



China: Odd Man Out in the Evolving New World Order? by Ralph A. Cossa

China seems very pleased with the outcome of the George W. Bush-Jiang Zemin summit meeting in Shanghai on Oct. 19 along the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting. This was not because a great deal was accomplished, but because of Jiang's extremely modest definition of what constituted a "successful" meeting. All Beijing apparently sought was a photo opportunity and a new slogan. Success was achieved on both accounts, with the Chinese press touting the willingness by both sides to seek a new "constructive relationship of cooperation."

This is not insignificant. Both Washington and Beijing were eager to show that relations were on a positive trajectory after the rocky start brought about by the April 1 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and American reconnaissance plane and a variety of other contentious issues, including continuing American arms sales to Taiwan. The mere fact that President Bush took time out from commanding his war on terrorism to travel to China was seen as an important signal, even if accumulating international support for his anti-terrorism campaign remained a key Bush agenda item during the abbreviated visit.

And, slogans are important to China. The operative slogan prior to the APEC visit was candidate Bush's "strategic competitor" label; a phrase generally avoided by administration spokesmen after Jan. 20, but still featured prominently in the press when describing Sino-U.S. relations. As long as Bush was willing to state in Shanghai that he sought a "constructive, and cooperative" relationship with China - which he did (although he added the word "candid") - Beijing was prepared to declare the visit a major success.

What Jiang Zemin was apparently not prepared to do during his first face-to-face visit with the new U.S. president (they have had several phone conversations) was attempt to move U.S.-China relations to a higher level, as his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, clearly has done. While the Bush-Jiang meeting was described as "cordial" and "friendly," the personal chemistry exhibited from the onset between Bush and Putin was nowhere to be found. In Shanghai, Bush and Putin took advantage of their third face-to-face meeting to move U.S.-Russian relations even closer - one Russian diplomat described the meeting as creating favorable conditions for "forming a new framework for strategic relations" between Washington and Moscow.

President Putin sent strong signals that Russia is ready to modify or "stretch" the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to address U.S. security concerns. His flexibility was quickly rewarded by Washington's announcement on Oct. 25 that it was delaying testing of those elements of its missile defense system that could

violate the treaty. Meanwhile, both sides also seemed closer to an agreement over deeper cuts in their respective nuclear arsenals; an arms control breakthrough is likely to be formally announced during Putin's visit to Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch in November. China, by contrast, remains generally inflexible on the issue of missile defense and clearly disappointed Washington by its unwillingness to break the standoff over implementation of a non-proliferation agreement signed with the Clinton administration last year.

This is not to say that Washington was dissatisfied with the outcome of the Jiang summit. The Bush team also had relatively low expectations regarding what could be accomplished. But they did appear genuinely disappointed. While Bush did receive China's endorsement of his war against terrorism and a commitment from Beijing to cooperate on stemming financial flows to terrorists, Jiang avoided endorsing the on-going Afghanistan campaign and felt compelled to repeatedly stress his caveats about avoiding innocent casualties - a U.S. objective, but one that is impossible to achieve 100 percent - and ensuring continuing UN Security Council endorsement (a forum where China enjoys veto authority).

President Jiang also expressed support for the establishment of a medium- and long-term mechanism for anti-terrorism cooperation between China and the U.S. However, little in the way of useful, operationally-oriented intelligence information sharing has yet to materialize and China seems most intent on ensuring that any international war on terrorism includes condemnation of Islamic Uighur separatists in China's western Xinjiang province. Washington seems somewhat more sympathetic (or at least tolerant) toward China's terrorist concerns (and similar Russian concerns over Islamic separatist activity in Chechnya), although here Bush had a caveat of his own: "The war on terrorism," Bush asserted in Shanghai, "must never be an excuse to persecute minorities." (This is a message Bush has also delivered at home, aimed at preventing a backlash against America's Muslim community.)

Secretary of State Colin Powell (nicely echoing a sentiment expressed previously in this column) noted in Shanghai that, as far as U.S.-Russian relations were concerned, "not only is the Cold War over, the post-Cold War period is also over." Meanwhile, Sino-U.S. relations still seem largely mired in what the Chinese have described in another context as a "Cold War mentality," with both sides apparently willing to settle for considerably less. As Presidents Bush and Putin start working toward the establishment of a post post-Cold War new world order, Beijing increasingly runs the risk of being left behind.

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