



## **Sino-U.S. Relations: Back on Track?** by Ralph A. Cossa

When the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting convenes in Auckland this weekend, most eyes will be focused on U.S. President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin. The stage seems set for yet another rapprochement in the perennial up-and-down relationship. At the top of their agenda will be the WTO and "One China" issues. But, if both leaders truly want to get the troubled relationship back on track, they must also come to terms with the festering sore inflicted by the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade last May.

Most observers are predicting that the two presidents will give the go-ahead to proceed on WTO, largely along the lines of Premier Zhu Rongji's earlier offer which had been (unwisely) rejected by President Clinton during Zhu's visit to Washington this past spring. Washington has made it clear that Clinton can not accept less than Zhu originally offered and Beijing has made it equally clear that Jiang will not offer more. Spin doctors on both sides will have a field day explaining how they have come away with a better deal this time.

Jiang will also be seeking yet another clear pronouncement of American commitment to a "one China" policy in the wake of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's "special state-to-state relations" comment in early July. Prudence dictates some caution here. Clinton has already reaffirmed America's commitment to "one China" in more specific terms – and in words closer to Beijing's definition – than any of his predecessors. He cannot afford to be seen as kowtowing to Jiang on this issue, especially since Jiang will no doubt continue to stress Beijing's "right" to use force if necessary to prevent Taiwan from officially splitting from the mainland.

Hopefully, Mr. Clinton will seize the opportunity to send a strong signal to the leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Straits that America will not support, recognize, or tolerate ANY unilateral change to the current status quo, be it via diplomatic/political means (by Taiwan) or through the use of military force (by the PRC). While Lee has not retracted his remarks, he has backed down considerably, clarifying officially that "special state-to-state" does not equal "two states" and that no constitutional change is being contemplated. Mainland Affairs Council Chairman Su Chi, who created the largest stir when he implied that Lee's comments signaled an end to the "one China" policy, has now been quoted stating that "we have never deviated from the framework of 'one China,' with each side being entitled to its respective interpretation."

This is about as much of a concession as Taiwan is likely to make. Taiwan domestic politics, which largely drove Lee's initial comments, will not permit further backsliding. It's time

for Jiang to declare victory on this issue and not press for more retractions from Taipei. Continued overt pressure will likely work against Beijing's long-term interests.

While forward progress on WTO and a further clearing of the air on "one China" are both important, the real test of whether both sides truly desire to get Sino-U.S. relations back on track will hinge on how the Belgrade bombing incident is handled. Chinese officials and scholars tell me that Beijing is hoping for one final apology from Clinton – this time delivered in person – in order to allow both sides to "put the issue behind us." But delivering an apology is only half the issue; the bigger question is the manner in which Jiang responds – as Japanese leaders from the Emperor on down can attest, China is much better at demanding apologies than at accepting them.

To my knowledge, neither Jiang Zemin nor any other senior Chinese leader has ever used the word "accidental" in any statement referring to the bombing. While Jiang may not have personally accused to U.S. of "Hitler-like atrocities," he has certainly allowed the myth that the bombing was deliberate to continue. There should be no further U.S. apology without some clear statement by Jiang in return that he accepts President Clinton's assurances that the bombing was not a deliberate act.

It would also be useful for Mr. Clinton to provide Mr. Jiang with a copy of his own personal statements regarding China in recent months, all of which underscore America's desire to get relations back on track. He should then explain to his Chinese counterpart that Jiang's own statements, including his most recent comments in Bangkok about American "gunboat diplomacy" and "economic colonialism," could lead one to believe that it is China and not the U.S. that is not sincere about improving relations. (One does, however, have to give Jiang credit for a certain amount of nerve to accuse America of gunboat diplomacy while speaking before an ASEAN audience, given the presence of PRC gunboats at Mischief Reef and elsewhere in the contested Spratly Islands.)

Chinese constantly complain that Americans unfairly "demonize" China and some non-officials in the U.S. – especially but not exclusively in the U.S. Congress – are indeed masters of this particular art. This is called freedom of expression. Chinese leaders are, of course, equally free to express concern about American behavior but, when they actively participate in the demonization of the U.S., they should likewise be taken to task.

The Belgrade bombing dealt a severe blow to American credibility in China and government acquiescence if not outright support for conspiracy theorists has helped to foster ill will against the United States among the Chinese people. If this is the intent of China's leaders, then we must recognize that the basis for future cooperation among our two nations

may no longer exist. On the other hand, if President Jiang is sincere in his desire to rebuild a solid, trusting relationship between China and the United States, he must meet President Clinton half-way and acknowledge the Belgrade bombing for what it was – a most unfortunate, tragic mistake.

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