



A new relationship for the U.S. and China?

by Brad Glosserman and Bonnie Glaser

This week, the United States and China commence a Senior Dialogue on global issues in Beijing. The two countries have long engaged each other on important issues, but this new discussion is different from its predecessors on two counts: the timing and the significance. This dialogue has the potential to transform the U.S.-China relationship.

The timing of this high-level forum could not be better. The potential for greater competition and even confrontation is growing as China's global presence expands. Both countries have increasing doubts about the other's long-term intentions; at the same time, the two governments are engaged in intense diplomacy on critical issues of common concern.

The tone of the U.S.-China relationship has shifted dramatically. Two years ago, U.S. officials were applauding the best relations ever. Today, no one in either capital would say that with a straight face. Americans complain that China's economic policies are predatory, that its diplomacy is designed to supplant the U.S. role in East Asia, and that it is engaged in a military buildup that will provide the muscle to that diplomatic "smile." For their part, the Chinese complain the U.S. is trying to contain China diplomatically, that it is trying to slow its economic development, and that Washington plays up "the China threat" to isolate Beijing within the region.

Yet as the two governments compete for regional influence, they also cooperate on critical issues. Topping the list has been getting North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks and to make a deal to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. Combating terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as encouraging China's peaceful and stable development are also important areas of cooperation. In a recent example, the two governments worked out an arrangement to revalue China's currency that vented growing pressure from Congress to take action against Beijing's economic policies. Averting war and preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait are shared priorities, even as both sides disagree on what constitutes the status quo.

The inauguration of the strategic dialogue is the product of the recognition of a second fact: China has a growing *global* presence and influence. While most Western strategists think of Beijing as a regional hegemon in waiting, the global impact of Chinese policies is unmistakable. There have long been concerns about China's attempt to influence governments on China's periphery in Central and Southeast Asia, but Beijing is now reaching out to Africa and Latin America too in the search to secure its interests.

The most obvious manifestation of this new reach is China's determination to procure energy supplies to feed its ravenous economy. Those efforts have obliged Beijing to

engage more deeply with the Middle East and Northern Africa and given it a stake in the promotion of stability in those regions. The search for raw materials has nurtured an expanding and dynamic trade relationship with Latin America, traditionally America's backyard. Beijing's efforts to modernize its military have also inflamed U.S. relations with Europe and Israel, two important American allies. The need for diplomatic coordination by two veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations Security Council is increasingly apparent, especially as China boosts its participation in UN peacekeeping operations. China's growing international economic role makes cooperation in the World Trade Organization and compliance with international trade rules increasingly vital. And environmental degradation and rising concerns about China's ability to control outbreaks of disease have made plain the need for the two countries to talk about nontraditional security threats and ways that they can cooperate to combat them.

This agenda entails considerably more than the discussions of the past that focused largely on the most immediate bilateral issues. In agreeing to hold a dialogue on strategic matters, the U.S. has recognized that ignoring China's global interests threatens America's ability to safeguard its own interests. The two governments now have the opportunity – or the imperative – to move beyond tactical zero-sum discussions and grapple with the new ways in which issues and their respective national interests intersect. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Michael Ranneberger explained one perspective on this state of affairs in testimony before the House Africa Subcommittee last week. "As a natural result of its [economic] growth, China is increasingly involved in the global marketplace, seeking new markets for its goods and reliable sources of energy." Ranneberger added that China can help advance U.S. goals in Africa to the extent that it increases prosperity and stability on the continent.

Initiating a dialogue is no guarantee that the two countries will be able to work together effectively. Several questions hang over this new initiative. What does China hope to achieve? Does Beijing seek to seriously engage the U.S. on these issues to avert potentially damaging competition and instead promote cooperation or does it merely crave recognition? Or is China looking for a new angle to press the U.S. to end its support for Taiwan? One test of Beijing's intentions is its willingness to go beyond talking points and position papers and engage in a creative and spontaneous discussion of issues, interests, and ways the two countries can join together to solve shared problems.

Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, who leads the U.S. delegation, is committed to moving the relationship beyond the tactical and bilateral and probe for new areas of overlapping interests and potential cooperation. Whether he

can succeed will depend not only on China, but also on his ability to overcome the opposition to a positive relationship with Beijing that is found in some layers of the Washington bureaucracy. Ultimately, success will require leadership from the U.S. president.

The U.S. must engage China as it rises, to help it deal with the many difficulties it will inevitably encounter, to encourage Beijing to continue on the path of being a responsible and productive member of international society. At the same time, the U.S. must invigorate relations with Asia so that there are no doubts about the U.S. commitment to the region. Doing so will neutralize “the China threat,” and build a constructive bilateral relationship that benefits both countries and Asia as a whole.

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