, both understand the importance to their own economic health and well-being of good relations with Washington and Tokyo and are unlikely to push their strategic partnership too far.

China's concerns about the U.S.-Japan alliance, have, at their root, apprehension over the Guidelines' possible application to Taiwan. While China views alliances and forward basing as leftover vestiges of the Cold War, many Chinese acknowledge that, in the near term, the U.S.-Japan alliance, if not aimed at China, generally contributes to stability. However, China's preferred future multipolar world envisions the U.S. and Japan as loosely separated poles rather than a tightly connected single structure. What Beijing fails to recognize fully is that its own future deeds, not its complaints, will have the greatest influence over how close the U.S.-Japan link is or needs to be.

Under current circumstances, nothing short of assurances by Tokyo and Washington that neither would interfere in a cross-Strait conflict is likely to seriously diminish Beijing's criticisms about the revitalized U.S.-Japan alliance. It is equally clear that such an assurance would be politically impossible – and strategically irresponsible – for either to give.

Managing Differing Views over Taiwan

The only thing less likely to be accepted than Chinese demands for "non-interference" assurances is Washington's demand for a "no use of force" pledge from Beijing vis-a-vis Taiwan. Washington does not want to do anything that might appear to encourage Taiwan to dramatically alter the current status quo, and Beijing desires and prefers a peaceful solution (albeit on its terms). Nonetheless, each would do well to accept that the other intends to keep its strategic options open.

As Americans and Chinese discuss cross-Strait issues, it is important to recognize that their search for common ground is secondary to the need for common ground between both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The election and inauguration of Chen Shui-bian as Taiwan's first opposition party president adds to the challenge but also presents an opportunity for fresh thinking. Chen has made it clear that he is not going to cross the independence line. But, his flexibility is limited and he faces daunting domestic challenges in rebuilding a government long dominated by a single party. Beijing must be prepared to recognize and respond positively to Chen's overtures, rather than just demand the impossible.

President Jiang Zemin's flexibility in dealing with Taiwan is likewise restricted, both by his own hardline pronouncements and by hardline elements within the leadership. There appears no substitute for genuine cross-Strait dialogue, which itself appears possible only if both sides are willing to go back to their 1992 understanding to agree to

disagree over what “one-China” means. Attempts to put a deadline either on reunification or on cross-Strait negotiations are likely to backfire. China must also recognize, and Taiwan must be reassured, that the U.S. will not back any Chinese formula that is unacceptable to the people on Taiwan – nor can any “solution” worked out between Washington and Beijing succeed absent Taiwan’s consent.

Future Visions for the Korean Peninsula

If Taiwan represents the area of most immediate challenge, the Korean Peninsula provides the greatest opportunity for near-term cooperation, given overlapping near-term objectives: a nuclear weapons-free Peninsula, avoiding a DPRK implosion or explosion, supporting ROK President Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy,” and promoting North-South dialogue.

Over the long term, however, U.S. and Chinese visions for a future Korean Peninsula diverge. U.S. officials argue that future security is best served by a continued U.S.-Korea security relationship even after reunification or reconciliation, as does President Kim. Some speak of a close U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral security relationship (a “virtual alliance”) in the future. China wants to see a unified Korea that simultaneously maintains close relations with all the major powers – a goal also shared by President Kim and by the U.S. – but disagrees that maintaining a U.S. security alliance is the best way of achieving this goal. This is one area where long-term visions clearly are not in sync.

Military-to-Military Cooperation

The January 2000 visit to Washington of Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai opened the door for a resumption of military-to-military contacts suspended since the accidental bombing of the Belgrade Embassy. But how much cooperation is realistically attainable, given China’s lingering suspicions and U.S. Congressional restrictions, and what types of cooperative programs do each side really seek? Pragmatically speaking, the most that can be hoped for is serious dialogue on issues of contention. Military equipment and technology transfers are not in the cards. An effort should also be made to start developing confidence building measures.

Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

Serious differences of opinion exist between Beijing and Washington on various arms control and non-proliferation issues. China is reluctant to engage in broad strategic arms talks as it continues to expand its own nuclear and missile arsenals, but is nonetheless concerned about U.S. efforts to pursue theater and national missile defense. China also sees U.S. arms sales as a legitimate topic for debate during arms control discussions.

Meanwhile, the U.S. commitment to arms control and non-proliferation has been called into question, as the Clinton administration seeks to amend the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Senate rejects the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. China also sees U.S. overtures to India as undercutting Sino-U.S. strategic cooperation. In return, the U.S. worries about suspected Chinese arms sales and developmental assistance to North Korea, Pakistan, and others. Arms control

can only work when both sides approach it as a “win-win” proposition; this is becoming increasingly more difficult.

Building Toward a Strategic Partnership?

Officials in both countries still profess a common desire to “build toward a constructive strategic partnership,” but is this realistic? While neither wants to be the first to drop the phrase, few would argue that meaningful progress is doubtful, absent some significant breakthrough on the issue of Taiwan. Even if the “Taiwan problem” somehow goes away, a long-term cooperative relationship is by no means assured. Another fundamental problem: how to balance Chinese concerns about sovereignty and non-interference with U.S. concerns over basic human rights and humanitarian crises that transcend national boundaries. Until such time as the U.S. and China can find some common ground between these conflicting principles, a strategic partnership remains unachievable.

Conclusion

Several things are required if Sino-U.S. relations are to be improved. First is a genuine belief on both sides that improved relations are possible and desirable. Second is a mutual commitment to pursue that objective. Third are realistic expectations regarding the nature and extent of the relationship. One does not have to search hard to find voices in both countries who share neither the belief nor the commitment.

A Sino-American Cold War is possible but not inevitable. A true strategic partnership also seems unlikely, given differing world views and long-term objectives. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is “apprehensive engagement” – cooperation in areas where objectives clearly overlap and a commitment to talk about and manage the many differences and lingering suspicions that continue to challenge the relationship. This will require serious strategic dialogue, not only between the U.S. and China, but among the four major powers and with North and South Korea and Taiwan as well.

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