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U.S.-China Relations: Avoiding "Tests"
by Ralph A. Cossa

How will the election of George W. Bush as America's next president affect U.S.-China relations? The conventional wisdom was that a Gore administration would be more favorable to China, but I believe this assumption is questionable. It is based, in part, on the belief that Gore would be more inclined to continue the Clinton policies of engagement and support for "one China," which are the real litmus tests for Washington as far as Beijing is concerned. However, these policies have been consistently followed for years by Republican and Democratic administrations alike (including by Bush's father) and there is no reason to believe that any future U.S. administration is going to change these basic policies, absent some dramatic destabilizing action by Beijing.

Meanwhile, on sensitive human rights issues and on worker's rights and other labor concerns, Gore would likely have been tougher on China than Bush. In one area of U.S. policy long criticized by Beijing, Mr. Bush also appears less inclined toward humanitarian intervention than Mr. Clinton has been and Mr. Gore could reasonably have been expected to be; recall Mr. Bush's admonitions about the need for "leadership without arrogance" and for more judicious use of American forces abroad.

In truth, China was not an issue in the election and both candidates had sent strong signals that they would continue to engage China. Both also confirmed that the primary U.S. bilateral relationship in Asia, as it has been for decades, is between the U.S. and Japan. True, Mr. Bush made it clear that the current Sino-U.S. "Constructive strategic partnership" buzzword would not be perpetuated. But, even the most enthusiastic cheerleaders recognize that this lofty goal is unattainable today (or in the next four years), given the two nations differing world views, plus their lack of common values, beliefs, and long-range objectives. Regardless of the Bush administration's chosen catchphrase, some form of "cooperative engagement and managed competition" is likely to guide relations between Beijing and Washington during the next four years (as it has over the past eight).

On the issue most pressing to China, no U.S. administration would be able to ignore an unprovoked Chinese attack against Taiwan; U.S. credibility in Asia and globally would be at stake. Even China's friend, Bill Clinton, sent two aircraft carriers to the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait in response to Chinese saber-rattling in 1996. Were Beijing to take some action to test Mr. Bush's resolve, an equally firm, or firmer, response should be expected. Keep in mind that the catalyst here would be a Chinese, not an American action. In truth, the real answer to the question about future Sino-U.S. relations will depend as much on Chinese behavior, and on Beijing's willingness or desire to "test" the new U.S. president as it will on who resides in the Oval Office.

Fortunately, the above-described worst-case event - a Chinese military action against Taiwan - while the most certain to result in a U.S. response that would rupture Sino-U.S. relations, is the least likely method that Beijing would employ, should it decide to test the mettle of soon-to-be President Bush. Even if the U.S. were not to respond militarily, the political and economic sanctions employed by America and its allies - and one would assume, at a minimum, a complete halt in Japanese aid and overseas developmental assistance - would likely be sufficient to cripple China's economy. And, of course, Beijing must assume that President Bush would respond militarily, as I assume a President Gore or, for that matter, Clinton would have if an unprovoked Chinese attack had happened on his watch.

As a result, absent an unambiguously provocative act on the part of Taipei - and there is no reason to believe that Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian is suicidal - a Chinese military move against Taiwan is highly unlikely. A more likely Taiwan-related maneuver would be a renewed attempt to change the rules regarding Taipei's WTO accession. Taiwan, following its GATT precedent, is prepared to enter the WTO not as a separate country but as the "separate customs territory of Taiwan" (a pragmatic but nonetheless significant concession to Beijing and to the "one China" principle). Beijing was rebuffed once when it insisted Taiwan be admitted, instead, as a "separate customs territory of China," but we may not have heard the last from Beijing on this issue.

China will also be sure to press Mr. Bush for a renewed U.S. commitment to the "one China" principle. They will likely get this, although the wording will be more like pre-Clinton pronouncements "acknowledging" (rather than endorsing) the Chinese position; a hedge which will make Beijing nervous (and delight Taipei, not to mention many members of the U.S. Congress). Mr. Bush will be under great pressure from Beijing to repeat the famous three no's uttered by Mr. Clinton in Shanghai - no Taiwan independence; no two Chinas or one China, one Taiwan; and no Taiwan participation in international organizations involving sovereign states - but he will be under even greater pressure domestically to avoid repeating what many believe was too great a concession. Domestic considerations are likely to prevail.

Any heavy-handed attempt by Beijing to get President Bush to put the three no's in writing is sure to fail and will likely backfire. Conversely, absent some obvious PRC provocation, Mr. Bush would do best by allowing the proposed Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA) to lie dormant. Efforts to codify the TSEA would set a counterproductive, confrontational tone and impede even routine efforts to address Taiwan's defense needs.

Finally, it is also important to note that there were really five no's uttered by President Clinton. The other two were no use of force and no change to Taiwan's status without the consent of the people of Taiwan. The latter two no's appear destined to play a

central role in future U.S. policy toward cross-Strait developments.

The Korean Peninsula is another area where Beijing may choose to be either cooperative or confrontational. ROK President Kim Dae-jung has been calling for a resumption of the Four-Party Talks involving North and South Korea, the U.S., and China. These Talks have been on hold since August 1999, stalemated in large part over Pyongyang's earlier insistence (presumably with Beijing's backing, if not instigation) that the U.S. military presence on the Peninsula be put on the bargaining table. Washington and Seoul wisely refused this demand. President Kim now asserts that his North Korean counterpart, Kim Jong-il, may actually favor a continued U.S. presence. It remains to be seen how China will handle this turn of events.

Ironically, one of the main arguments made by the Clinton administration regarding the value of close Sino-U.S. ties has been Beijing's positive role as an interlocutor with Pyongyang. As direct links expand between Washington and Pyongyang as well as between Seoul and Pyongyang, China's role will become less critical.

Another area where a test of wills could emerge is over the recurring problem of Chinese missile exports. China, after much prodding from the Clinton administration, announced in late November 2000 a missile export policy consistent with the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR); i.e., no export of missiles capable of carrying a payload in excess of 500 kg or traveling in excess of 300 km. Mr. Bush will likely be compelled early on to deal with allegations - real or imagined - of Chinese non-compliance. He must be careful not to overreact to unsubstantiated accusations. But Beijing must understand that a failure to vigorously enforce its new missile export policy would result in an unwelcome but unavoidable test of U.S. resolve.

China may also choose a confrontation over theater missile defense (TMD). Mr. Bush can be expected to proceed with TMD in continued close cooperation with Japan. Taiwan will likely neither be ruled in nor out for the time being, unless Beijing forces the issue with renewed missile "tests" in close proximity to Taiwan, a la 1996. If the Chinese leadership was foolish enough to choose this as its test of American resolve, the U.S. Congress will make it impossible for Bush to do anything other than enhance Taiwan's protection. A Chinese decision to ease up on its missile export restrictions in response to U.S. pursuit of TMD (or NMD) would be equally troubling, as would a continued, accelerated build-up of Chinese missiles opposite Taiwan.

Beijing also faces a decision regarding its traditionally strident rhetoric against U.S. unilateralism and hegemonism and against the U.S.-Japan alliance and the presence of U.S. overseas military forces. Washington and Tokyo, in a move that is long overdue, have already starting taking Beijing to task over this rhetoric and this could (and should) be an easy bandwagon for President Bush to hop upon once he is inaugurated. Conversely, a more moderate PRC stance on any of these issues, and especially vis-a-vis Taiwan, would help get the new relationship off to a more promising start.

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Response to PacNet #51 Survey

The White House announced on Dec 29 that President Clinton would not be visiting North Korea after all. Most PacNet readers apparently agreed with this decision, since responses to our "Should Clinton visit North Korea" survey were running 10 to 1 against the trip when it was canceled. Opponents primarily cited concerns over North Korea's reliability, belief that the deal would be hastily conceived and not verifiable, and fear that the visit would distract from or undermine the North-South process. Supporters saw the need to seize the day and expressed concern over lose of momentum. We thank all those who participated and continue to encourage reader reaction to PacNet articles.

Response to PacNet #49
("Limitations of Sovereignty: The Case of Kosovo and its Implications for Japan" by Ralph A. Cossa, December 8, 2000)

I enjoyed the "Limits of Sovereignty" commentary, but as a long time Canadian-peacekeeper-combat engineer, I was struck by three things:

- "Guideline: objective verification of cirmes/determination of mechanisms not available/impartial verification mechanism …" This is the Achilles heel of the argument, because there is no hope in the foreseeable future for substantive progress.
- "If national leaders were aware of the type of coordinated … serve as a powerful deterrent." Maybe, just maybe, if and only if the "national leaders" thought and performed the way we think national leaders need to/should perform. I think, without doing research, that in none of the most horrendous "unacceptable behaviours" we have known since, say 1990, this could have been the case. Frankly, the people, and places and nations, that would be deterred are mostly those who do not need to be deterred because their behaviour is already deterred by standards they chose to create, adopt or adapt.
- "… most states in Asia appear open to the idea of greater Japanese military participation …" In my view/experience, VERY LITTLE greater

Dr. David Harries, Maccaferri, Asia