PacNet

Number 26

Pacific Forum CSIS
Honolulu, Hawaii

July 2, 1999

China: Engage or Confront?

by Arnold Kanter

The Clinton Administration's much touted "strategic partnership" between the United States and China appears to a growing number of thoughtful Americans to have been hopelessly naïve from the outset. Are they right? Have recent events and revelations proven the critics of "engagement" to have been correct all along? In the wake of the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, is it not now time to acknowledge that the United States and China are historically destined to be competitors if not adversaries? Rather than renewing China's MFN status, should we not be shifting to a policy of containing China?

At this point, the best -- if emotionally unsatisfying -- answer to all of these questions is "no."

There is no denying that U.S.-China relations, which already were short on substance and long on controversy, are now in crisis. The increasingly bitter debate in the United States about policy toward China -- which often has been characterized more by heat than light -- is now being matched by a parallel debate among China's rulers about Beijing's policy toward Washington. Serious and sincere concerns in each country about the motives and objectives of the other are becoming intertwined with domestic struggles for political position and advantage. Each side's reactions -- and overreactions -- to events such as the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and reports of Chinese spying are feeding back into, and further polarizing, the domestic politics of the other.

But the present crisis should not be confused with the inevitability of an expansive, hostile China emerging on the world scene, or compelling evidence that China is destined to be our new, mortal enemy. Indeed, to leap to such a conclusion would transform U.S. policy into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Recent events and revelations notwithstanding, the jury is still out -- inside China as well as outside -- on whether China will become a constructive or destabilizing great power. Equally important, it is the actions of the two governments and the interactions between them, not some kind of historical determinism, which will shape how China evolves and what course the relationship between our two countries takes.

An adversarial relationship with China is neither unthinkable nor intolerable. After all, we had such a relationship with the Soviet Union for nearly fifty years. If there is no other choice, we can live in a world in which China is a constant competitor. But the converse also is true: an adversarial relationship with China is not inevitable. U.S. interests and values will be far better served if Beijing concludes that it is in China's national interest to cooperate with the United States wherever possible rather than play the role of a regional or global troublemaker. Recognizing that such a result can only be achieved if Chinese calculations of their own national interests lead them to desire such a relationship at least as much as we do, we -- and they -- have every incentive to make it a reality.

China's stake is clear. Its future economic development, international political standing, and very sense of security would be fundamentally transformed if it became locked in a new Cold War with the United States. Put simply, China probably can manage without our cooperation, support, investment, and access to our markets, but only with considerably more difficulty and far fewer benefits.

That said, we also have a major stake in good relations with the PRC. The economic benefits of a constructive relationship are clear and important, but are far from our only interest. For example, China can make a big difference -- for good or ill -- in how successful we are in achieving our non-proliferation goals not only in Asia, but in regions around the world. But probably of most direct and immediate strategic importance, no one in the region wants to be caught in the middle of a U.S.-China confrontation and forced to choose sides. We cannot be sure how key countries would line up if faced with such a choice (and might well be badly surprised), but we can be certain that our core interests in the entire Asia-Pacific region would be badly damaged.

Ironically, the current controversy over Chinese nuclear spying helps underscore our stake in good relations with the PRC. We may never know for certain how much information the Chinese acquired, from where they obtained it, or how much it has helped them. But what does seem clear is that, for some time, the Chinese have had the indigenous capability to build a much larger and more threatening force than the one they have so far decided to deploy.

In other words, the Chinese evidently made a political decision some years ago to confine themselves to a relatively modest, second strike nuclear force. Whatever missile and nuclear secrets they may have obtained over the past 10 or 20 years, up to now they have stayed with this decision. Without condoning either Chinese espionage or our own lapses which facilitated it, we should not lose sight of the central fact that we want to keep it that way. That is, our national security interests will be far better served if the Chinese continue to follow their current policy rather than conclude that they now need much larger and more capable nuclear capabilities.

This nuclear example illustrates a more general lesson. A realistic China policy should be based on the premise that the PRC's future is neither settled nor foreordained. Whether by accident or design, our actions will influence the debates and decisions in Beijing about how that country will evolve and what

1001 Bishop Street, Pauahi Tower, Suite 1150, Honolulu, HI 96813 Tel: (808) 521-6745 Fax: (808) 599-8690
Email: pacforum@hawaii.rr.com Web Page: www.csis.org/pacfor

kind of great power it will become. China's future, in turn, will greatly affect our own. And notwithstanding the current crisis in U.S.-China relations, each side must know its interests are better served to the extent that it can elicit cooperative behavior from the other.

The challenge both countries face is to transform their common stakes into concrete policies which rest on a solid foundation of shared strategic interests. To be successful and sustainable, such policies need to flow from hard-headed calculations of respective national interests which identify and capitalize on points of convergence, and create incentives for mature management of differences where they do not. Their hallmark will be a kind of cautious, even wary, pragmatism. At best, the result will be a fluid, complicated relationship which does not fit neatly into simplistic models which divide the world into allies and enemies.

We may not succeed in achieving even this limited objective, and we must remain fully prepared to deal with a Beijing which is determined to become our adversary. But it is neither naïve nor futile to try. We also have time: even if China should turn out to be our new enemy, it would take at least a decade or two before it could amass the military power required to seriously threaten U.S. vital interests. It would be irresponsible not to use this time to try to build a constructive relationship, heading off a new Cold War -- or worse. To squander this opportunity, to behave as though the die already is cast, and to default to a policy based on fear and recrimination, will surely undermine rather than serve our national security interests.

***Arnold Kanter**, a Senior Fellow at the Forum for International Policy, served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 1991 to 1993 and special Assistant to the President for Defense Policy and Arms Control on the National Security Council staff from 1989 to 1991. This is a reprint of an Issue Brief of the Forum for International Policy of Washington D.C. whose president is Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor and Chairman of the Board of Governors of Pacific Forum CSIS. This is printed with permission.*