



Zhu Rongji's Visit: Beginning the Strategic Dialogue

by Ralph A. Cossa

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji is coming to Washington at the worst possible times, what with the current anti-China feeding frenzy in the press and on Capitol Hill. China's recent spate of human rights violations and alleged espionage activities has made it open season on China--"innocent until proven guilty" having little weight in the court of public opinion.

Nonetheless, Zhu's visit provides the opportunity for a major step forward in Sino-U.S. relations, if the Clinton Administration is prepared to engage China's number two leader (behind President Jiang Zemin) in a much-needed strategic dialogue in addition to anticipated economic discussions. The point is neither to demonize China nor to let it off the hook when its behavior violates international norms, but to seriously discuss the issues that threaten to put our nations on a collision course.

Strategic Partnership. The first things both sides need to do, in the interest of clarity, is to refrain from ever again using the term "strategic partnership." Sino-U.S. relations do not, and are not likely to ever, constitute a strategic partnership by almost anyone's definition of that term. What is needed is strategic dialogue on the issues that divide us. What we should be seeking as a strategic accommodation, in the positive sense of the term, i.e., we must learn how to agree to disagree in a less confrontational way.

WTO Membership. Chinese membership in the WTO serves America's geopolitical as well as economic interests, provided China accepts some reasonable rules of entry, which it appears increasingly willing to do. But, the Administration should not push for final agreement unless it is willing to expend the political capital necessary to prevent Congressional action to block China's accession. WTO membership for China is justified on its own merits and should not be held prisoner to other events. Entry is best, but delay is better than striking a deal that we cannot deliver.

Human Rights. China both deserves and expects to be criticized on human rights but let's put this into perspective. Relatively speaking, the average person in China enjoys greater freedom of movement and expression and a greater sense of personal security than at any time in China's 5,000 year history, and Zhu Rongji deserves a fair share of the credit for improving the quality of life of the average Chinese, continued abuses notwithstanding. While Mao may have given Milosevic a run for his money, today's leaders are considerably more tolerant.

Kosovo. And, speaking of Milosevic, Kosovo is one area where the two sides have already agreed to disagree; the Chinese have been among the most outspoken critics of the

NATO action. Zhu should be challenged to become part of the solution, however, rather than just being allowed to complain about the problem. Would China be prepared to put peacekeeping forces in Kosovo if a new ceasefire could be achieved? (An equally good question is, would Washington and Brussels accept this?)

South China Sea. I can imagine no Chinese human rights violation that would lead us into war with China today. However, the expansion of Chinese military facilities on disputed Mischief Reef in the South China Sea could trigger a conflict, given the threat this poses to a U.S. treaty ally, the Philippines. The current U.S. response--that Chinese actions to date do not threaten freedom of navigation--misses the point. Beijing is violating its agreed-upon code of conduct with Manila and renegeing on its promise to ASEAN to avoid potentially destabilizing actions. China must understand that its failure to honor its promises in the South China Sea casts considerable doubt on China's trustworthiness, not to mention its future intentions.

Taiwan. Taiwan continues to be China's core security issue and it is important for the U.S. to continue to recognize this. There is little need for President Clinton to repeat China's desired "three no's"--no independence, no "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan," and no Taiwan participation in governmental forums--but he should underscore America's biggest no: no use of force. The U.S. also needs to argue that recent Chinese comments about setting a deadline for reunification are dangerous and potentially destabilizing.

U.S.-Japan Alliance. The Chinese see no need to be subtle in explaining how important Taiwan is to them. The U.S. needs to be equally direct in explaining that the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, and efforts to revitalize this relationship (such as the revised Defense Guidelines) represent America's core security interest in Asia and that Chinese attacks against the U.S. alliance system are offensive and threatening to us.

Missiles. I recently chaired an international conference on preventive diplomacy. The first Chinese speaker went on for ten minutes about the dangers of theater missile defense (TMD). As others have no doubt experienced, whatever the topic or question, the Chinese response will include an attack on TMD as "threatening and destabilizing". The most appropriate response is to challenge China to enter into a dialogue about the threat to Asian peace and security posed by all types of missiles--offensive and defensive. As Secretary Albright recently observed, it makes more sense to talk about existing threats than theoretical countermeasures. We should be prepared to enter into a strategic dialogue with China about both offensive and defensive missiles but not on TMD alone.

There are, of course, many economic issues that will also come up for discussion with China's economic czar. But, given his broad influence over all aspects of Chinese policy and his unofficial designation as Chinese President Jiang Zemin's heir-apparent, we can not afford to allow either these important economic discussions or the inevitable sparring over espionage and human rights to detract us from initiating a much-needed strategic dialogue with Mr. Zhu as well.

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