



Sino-U.S. Relations: In Search of a New Slogan

by Philip Bowring

"Are you an American?" Response: "Yes!" "What did you think about last night's decision on the Olympics?"

This conversation played itself out half a dozen times the day after China's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics was announced, as I walked around Tiananmen Square and neighboring shopping districts. From hotel bellmen to shoppers who literally came up to me out of the blue, they all seemed interested in knowing what Americans thought about China's victory. Most seemed somewhat surprised (but clearly delighted) when I responded that I was very pleased for China.

Almost everyone I talked to in Beijing, from government officials to leading scholars to the man on the street, seems genuinely puzzled and concerned about the future direction of Sino-U.S. relations. Few are ready to conclude that Washington is embarked on a course of confrontation and containment, but many see this as the prevailing trend. Most curiously, they also seem to see the nature of the future relationship as resting almost exclusively in America's hands. Few seem prepared to acknowledge that Beijing's actions have had (and will continue to have) a significant impact on the future direction of what almost everyone on both sides agrees is a seriously strained relationship.

Their confusion is understandable. The Bush administration has taken great pains to define what China is and is not. China is a "competitor for influence" and a "potential regional rival" but also a "trading partner" and a "potential partner willing to cooperate in areas where our strategic interests overlap." China is all these things, said Secretary of State Powell, "but China is not an enemy and our challenge is to keep it that way." While the Chinese still recall candidate Bush's "strategic competitor" label, for the most part this highly pejorative slogan has been dropped from the official Washington lexicon. But, beyond the general statement that Washington "seeks a constructive relationship" with Beijing, little effort has been made to define the desired end state.

During the Clinton years, Washington and Beijing had agreed to "build toward a constructive strategic partnership." Current nostalgic reporting notwithstanding, neither side claimed that such a relationship already existed; only that this was the long term goal. The Bush administration rejected this slogan -- realistically speaking, a true strategic partnership was an over-idealistic goal, given the fundamental differences that exist between the two societies.

But, the Bush administration has yet to clearly articulate its vision for a future Sino-U.S. relationship, leaving the Chinese to engage in worst case assessments. Those who see an

administration bent on confrontation and containment claim lots of evidence: the robust U.S. arms sales package to Taiwan; Bush's commitment to pursue a missile defense shield that they fear will place China's "minimum deterrence" force in jeopardy; the high profile transit visits to the U.S. of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian (on his way to and from an official visit to Latin America); the granting of a visa to Taiwan's chief "troublemaker," former President Lee Teng-hui; America's continued spying against China, as highlighted by the EP3 incident; and, of course, Bush's infamous statement that he was prepared to do "whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself.

Overlooked are the silver linings in these gray clouds: the decision to withhold the weapons system most desired by Taipei (and feared by Beijing), AEGIS-equipped destroyers with enhanced anti-missile capabilities; assurances that only a limited missile defense is planned, one that "should not cause Beijing sleepless nights;" the lack of "official" activities during Chen's two transits; the low-keyed nature of Lee's visit; the willingness to meet Beijing more than half way in resolving the EP3 affair while carefully avoiding the "H" word (hostage), which would have turned the incident into a full-fledged crisis; and Bush's quick follow-up to the "whatever it took" comment which underscored his continued commitment to a "one China" policy, to which he added, significantly, perhaps Washington's most direct warning to date against a Taiwan "declaration of independence." Add to this the Administration's approval of "normal trade relations" status for China for another year and its neutral stance on Beijing's Olympics bid (despite heavy pressure from many in Congress to try to block Beijing's effort), and one can find equally compelling evidence that a cooperative relationship is genuinely being sought. Yet the Chinese tendency at present is to see the glass half-empty, not half full.

Security specialists and officials I talked with were all placing high hopes on Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to China later this month to set relations in a more positive direction. They look to Powell to underscore the positive side of the relationship and to pay due respect to China's core concerns, especially as regards Taiwan and missile defense. These appear to be reasonable requests. But Beijing must be willing, in return, to abandon its own incessant rhetoric accusing Washington of seeking "absolute security" or "global hegemony in a unipolar world" in favor of a constructive strategic dialogue with Washington that recognizes the legitimate security concerns of both sides.

The "constructive strategic partnership" slogan is dead. What's still missing is a new positive slogan that will help chart the path of future Sino-U.S. cooperation. Hopefully, this will emerge from Powell's visit to Beijing.

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