

Consensus Based on Mutual Respect and Equality: the Cornerstone of “Strategic Reassurance” by Shen Yi

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Recently, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, in an address at the Center for a New American Security, called on China to provide “strategic reassurance” that its intentions were peaceful. Many Chinese argue this term is an important test balloon to establish a new principle for the Obama administration’s approach to Sino-U.S. relations. However, because the term lends itself to different interpretations, it would be better for both sides to build a consensus based on mutual respect and equality, which would promote further dialogue and consolidate a cornerstone for future relations.

Steinberg’s use of the term “reassurance” reminds people of the increased risk of conflict between these two countries given the increasingly rapid rise of China’s power, which has surprised most of the world, including most Chinese. Accordingly, the “reassurance” should be mutual reassurance, with both sides providing information to allow confirmation of the other’s intention. While the U.S. and its western allies may worry about China’s “real strategic intentions,” Beijing also worries about the possible reaction from Washington as the relative power structure has been continually and vividly changing.

As a first priority, patience will be extremely important to achieve a consensus in the strategic dialogue between those two great powers which have totally different cultural backgrounds. In Steinberg’s “Strategic Reassurance” address, he defined “reassurance” as certain kind of “bargain” and then he put out his offer that while the U.S. and allies are “prepared to welcome China’s arrival as a prosperous and successful power, China must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of security and well-being of others.” The details of the bargain would apparently include “strategic nuclear weapons, space, and increasingly in the cyber realm.” For its part, China would prefer to get a more wide-ranging, detailed, and pragmatic offer. After Steinberg delivered his speech, several Chinese scholars discussed the content of “strategic reassurance” and its possible affect on Sino-U.S. relationship; nearly all of them agreed that the U.S. should provide more details to make the offer more attractive.

As this task cannot be completed without the efforts of both sides, China must also do its part. The publication of a white paper on its defense strategy, official use of the term “deter” to describe the military strategy of China, and launching an open website covering the Ministry of Defense activities are some of the most important items Beijing has already developed in the past several years. But that’s just the

beginning. There is a lot that still needs to be developed to ensure Beijing uses the proper means to clearly express Chinese strategic intentions. As a newly rising great power, China needs more time to learn the rules of the game among the great powers and should respect and be sensitive to those rules. China should be more active in promoting high-level military-to-military exchanges and building more stable dialogue institutions between the two militaries. With the general increase of power, China will be more confident in doing so. Since the late 1990s, China has become active in cooperating with U.S. to solve the nonproliferation issues in Korea and Iran. Other areas where the two countries should increase cooperation include securing cyberspace, fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, in Central and South Asia, and antipiracy action in the India Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.

During the Cold War, the use of the term “strategic” between U.S. and USSR was limited to describing those traditional security issues mainly focused on military confrontation. Today, strategic should cover a wide range of issues. It is important to point out that China and the U.S. may have different priorities that reflect their own preferences and interests. Therefore, if we want to promote “strategic reassurance,” it is important to get a common understanding of a detailed and operational version of the term. Maybe it is a proper time for both sides to recognize this and work to bridge the cognitive gap in the strategic dialogue with more patience.

It is important for the U.S. to remember that traditional Chinese culture means Beijing will be as sensitive to the means used as to the goals being articulated. Therefore, the U.S. needs to choose the proper means to communicate its real intentions and concerns. Based on its experience in the dialogue with the U.S. since the 1970s, China has learned to ignore some negative information on Sino-U.S. relationship in special periods (e.g., during presidential election campaigns). But Beijing still will feel “unequal” when it seems that it has been made the scapegoat by some politician in Washington.

A second priority is to demonstrate mutual respect in the process of developing “strategic reassurance.” In some ways, this would be more important than the content or the final results. Mutual respect proven by action rather than rhetoric would ensure the final success of the dialogue. If the U.S. could confirm that Washington respected Beijing’s interests, it would help consolidate support for the bilateral relationship within China. Of course, it would be more effective to take real action rather than simply repeat the term “respect.”

Real actions toward the Taiwan issue would provide immediate, clear, and absolutely positive evidence that the U.S. will respect China. For example, sending a clear message encouraging peaceful reunification or providing a clear timetable on stopping arms sales to Taiwan would be helpful. Though it is reported that the Congress removed a provision

related to arms sales to Taiwan in the final version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, it is still difficult to confirm the real meaning of the action: is it a signal for real change or is it nothing more than a temporary promise? If a clear signal on Taiwan would be difficult given the political realities within the U.S., the administration needs to find a better way to prove its respect to China. At the same time, China should launch some new thinking and become more confident in bargaining with the U.S. even though it would be difficult to persuade the U.S. to make real compromises on Taiwan issues.

Dealing with maritime issues inside the strategic reassurance framework would also be very important. Since states such as the Philippines and Vietnam have a history of promoting their own interests by overestimating the so called "military threat" from China and tend to portray China's actions to protect its interests in South China Sea as a "challenge to U.S.," China and U.S. need to develop a more stable and reliable dialogue mechanism to avoid any misunderstanding.

Finally, equality – sharing the burden and possible costs equally – is critical to the success of "strategic reassurance." As a moderate newly rising great power, China wants to make necessary contributions to the world that fit its real capabilities including the governance of global public issues such as climate change and environmental protection. But real and effective governance is not free. Those who want to contribute to the final resolution have to share the costs. Because these contributions incur short-term political and economic costs inside the country, those leaders concerned with the short-term rewards are reluctant to take "real" action and instead rely on rhetoric. Inside the framework of Sino-U.S. relationship, the importance of equality, especially in China, has been rising for a long time.

China has done a lot to prove that it wants to be a responsible great power. According to statistics released by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, China invested over 700 billion *yuan* in environmental protection during the Tenth Five-Year Plan period (2000-2005), in comparison with 47.64 billion *yuan* during the Seventh Five-Year Plan period (1986-1990). Premier Wen Jiabao said in the government work report that China invested 42.3 billion *yuan* to support development of 10 key energy conservation projects and environmental protection facilities in 2008. In the same year, China's energy consumption per unit of GDP fell by 4.59 percent from the previous year; chemical oxygen demand fell by 4.42 percent; and sulfur dioxide emissions fell by 5.95 percent. For the past three years, total energy consumption per unit of GDP dropped by 10.08 percent; chemical oxygen demand dropped by 6.61 percent; and sulfur dioxide emissions dropped by 8.95 percent. These numbers mean a change in the structure of several industries, which will cause migrant workers to lose their jobs and a significant increase in the costs of those industry's factories.

Since June 2008, government administrative regulations prohibit all supermarkets or department stores from providing free plastic bags to customers. As calculated by the Ministry of Science and Technology, China can save the energy equivalent of 12,000 tons of standard coal, and cut carbon

dioxide emissions by 310,000 tons by reducing plastic bag consumption by ten percent.

Compared to what the U.S. has done in the same timeframe, it would be difficult for the Chinese government to convince the people why only China should take all these steps to protect the environment. It is important to recognize the significance of the change that has taken place within the social structure of China since the opening and reform in late 1970s. Now, partly as the result of China's market economy and the increasing transnational flow of people, Beijing faces growing pressure from local interest groups that push the government to fight for an environment of equality for Chinese enterprises and normal Chinese people which makes it more and more difficult for Beijing to accept an unequal share of the burden on those global governance issues.

If Washington just keeps talking about "strategic reassurance" but neglects a relative equal sharing of the costs, it will be difficult for China to accept the initiative without doubting that the real intention of "reassurance" is to trap China with new terms.

It is difficult to launch a successful and consolidated arrangement for "reassurance" without the most important cornerstones of mutual respect and equality. If China and the U.S. could launch successful dialogue to build an effective "strategic reassurance", the road can be far less bumpy.