

US-China Relations on a Downward Slide

by Ralph A. Cossa

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When President Obama wrapped up his first trip to China in mid-November of last year, US-China relations seemed as good or better than they had been in years. It's been all downhill ever since! And it looks like things are going to get even worse.

While the Western media and administration critics had complained that Obama gave too much and demanded too little during his visit, both sides proclaimed success and pointed to the joint statement issued by Presidents Obama and Hu Jintao – the first such statement between the two sides in 12 years – as a breakthrough of sorts, highlighting the depth and breadth of the relationship.

From Washington's perspective, the Chinese publicly acknowledged America's positive role in the region: "China welcomes the United States as an Asia-Pacific nation that contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region" read the US English version. (The Chinese version read slightly differently: "China welcomes *the efforts of* the United States as an Asia-Pacific nation that contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region." [emphasis added])

From China's perspective, respect for each other's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "core interests" were the key, since every Chinese knows these words are synonymous with Taiwan and Tibet. While inside sources assure us that President Obama made it clear to President Hu that arms sales to Taiwan would proceed and that he (like all his predecessors) would eventually meet with the Dalai Lama (in his capacity as a religious and cultural leader), many Chinese choose to interpret these remarks as a signal of increased "flexibility" on Taiwan and Tibet, especially since President Obama had very publicly opted not to meet the Tibetan spiritual leader last October as a goodwill gesture or courtesy toward President Hu. Meanwhile Washington interpreted a pledge to "take concrete steps to advance sustained and reliable military-to-military relations" as a signal that such ties would not reflexively be broken after every real or perceived US slight or transgression. Wrong on both counts!

Efforts to build a new "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive" partnership immediately hit a snag in Copenhagen where the Chinese were seen as largely uncooperative (if not downright insulting) toward President Obama, despite their joint commitment to work together for a "successful outcome." This was followed by a series of tit-for-tat protective trade measures centered around steel imports (despite a pledge to "jointly fight protectionism in all its

manifestations"). Added to this were US complaints that China (gasp! shock!) was censoring the Internet and using it to spy on dissidents, a case brought to a head when Google complained about Chinese restrictions and cyber attacks.

Then came the Jan. 29 notification to Congress of the administration's plans to sell Taiwan approximately \$6.4 billion worth of arms (including PAC-3 anti-missile missiles and heavy-lift *Black Hawk* helicopters), thus rounding out much of the remaining components of the 2001 arms package originally approved by the Bush administration.

Beijing's reaction was unusually severe, especially since the notification did not address Taipei's 2001 request for a submarine feasibility study or its more recent letter of request for *F-16 C/D* fighter aircraft to replace aging planes in Taiwan's Air Force; Beijing had previously made it clear that while "all arms sales are bad," submarines and *F-16 C/Ds* were especially problematic. In addition to (once again) suspending military exchanges, Beijing threatened to impose sanctions on US companies involved in the Taiwan arms sales if the deal goes forward (which it will unless Congress objects to the sale, which it won't). It also warned that cooperation on important global and regional issues will "inevitably" be affected if the Obama administration violates "solemn US commitments."

When a White House spokesman subsequently revealed that President Obama would indeed meet the Dalai Lama during his visit to Washington later this month, a Chinese spokesman warned that this "will certainly threaten trust and cooperation between China and the United States." Washington was urged instead to "handle related issues carefully and appropriately to avoid causing more harm to Sino-US ties." In retrospect, and despite warnings to the contrary, President Obama's decision not to see the Dalai Lama during his October DC visit could have been interpreted as a sign of Obama's weakness or as a new precedent that raised Chinese hopes that it could block such visits in the future.

Some have viewed Beijing's harsh reaction and stern warnings as a sign of increased Chinese self-confidence (read: arrogance). Others see it as insecurity from a regime fearful of instability. Both are probably right.

In a recent meeting with senior Chinese officials and scholars dealing with Taiwan, US interlocutors were frequently reminded of the "new realities" caused by China's increased political, economic, and military power and influence; "facts" that should cause Washington to "reconsider" its support to Taiwan, given the relative importance of both to Washington. But they also acknowledged domestic challenges, including an unprecedented number of civil demonstrations (100,000 instances in 2009, according to one Chinese scholar) and

growing public demands (many from its 300+ million netizens) for China to be more firm in asserting and protecting its interests. If US actions are as big an “insult” to the Chinese people as Beijing repeatedly claims, then why isn’t the government doing something about it? This underscores the danger of overplaying the nationalism card.

Most instructive were Chinese demands that the US readjust its strategic calculations in recognition of China’s growing clout. One cannot escape the conclusion that the Chinese may have (wrongly) interpreted President Obama’s acts of courtesy as a sign of weakness or a willingness to defer to China on its “core interests,” thus prompting a more confrontational approach to test US resolve.

It is equally plausible that the Chinese overreaction is really aimed not at preventing the impending visit with the Dalai Lama or the current round of arms sales but is rather a deliberate raising of the stakes in response to seemingly routine or predictable (and clearly forecasted) actions to head off more controversial future arms sales (such as the *F-16 C/Ds*).

Such a move could easily backfire, however. For example, were Beijing to use the arms sales and/or Dalai Lama visit to justify not cooperating with Washington on one of its core interests, Iran – and Washington has reportedly made it clear to Beijing that this is indeed a core issue from a US perspective – this could damage Beijing’s reputation internationally. More importantly, this could facilitate development of a nuclear weapons capability that could just as easily be employed against China as against the West. It could also persuade Washington to go ahead with the more controversial *F-16 C/D* sales since there would be very little left to lose.

In fact, China’s history of obstructionism on Iran could lead Washington to this conclusion regardless of other actions or reactions. Let me be clear: I’m not suggesting some type of Taiwan/Iran swap or quid pro quo. What I am saying is that if US hesitancy about moving forward with the much-needed aircraft sale was aimed at fear of undermining Chinese support on Iran, Beijing’s continued intransigence should remove this consideration. At some point, Taiwan must have new fighter aircraft; their *F-16 A/B*, *Mirage 2000 D/E*, and *F-5 E/F*, (circa 1978, 1982, and 1972 respectively) have been around longer than most of the pilots who fly them. If not *F-16 C/D* today, then it will be *F-35s* or something else in a few years time.

What Beijing needs to understand is that arms sales are more than just the fulfillment of the US moral and legal commitment to help Taiwan defend itself. In the final analysis, these sales are driven by Taiwan’s perceived defensive needs in the face of a relentless expansion of Chinese military capabilities across the Strait. The best way to get Taiwan to request less would be for China to significantly reduce the threat Taipei currently faces).

Arms sales to Taiwan are a clear demonstration of Washington’s commitment to peace and stability in Asia that send a clear signal to allies and potential adversaries alike that the US is determined to be an Asia-Pacific power. A refusal to sell much-needed arms to Taiwan would raise serious doubts

about the credibility of the US defense commitment to its other allies. It could also compel Taiwan to turn to nuclear weapons as a last resort, an outcome that China, least of all, should want to see.