



Strategic Partnership? by Ralph A. Cossa

During their historic summit meeting in Washington last October, Presidents Clinton and Jiang Zemin issued a joint statement indicating that they were mutually “determined to build toward a constructive strategic partnership” between the U.S. and China. This commitment was reaffirmed during Secretary of State Madeline Albright’s recent visit to Beijing to prepare for next month’s Beijing summit between these aspiring partners.

The problem is, neither side has yet to define exactly what a “constructive strategic partnership” would look like. Both seem to agree, however, that at a minimum it should involve high level dialogue on strategic issues and joint efforts to develop cooperative approaches when mutual security interests are challenged.

Well, don’t look now, but a challenge has been issued, in the form of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons tests, and evidence of constructive cooperation or a coordinated Sino-U.S. approach is nowhere to be found.

Immediately after the Indian tests, I suggested that the U.S. and China consider offering a joint security guarantee to Pakistan in return for a pledge not to respond in kind to India’s actions. Chinese and U.S. officials with whom I have since discussed this proposition have told me (informally, and in more polite terms) that I must be nuts. Neither side could imagine the other (or themselves?) seriously contemplating much less pursuing such an initiative. Quite frankly, neither can I... but I’m not the one “determined to build toward a constructive strategic partnership.” Meanwhile, Pakistan, in justifying its own action, claimed that the lack of outside security assurances left it with no choice but to provide for its own defense.

This initial failure to respond notwithstanding, Washington and Beijing still share a mutual interest both in seeing the Indian and Pakistani programs terminated and in halting further proliferation. For its part, the U.S. did take a firm stand against India and tried openly to pressure and entice Pakistan not to start testing. China was much more subdued, issuing hollow words of condemnation against India while stating that “China will not encourage Pakistan to conduct its own nuclear tests.” A diplomatic mission to Beijing by Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, reportedly aimed at obtaining Chinese security assurances, came away empty-handed, save for an alleged pledge by China not to impose economic sanctions should Pakistan conduct a nuclear test...hardly the stuff deterrence is made of.

China took a little heat internationally from those who accept at face value India’s claim that it was fear of China (and China’s nuclear and missile technology assistance to Pakistan) that drove India’s decision to test. In reality, most

India-watchers agree that domestic political factors -- including the desire of the ruling BJP Party to shore up its fragile coalition by playing to Indian nationalism -- ruled the day. China did play a supporting role, although I would argue that “China envy” rather than fear of China was the much greater motivating factor -- one cannot discuss international relations in India for more than two minutes without receiving a lecture on how China, as a nuclear power, gets special treatment and respect which should rightfully be accorded to India as well (or instead).

It has been relatively easy for China to brush off criticism about somehow being to blame for India’s actions, especially given Beijing’s pledge not to resume its own testing program. But, China will not be able to escape international criticism over Pakistan’s actions since Beijing (rightly or wrongly) is universally perceived as the silent partner behind Islamabad’s nuclear program. At a minimum, China’s critics in the U.S. Congress will have a field day. The Pakistani nuclear test could even provide the final straw in convincing President Clinton – already under fire due to alleged Chinese campaign contribution and technology transfer scandals – to cancel his visit to China.

All this would seem to argue in favor of a much stronger Chinese response to both India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear testing if for no other reason than to convince others not to follow suit. While Pakistan was considered the most likely to be the next after India to test, it is not likely to be the last to do so. What kind of message does a lukewarm response to testing by India or Pakistan send to countries like Iran, Libya, or North Korea?

And then there is Taiwan. If New Delhi can make the case that the China threat justifies their nuclear weapons program, and if China merely shrugs its shoulders as Islamabad makes the same case vis-a-vis India, then what does one say to the people of Taiwan? After all, China has been shooting nothing but olive branches toward India in the past several years, while firing missiles toward Taiwan.

I should note that when I raise this concern among my American colleagues, they quickly remind me that the U.S. has successfully blocked Taiwan’s nuclear weapons aspirations in the past and can easily do so again. The fact that many previously assured me that the mere existence of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty would be sufficient to pressure India, a non-signatory, not to test prevents me from being too complacent, however.

Perhaps my call for joint security guarantees to Pakistan in return for a no testing pledge was too far-fetched or difficult for a budding strategic partnership to tackle. But, a failure by Presidents Clinton and Jiang to do more than collectively wring their hands over the emerging nuclear arms race in South Asia will merely help to perpetuate this destabilizing

situation while also greatly increasing the odds that others will travel down the nuclear weapons path.

It should also be instructional for President Clinton to note that his earlier call for support for a strong stand from America's G-8 "partners" also fell largely on deaf ears, with only Canada and Japan demonstrating -- by words and deeds -- a matching commitment. If nothing else, this should demonstrate to Washington who its strategic partners really are.

Ralph A. Cossa is Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS.