



Clinton Visit to China: What Wasn't Discussed

by Ralph A. Cossa

President Clinton's visit to China, by virtually all accounts, has been a huge diplomatic success. Even seasoned China-watchers (and seasoned China bashers) were impressed by the degree of openness and candor of the dialogue and by Beijing's willingness to broadcast Clinton's less than flattering remarks to a broad Chinese domestic audience.

Everyone (including the Chinese leadership) expected Clinton to present a human rights lecture in Beijing – receiving such a sermon was the price Chinese President Jiang Zemin was willing to pay to have Clinton stand alongside him in Tiananmen Square. No one expected that it would be broadcast, uncut, throughout China. Clinton's give-and-take with the students at Beijing University also provided a rare opportunity for the future generation of Chinese leaders to hear, first hand, an authoritative opposing viewpoint.

It is not an overstatement to say that the visit has taken Sino-U.S. dialogue to a new level. But, despite this significant progress, the two presidents apparently failed (at least publicly) to address the more critical fundamental difference between our two countries; the one which, if left unresolved, could lead the world into a new bipolar confrontation sometime in the early 21st century. I am talking here about the fundamental difference in each nation's future vision of Asia.

When American policy-makers envision the East Asia of the future, they see a stable, prosperous region in which the United States is still a primary (although not necessarily the only) source of stability; an Asia in which the United States remains fully engaged politically, economically, and militarily; an Asia where stability is ensured in no small part by the continued security partnership between the U.S. and Japan and by America's other bilateral security alliances.

They see a Japan which is a more equal security partner to the U.S., but one that continues to prefer a complementary military force to a "stand-alone" force that could prove destabilizing (Japan's peaceful intent notwithstanding); a Japan which is an accepted political as well as economic leader in Asia (and globally); a Japan that is more willing and able to play a positive role in promoting and protecting regional security, but within clearly defined boundaries that remain both transparent and reassuring to Japan's neighbors; and, incidentally, a Japan whose markets are considerably more open and integrated than they are today.

I believe American policy-makers also seek a peaceful, prosperous, reunified Korean Peninsula that continues to view the U.S. both as an military ally and as a regional balancer, and hopefully as an honest broker promoting improved relations between Japan and the new Korean republic.

American policy-makers also seek a prosperous, cooperative, more politically-tolerant China that continues to see its fortunes inextricably intertwined with the rest of Asia and the West; a China that is as much a partner for peace in Asia as they hope Russia will be in Europe; a China which may not joyously welcome, but is at least accepting of and not actively working against, a continued American security role in the region. They also desire (and expect to see) a peaceful solution to the China-Taiwan problem that respects the concerns and aspirations of the Chinese people on both sides of the Strait.

While this vision should not appear threatening to China, it does not coincide with the vision I hear when discussing Asia's future with PRC officials and Chinese security analysts. They would clearly prefer an Asia in which China and not the U.S. plays the primary regional balancer role; where a reunified Korea looks to Beijing for its principal security guarantees; where U.S. military forces at a minimum no longer reside on the Korean Peninsula and, ideally, are nowhere else in Asia as well -- Beijing already characterizes America's bilateral security alliances as Cold War vestiges left over from history -- and where Japan's regional leadership role (politically and economically) is kept to a minimum.

China's view of itself as the future regional balancer is not surprising, at least not from a "Middle Kingdom" perspective. Nor is it necessarily threatening, although it has the capability of becoming so if Beijing tries to force this role on the region rather than letting it evolve (or fail to evolve) naturally. But, if China is actively seeking substantially diminished U.S. presence and influence in the Asia Pacific region (including a termination of America's bilateral alliances), their objectives clearly run contrary to U.S. interests and aspirations, and to the stated desires of the vast majority of nations in the region. These nations, in large part, share and endorse the U.S. future vision.

This does not mean that the U.S. is on an inevitable collision course with Beijing. It does mean that we must recognize that we have different long-term goals and aspirations and that we must work to more effectively manage the differences. Failure to harmonize these goals today increases the prospects of confrontation over the long run. It also makes the "strategic partnership" that both sides continue to tout virtually impossible to achieve.

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