



Running Out of Time

by Patrick M. Cronin and Emily Metzgar

In his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Colin Powell explained that China is neither a strategic partner nor an implacable foe. But he did not clarify what the Bush Administration thinks China is. This leaves a vacuum to be filled by events like China's denial that its technicians upgraded Iraq's air defense system and the recent Washington visit of China's vice premier, Qian Qichen.

Former U.S. Ambassador to China, Stapleton Roy, observed that most U.S. administrations start with one China policy but finish with another. Although it is not clear what China policy the Bush Administration will embrace, there is danger ahead and it started with Qian's visit. Beijing lacks a clear sense of the Bush Administration's China policy and is not happy about what it has seen thus far.

China sees the Bush Administration giving priority to alliance preservation in East Asia with South Korea and Japan. China interprets U.S. actions as hegemonic behavior intended to prevent it from emerging as a strategic competitor. While it is necessary to build U.S. policy on regional alliances, it is also important to recognize that East Asia's security is equally dependent on cooperative U.S.-China relations.

The calendar will not wait for the kinks of this transition period to work themselves out. News items continue to fill the vacuum. China announced a defense budget increase of nearly 18 percent. Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan has warned that there are serious consequences associated with U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Satellite images show a new Chinese missile base capable of targeting Taiwan. Washington will want to rush to judgment about China, but U.S. policy cannot be based solely on reactions to Chinese behavior.

China is playing a dangerous two-level game of superficial cooperation and subterranean competition with respect to the United States and the broader international community. China's alleged technical assistance to Iraq juxtaposed with efforts to join the WTO are a manifestation of China's approach and are evidence of why the United States must learn to deal with China at multiple levels. Both governments must learn to listen past the rhetoric and prevent a single issue, such as arms sales or human rights, from dominating the bilateral agenda. The United States and China must also recognize that it is difficult to move past rhetoric when passions have been stirred. Both countries should use moderation when referring to one another, particularly at this time of uncertainty about the nature of the bilateral relationship.

Although much has been made of the personal relationship between China's new ambassador to the United States, Yang

Jiechi, and the Bush family, it will take more than cordial relations between the President and Ambassador to guide this relationship into stable territory. The list of bilateral agenda items does not look promising and rhetoric surrounding them makes both countries nervous. Many issues, including the State Department's release of the annual Human Rights Report, near-certain delays in China's WTO accession, discussion about April arms sales to Taiwan, missile defense, and the Chinese government's increasingly hysterical crackdown on Falun Gong ensure the difficulty of nurturing salutary relations between China and the United States.

American emphasis on China's human rights conditions adds to that country's indignation. China recently released its own report, "U.S. Human Rights Record in 2000" lambasting the "myth" of American democracy, pointing to low voter turnout rates, the prison system, illiteracy rates, and the death penalty. Meanwhile, the announcement that the United States will campaign for a resolution in Geneva condemning China's human rights practices makes U.S. partners elsewhere uneasy. By going to Geneva, the Bush Administration may be on the verge of replicating the feckless approach of the Clinton Administration that isolated the United States instead of China on human rights.

Even while it supports addressing human rights in multiple forums, the Bush Administration should allow other elements to focus on these issues. It is important to take a stand on human rights principles, but Congress and various NGOs can be more effective at highlighting abuses and nurturing civil society over a sustained period of time. What is gained by having the executive branch push the human rights issue at the expense of other bilateral agenda items? The more important question is whether pressuring China on human rights in Geneva is an ad hoc policy decision or is instead part of a coordinated strategy for developing U.S.-China relations. This is a fundamental distinction for an administration with limited capital to expend in its relations with China.

Meanwhile, the Taiwan issue will present the Bush Administration with hard choices sooner rather than later. China will actively lobby for constraints on arms sales to Taiwan and the temptation will be to proceed with sales if only to show that Washington cannot be bullied by Beijing. Before making a decision, the question of how arms sales advance U.S. interests must be addressed. This is not to say that sale of Aegis destroyers cannot advance U.S. interests. But, doing so is not obviously part of an American strategy to protect democracy in Taiwan. Rules of the road for building relations with China must be laid out first. Arms sales to Taiwan must be part of a comprehensive approach to our relationship with China and not an isolated policy decision.

Further complicating the task of developing a relationship between the United States and China is that country's seemingly unstable domestic environment. Political tensions, fear of Falun Gong practitioners, and a propensity for overreaction vis-à-vis

Taiwan render China a potentially difficult interlocutor for the new administration. Prospects for the bilateral relationship are slim without a comprehensive strategy to guide policy decisions.

The United States should not sacrifice its national interests to please China. But there is nothing to be gained from needlessly provoking Beijing on issues on which it is clear we must agree to disagree. High-level reassurances now from Washington that China is a country with which the United States wishes to have productive, cooperative relations may be a useful short-term solution to the increasingly hyperbolic nature of bilateral exchanges. The U.S.-China relationship must mature to allow thoughtful discussion of difficult issues and this can only happen with the promotion of honest and consistent high-level discussions, cutting through the rhetoric and making both countries' bottom lines easier to discern.

Secretary Powell spoke honestly about the U.S. relationship with China and raised expectations for Bush Administration policy. Powell's statement was welcome, but the Administration must guard against having its complex relations with China reduced to reflexive responses in a strategic vacuum rapidly being filled by bad news. Even for the highly capable foreign policy wisemen of the Bush Administration, China poses a tremendous challenge.

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