

Shaping the Choices of a Rising China: Recent Lessons for the Obama Administration

President Barack Obama ran a successful campaign on the theme of change. Yet, for addressing what is perhaps the greatest long-term strategic challenge facing the United States—managing U.S. relations with a rising China—change is not what is needed. President George W. Bush’s strategy toward China is an underappreciated success story and the Obama administration would be wise to build on that success rather than attempt to radically transform U.S. policy toward China.

As a former U.S. Department of State (DOS) official working on China policy, I would sum up Bush’s strategy as a long-term effort to shape the choices the leadership in Beijing makes about how to use China’s increasing regional and global influence. Rather than trying to rollback or contain the growth of Chinese power, the United States has used the combination of a strong U.S. regional presence and a series of creative diplomatic initiatives to encourage Beijing to seek increased influence through diplomatic and economic interactions rather than coercion, and to use that increased influence in a manner that improves the prospects for security and economic prosperity in Asia and around the world.

This effort has been successful because Washington deftly handled many of the traditional issues in the bilateral relationship, such as economic frictions or

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tensions between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. What was truly innovative in the Bush administration's China policy, however, was the intensive and sustained engagement with Beijing on how better to coordinate U.S. and the People's Republic of China's responses to policy problems around the globe, from a nuclear weapons program in North Korea to pirates in the Gulf of Aden to humanitarian crises in Sudan. This innovation has produced real results that are often missed because many long-standing problems in the relationship are still quite prominent. If one takes a historically informed perspective and views U.S.–China relations as a movie, instead of a snapshot, then the positive evolution in China's foreign relations that have been fostered, at least in part, by Washington's diplomatic approach to Beijing can be seen clearly. While China is still quite far from becoming the “responsible stakeholder” that former deputy secretary Robert B. Zoellick envisioned in his famous speech in September 2005,¹ China has made positive adjustments in its foreign policy that would have been hard to imagine just several years ago.

U.S. Goals and How to Achieve Them

What does China want and what does the United States want from China? There is a broad national consensus within China across diverse segments of society and different intellectual orientations that the nation should increase its power and influence on the international stage. The key question is what mix of policies China should use to increase that influence: economic growth and greater integration with regional and global economies; diplomatic activism designed to reassure China's nervous neighbors and help solve regional and global problems; and/or military coercion against actors with whom China has been brewing territorial or political disputes? China's answers to these questions will have enormous repercussions for the region and the world. The United States can best influence these choices by maintaining the current two-pronged strategy: a strong U.S. presence in Asian security and political affairs to discourage the use of coercion by China when resolving its disputes, and active diplomatic engagement to encourage China to seek greater influence through constructive economic and diplomatic policies.

First, by maintaining a strong U.S. security presence in Asia in the form of U.S. forces and bases along with a network of strong alliances and non-allied security partnerships, the United States makes it difficult for experts, advisors, and decisionmakers within China to advocate the use of coercive force against Taiwan or other regional actors as an inexpensive and effective way for Beijing to address its problems. The term “hedging” is often used, even in official government documents, to describe this role of the U.S. security presence. The term has some validity, but it does not fully capture the role that U.S. regional power plays. Hedging

implies that the U.S. presence will only be useful if diplomatic engagement fails to convince a rising China to avoid belligerence. In fact, the maintenance of U.S. military superiority in the region, properly considered, is an integral part of that broader engagement strategy and makes diplomatic engagement itself more effective. The military strength of the United States and its allies and security partners in Asia complements positive U.S. diplomacy by channeling China's competitive energies in more beneficial and peaceful directions.

The U.S. wants Beijing to use its increasing influence to enhance security and economic prosperity.

The second prong of the strategy, a robust set of diplomatic dialogues, is designed to urge China to use its growing power constructively and to help Beijing recognize that, if it does so, it will be accorded the greater prestige and influence that it seeks. The United States has maintained several dozen formal dialogues with the Chinese, the most famous of which have been the Strategic Economic Dialogue on bilateral and global economic and environmental affairs under former secretary of treasury Henry M. Paulson, and the Senior Dialogue on bilateral and global political and security affairs under former deputy secretaries of state John Negroponte and Zoellick. I had the privilege to play a supporting role in both of these major initiatives and it was clear to me that there was a common theme to both: the United States wishes China well, but believes that for China to do well, it will need to adjust its domestic and foreign policies in ways that will foster long-term stability and growth at home, and will bolster stability in international economic and political relations. Since the adoption of the opening and reform program thirty years ago under the former leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Deng Xiaoping, no actor has benefited more than China from international stability. As a rising power, it is in China's strategic interest to exert greater effort to help maintain that system.

Three broad themes have contributed to the success of these talks:

Not Containing China but Shaping Beijing's Choices

Neither the United States nor its many friends and allies in Asia want a new Cold War in the region. Any effort to try to hamper China's growth of economic or diplomatic power would backfire. It would alienate Washington from its many regional partners, leaving the United States in a weaker position. Moreover, such a policy would empower the wrong ideas in the domestic debate in China and would bolster the credibility of existing hawkish arguments, which state that the United States and its allies quietly harbor hostile intent against China and that only the development of a much stronger military and a greater emphasis on

coercive diplomacy will secure China its rightful place on the international stage. Instead, the United States needs to consistently remind China that the United States wants Beijing to play a larger role in international politics and that China can best win increased power and prestige at an acceptable price through cooperation with the international community in common endeavors.

No Zero-Sum Competition with China

Contrary to common assumptions, there is no U.S.–China scramble for Africa, Latin America, or Southeast Asia. The Bush administration did not treat the pursuit of Chinese and U.S. influence in these regions as a zero-sum game, which was wise. In general, increased Chinese activity in developing regions of the world is welcome and the United States should encourage greater, not less, aid and investment there. Problems do not arise because of some imagined scramble for influence and resources in these parts of the world, but because Chinese policies lack transparency and are not coordinated with major donors and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. As a result, Chinese projects can miss opportunities to work along with those others' programs and, *in extremis*, can even undercut those efforts. For example, China often has offered unconditional loans to governments prone to corruption when conditionality can be used to improve governance, a factor that global leaders and economic experts agree is perhaps the most important in fostering sustainable long-term development.² An assistance dialogue between U.S. Agency for International Development and those Chinese actors engaged in foreign aid and investment would be a good starting point. The United States pursued the establishment of such regular meetings during both the Strategic Economic Dialogue and the Senior Dialogue. The Obama administration would be wise to pursue that goal in 2009 and establish such a formal assistance dialogue as soon as possible.

Dialogue Addresses Problems in Regions around the World

One of the signal changes in the U.S.–China relationship in the past several years has been a move beyond the traditional bilateral issues that dominated previous discussions between the two sides such as trade deficits, relations across the Taiwan Strait, and human rights. These issues remain important in the U.S.–China relationship, but especially in U.S. political and security dialogues, the conversation has increasingly focused on how China and the United States might better coordinate the countries' approaches to problems in regions around the world including Africa, Central and South Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. As part of the Senior Dialogue, there is a series of regular sub-dialogues led by U.S. regional assistant secretaries of state and their Chinese counterparts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ten years ago, people in these

positions in the two countries likely would not have known each others' names, let alone been involved in extensive discussions about how best to foster stability and growth in various parts of the world. These are real dialogues in which the Chinese bring to the discussion their own robust diplomatic experiences, which often differ from their American counterparts in important ways. For many challenges, such as North Korean denuclearization or stopping the genocide in Darfur, it will be difficult, if not impossible to solve the problems without close coordination and collaboration with China.

Maintaining U.S. military superiority makes diplomatic engagement itself more effective.

Signs of Real Progress Amid Continuing Challenges

Dialogue with China works. It has its own benefits—knowledge gained, trust enhanced—but since the real goal is to shape China's course of action, success must be measured by actual improvements in China's policy. Of course, from a U.S. perspective, there will always be plenty of shortcomings in Beijing's foreign relations to complain about, which was unfortunately true before the Bush administration and will remain true during the Obama administration. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the positive changes in China's diplomacy that would have been hard to imagine just several years ago. Moreover, some of these adjustments suggest potential evolutionary shifts away from a long-standing core principle of China's foreign relations: non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states with which Beijing historically has had good relations. If adhered to doggedly, this principle will not allow China to play a positive and constructive role in handling many of the security and economic challenges the international community faces collectively in the twenty-first century. Though the overall change in China's policy has been positive enough to create the basis for cautious optimism about the future, the examples below show how it has improved more in some areas than others:

North Korean Denuclearization

The best example of increased U.S.–China coordination in handling a problem outside the traditional bilateral relationship is the Six-Party Talks on ending North Korea's nuclear program. China has done much more than simply host the talks since their inception in 2003. In 2006, it signed two United Nations Security Council resolutions carrying sanctions against Beijing's traditional ally in Pyongyang after having helped draft the resolutions.³ China also assisted in drafting all important documents and statements in the Six-Party Talks process, and helped break specific logjams. Almost none of the progress to date in the

talks would have been possible without China's active engagement in the process. Several years ago it would have been difficult to imagine China playing a leadership role in a process that pressures a long-standing ally to comply with the demands of the international community. The talks have run into serious new difficulties in recent months, which can come as no surprise when one is dealing with North Korea. In April 2009, North Korea announced that it would withdraw from the talks following a Security Council Presidential Statement that condemned its launch of a long-range rocket and referred this provocative behavior back to one of the aforementioned sanctions resolutions.⁴ The talks, however, have broken down before and past experience suggests that the Six-Party Talks mechanism is still the best way to address what is a very complicated problem. One major reason is the important role that China plays in helping remove the obstacles that North Korea has created along the way.

Addressing the Genocide in Darfur

From the beginning of the atrocities in 2003 until the summer of 2006, Beijing's policy in response to the genocide in Darfur seemed to be to simply shield the regime in Khartoum against any pressure from the international community. Beijing's policy, however, began to change for the better as 2006 progressed, in part due to diplomatic engagement with the United States. Later in 2006, China backed a three-phase plan for peacekeeping drafted by Kofi Annan. By early 2007, Beijing was pushing Khartoum to allow implementation of Phase II, in which the UN promised to build infrastructure for the eventual deployment of large-scale peacekeeping forces in Phase III. Following intensive meetings between DOS officials working on Africa policy and their Chinese counterparts in early 2007, Beijing committed to send hundreds of engineering troops to Darfur in support of Phase II. The group of over 300 Chinese engineers, now in place, constituted the first non-African peacekeeping contingent in Darfur. Finally, China signed the Security Council resolution 1769 on Sudan/Darfur, which authorized a joint UN–Africa Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur for the first time.⁵

Darfur is still a humanitarian disaster. Completing and moving on to Phase III of the UN plan in an effective manner will require a great deal of diplomatic pressure on Khartoum and better coordination at the UN. The international community needs China to do more to bring about these results. Ongoing aspects of China's policies, such as sales of small arms to Khartoum, are irksome. Yet, there is little doubt that there has been a positive shift in Beijing and that U.S. diplomatic engagement, along with a host of other factors, has helped foster that change, as is demonstrated by the productive regional sub-dialogue on Africa mentioned above. Significantly, the Chinese efforts in the past few years in Darfur suggest a softening of the aforementioned non-interference principle

and could provide a foundation for future coordination between China and the international community in addressing dire humanitarian and security issues in various parts of the world.

The United States wants Beijing to play a larger role in international politics.

Addressing Repression and Catastrophe in Burma

An area of real frustration for the United States has been China's policy toward the repressive regime in Burma. But even in what is a generally gloomy picture, positive changes can be seen in Beijing. Following the violent and public crackdown on peaceful protestors in Rangoon and elsewhere in Burma in the summer of 2007, China vetoed a draft Security Council resolution that was supported by the United States and has consistently opposed additional international pressure on the regime in Burma. Despite this generally defensive protective stance toward Burma, Beijing did, however, adopt a few creative and constructive policies in the past two years. China assisted the United States in establishing a dialogue with Burma in June 2007, held at the deputy assistant secretary level in Beijing. Unfortunately, little came of those meetings. Beijing also helped convince the Burmese regime to accept international aid, including shipments by U.S. military aircraft, following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

Perhaps most important, following the brutal and public crackdown in 2007, the Chinese government publicly called for meaningful reconciliation between the Burmese regime and its domestic democratic opposition as well as its ethnic minority factions, something the United States and many other actors inside and outside Asia had urged China to do. While the Chinese message to the Burmese regime was more mild than that of the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or European governments, it is quite significant that Beijing broke from its traditional principle of non-interference in such cases, if only verbally. It is clear that there is a growing awareness in Beijing that problems within countries can have important international consequences and that China cannot build a positive reputation by remaining entirely aloof. In future dialogues with Beijing, this is an intellectual trend that diplomats from the United States and other like-minded states should encourage in their Chinese counterparts.

Halting Iran's Nuclear Program

Perhaps the most difficult and important issue for the Obama administration to tackle in coordination with other international actors is stopping the Iranian nuclear program. There is an urgent need for significant improvement in U.S.–China relations here. China has participated actively in the P5+1 process,

which involves the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany. China hosted a meeting in 2008 in Shanghai and has signed three Security Council resolutions that include sanctions against Iranian entities and individuals.⁶ Yet, there is a distinct lack of urgency to China's approach on these issues and the international effort to increase pressure on Iran generally has been slow and unimpressive.

Perhaps more important, as the international community has gradually increased pressure on the regime, China's state-owned energy giants have continued to pursue new, multibillion dollar energy contracts with Tehran. This sends a very bad signal that can undercut the international efforts in which China itself is participating. The Obama administration will need to continue to work hard to convince Beijing of the dangers to all, including China, of Tehran's intransigence. Nuclear proliferation is never welcome, but is particularly dangerous when it involves a state that exports instability by supporting armed insurgents and terrorists, thereby destabilizing an energy-rich region on which the world, including China, depends for its economic well-being. If there is any lesson from the North Korean nuclear issue, it is that it is much more efficient to counter nuclear proliferation before a country develops fissile material and tests nuclear explosives rather than after.

Economic Affairs

Despite some breathless press coverage to the contrary, Washington's engagement with China on economic affairs has been effective. The problem for U.S. China policy is not that there is a large bilateral trade deficit with China, which can be explained largely by structural factors rather than by specific Chinese policies, but that the current trade deficit with China is artificially inflated and reflects certain problematic Chinese practices such as undervalued currency, export subsidies, and grossly insufficient protection of intellectual property rights. These will only become more controversial in recessionary economic times in the United States. The United States, however, has resisted the protectionist temptation embodied in punitive new trade bills, and has instead addressed these issues in a vast array of economic dialogues with China, by the occasional and prudent use of World Trade Organization (WTO) cases, and through existing bilateral trade measures.

Washington's approach to these problems, spanning the Clinton and Bush administrations, has produced tangible results. In the five years following China's accession to the WTO in 2001, exports to China grew five times faster than U.S. exports to the rest of the world. In 2006, exports to China grew nearly twice as fast as imports from China and growth in exports continued to outstrip growth in imports by healthy margins in 2007 and 2008. The volume of U.S. exports has become quite large: China is now the United States' third largest export market.

There are many reasons for this success, including China's revaluation of its currency by approximately 20 percent against the dollar since 2005. The United States has also secured contracts for the sale of nuclear power technology to China, for increased air routes between the two countries, and for active cooperation on the ground in China between the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Chinese counterparts.

In economic dialogues, Washington has adopted a very smart approach: emphasizing that U.S. prescriptions are not only good for the United States, but will also help China create a stable foundation for sustained economic growth over the long run. For example, improving intellectual property rights (IPR) enforcement will be critical if China wants to encourage the growth of a domestic knowledge-based economy. IPR enforcement will also be essential to encourage companies from the EU, Japan, and the United States to export their "clean technologies" to China, where they are needed the most, as China becomes the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. A better social safety net and farmers' greater financial control over farmland will likely increase local investment and domestic consumption as a percentage of gross domestic product and thereby, coupled with a revalued currency, reduce China's large and growing current account surplus with the world.

There are many other reasons that dialogue and the use of rule-based institutions is more effective than ad hoc, unilateral sanctions by the United States. A collaborative and transparent approach will enable future engagement with the Chinese government on important issues such as energy and global warming, food and product safety, and foreign assistance programs. With rising unemployment in the United States and a Congress that does not seem to support free trade on principle, the Obama administration will need to show fortitude to prevent protectionist voices from harming this positive legacy and sparking a round of market-constricting measures on both sides of the Pacific. Such a spiral of trade tensions would harm not only the two nations' economies, but also damage a pillar supporting the overall bilateral relationship. Moreover, during a time of financial hardship around the world, a breakdown of U.S.-China trade, investment, and financial cooperation would send a dangerous signal to the rest of the world.

Recent Chinese efforts in Darfur suggest the non-interference principle is softening.

Serious Problems Remain

Though significant progress has been made in U.S.-China relations in the past several years, serious problems remain:

Human Rights and Religion Freedom

Despite the Bush administration's true commitment to improving human rights and religious freedom in China, progress on human rights issues has been limited and unsatisfactory. In the first half of 2008, the two sides agreed to restart the Human Rights Dialogue after a six-year hiatus. The discussions in late May 2008, which I attended, were extensive and the United States was able to present all of its concerns not only to officials from the Foreign Ministry, but also to the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Justice, prison officials, and agencies that control the internet in China. U.S. officials pointed out that improvement on human rights, civil liberties, press freedoms, and freedom of religious association would help China achieve its stated goals: becoming a respected global actor; reassuring its neighbors as its influence increases on the international stage; and creating a stable, "harmonious society," by reducing corruption, increasing social stability, and promoting rule of law at home. The U.S. government routinely points out that a freer press is indispensable in fighting corruption and serves as a peaceful outlet for citizens to express social frustrations, which is preferable to the tens of thousands of riots that occur in China each year. Furthermore, protections for defense lawyers against harassment and arrest are the only way to guarantee the rule of law. And independent religious and civil society groups can help provide a safety net in fast-changing economic times. All of these improvements would serve to achieve the explicit goals of the current Chinese leadership.

In 2008, the United States also encouraged Beijing to reopen talks on Tibet with the Dalai Lama's representatives. Following the riots in Lhasa in March 2008 and the severe crackdown on the Tibetans that followed, many were surprised that Beijing acceded to the strong suggestions of Washington and many other capitals that urged China to engage with the Dalai Lama's representatives. Washington underscored three basic reasons why the Dalai Lama should be Beijing's preferred negotiating partner. First, he is not seeking formal sovereign independence for Tibet from the mainland. Second, he has explicitly rejected violence as a means to pursue greater Tibetan autonomy within China. And finally, he alone has the authority in Tibet to restrain advocates of violence over the long term. Although the meetings took place in May 2008, they did not produce any concrete progress toward reconciliation between the two sides.

Meanwhile, groups within the global Tibetan movement seem to be considering less peaceful methods to pursue their goals and are calling more vocally for full sovereign independence for Tibet. Making matters more complex, there is no clear successor to the Dalai Lama, and in any case, any successor is unlikely to have his authority among Tibetans inside or outside of China. Containing advocates for belligerence and more radical political goals, therefore, will likely be very difficult once the Dalai Lama passes from the scene. It is

clearly in China's interest to pursue serious negotiations now with the Dalai Lama. Unfortunately, Washington has not been able to convince Beijing of this.

The discussions that the United States and other actors have had with China in recent years on these issues are worthwhile and have produced some limited, but notable results. For example, China created new, more liberal regulations for journalists in the lead-up to the Olympics in the summer of 2008, and following international pressure to do so, extended those regulations indefinitely. In the past three years, China also accepted international advice that its supreme court should review all death penalty cases. According to Chinese government claims and some independent observers, the number of executions, while still high, dropped markedly in 2007–2008 as a result.⁷ Still, the overall record of engagement on human rights and religious freedom has not been very encouraging and the environment for dissidents and the boldest reporters, lawyers, and religious leaders remains very poor.

Perhaps there is a better approach than the one adopted by the Bush administration in 2008 on issues of human rights and religious freedom, but I am not aware of one. Linking human rights issues to other areas of cooperation, such as trade and investment, simply has not worked in the past and there is no reason to believe it will begin working now. Similarly, principled refusal to discuss human rights issues with Beijing prior to concrete improvements have only reduced the number of venues in which the United States has been able to express its legitimate concerns to Beijing in a systematic way.

There is a distinct lack of urgency to China's approach to efforts to increase pressure on Iran.

Energy, the Environment, and Global Warming

Perhaps the most complex issue in U.S.–China relations this century will be coordinating efforts to address global warming. The Bush administration engaged emerging economies such as China and India alongside other leading economic powers for the first time in a meaningful way in the Major Economies Initiative, initiated in July 2008, and the Five-Party Energy Ministerial (first launched in December 2006 and involving China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United States). India, China, and other developing economies had few, if any, real responsibilities in the Kyoto Protocol Treaty, which makes little sense. The process of engaging China has only just begun and, given the technical complexity and political sensitivity of the issues involved, the potential for deadlock and mutual recrimination that could poison the overall relationship is

Washington's engagement with China on economic affairs has been effective.

dangerously high if the subject is not handled carefully. The Obama administration needs to build on these nascent dialogues. Washington would have more credibility and leverage in these international discussions if the United States were to do a better job at home than has been done in the past several years in reducing greenhouse gasses, and thereby seem more sincerely dedicated to working with others to solve the problem.

The Obama administration's early attention to this issue bodes well for future engagement with China and others. During Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's first trip to China in February of this year, it became clear that the issue of climate change would be a high priority in future dialogues with Beijing.

Military Modernization and Lack of Transparency

China's military spending has increased sharply in the past several years and the United States does not fully understand the goals sought by this impressive program or of the doctrinal implications of the new weapons systems pursued. China's unannounced test of an anti-satellite weapon in January 2007, spewing debris in the lower earth orbit, caused consternation among all space-faring countries and underscored the need for greater dialogue on military security issues between China and other concerned powers. In the past two years, there have been some real achievements on this score in U.S.–China relations: high-level military-to-military contacts have increased, a new security dialogue on nuclear doctrine has been created, and defense officials from both sides have for the first time joined the Senior Dialogue on security and political affairs led by DOS and the Foreign Ministry of China.

In late 2008, China suspended certain military dialogues with the United States to protest the Bush administration's decision to sell arms to Taiwan. Such suspension is counterproductive, and if practiced often, will hurt China's interests more than the United States. China itself is arguably the biggest beneficiary of greater transparency and confidence-building as it seeks to reassure the world of its "peaceful rise," to borrow a CPC expression commonly used earlier this decade. Fortunately, soon after Obama took office, the Pentagon sent a senior official to Beijing for consultations with the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), and in April 2009, Chief of Naval Operations Gary Roughead traveled to Beijing. Enhancing such dialogues should be a priority for the U.S. Departments of Defense (DOD) and DOS in 2009.

Ensuring Long-Term Stability in the Taiwan Strait

Since the defeat of a provocative referendum on applying to the UN under the name Taiwan, and the election of a moderate new administration in Taiwan in March 2008, there has been real *détente* in what had been very tense cross-Strait relations. Meetings have occurred between envoys of Taiwan and mainland China and they have been able to reach several economic agreements. The United States helped produce these welcome outcomes by privately and publicly demanding that cross-Strait differences be settled peacefully in a manner that is acceptable to both sides of the Taiwan Strait and by opposing unilateral changes to the status quo in cross-Strait relations by either side.

Looking forward, long-term stability will only be secured if mainland China reduces its destabilizing military threat toward Taiwan and allows Taipei meaningful participation in international organizations, including those such as the World Health Organization in which Taiwan's full membership is precluded by statehood requirements. If the mainland refuses to adopt a more flexible and constructive approach on such security and political issues, then Taiwan's public may become impatient with the moderate approach adopted by current President Ma Ying-jeou, and again support more radical, pro-independence positions by Taiwan's elected leaders. A New Year's speech by President Hu Jintao suggested that China very well might adopt new measures to build confidence across the Taiwan Strait and allow Taipei to enhance its role on the global stage and early signs are somewhat encouraging, including Taiwan's ability to attend the May 2009 Meeting of the World Health Assembly as an observer.

In an official speech I delivered in Annapolis, Maryland on September, 11, 2007, I asserted that the United States wants a strong and moderate Taiwan.⁸ My meaning was simple: Taiwan should be strong militarily, economically, and politically. At the same time, Taiwan should be moderate in its political and diplomatic stance toward the mainland in order to avoid unnecessary cross-Strait tensions and so as to expand, rather than shrink, Taiwan's international space. From a U.S. policy perspective, there is no trade-off or contradiction between carrying out obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 and strengthening Taiwan's defensive capabilities, while at the same time encouraging improved cross-Strait relations and taking strong private and public stances against political initiatives on Taiwan, such as the aforementioned UN referendum, that would unnecessarily create tensions in cross-Strait relations. The Obama administration should not try to alter this formula for cross-Strait relations, the basic elements of which have existed for decades. This approach, implemented very proactively and very publicly by the Bush administration, passed a very important test in 2007–2008 by tamping

Perhaps the most complex issue will be coordinating efforts to address global warming.

down tensions in the Strait in the lead-up to the March 2008 presidential election and referendum balloting in Taiwan.

The Need for Continuity in China Policy

When Bush ran for office in 2000, his campaign labeled China a “strategic competitor” and some of his advisors took the position that U.S. policy should be guided by a simple formula:

“Anything But Clinton.” This was a flawed approach, as many elements of the Clinton administration’s policies toward China made a great deal of sense, particularly in that administration’s second term. Fortunately for the United States, these views within the Bush administration were quickly sidelined in 2001, especially after the crisis following the collision of an EP-3 surveillance aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet, and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.⁹ The Obama administration should similarly reject voices within the Democratic Party who might call for an “Anything But Bush” agenda in foreign policy. During the Democratic Party primary, all major candidates made statements that suggested the United States was on the wrong track in its China policy, particularly in economic affairs.¹⁰ Given the economic difficulties facing the nation and the growing resistance to free trade on Capitol Hill, it will be very important for the Obama administration to reject calls for protectionism and eschew any fundamental change in the U.S. policy toward China it inherited.

More generally, for a new president facing a financial crisis, two wars, and a mandate for change, it is useful to first identify important policy arenas in which things can and should remain essentially the same. The overall U.S. strategy toward a rising China in the past several years is just such a policy arena. The Bush administration achieved a great deal by handling the traditional bilateral issues in the relationship well, while transforming and broadening the U.S.–China relationship by strengthening coordination of the two countries’ global efforts to ensure stability and growth. The most recent example of China’s increased willingness to share burdens and coordinate its activities with the international community is demonstrated by the December 2008 decision to deploy PLA Navy forces to the Gulf of Aden to support a Security Council resolution to counter piracy off the Somali coast. Significantly, this resolution allows international navies to pursue those pirates within the twelve nautical mile limit of Somalia’s territorial waters. Once again, China is taking active steps to assist in solving global problems in a way that might soften its traditionally strict principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.¹¹ This evolutionary process is still young and Beijing will need to exhibit a lot more of

this type of cooperation in the future if China is to fully become the “responsible stakeholder” that Zoellick envisioned. The Bush administration’s policies served to encourage such a long-term transformation, and the Obama administration would be wise to continue along that path. On the negative side of the equation, the provocative harassment by Chinese vessels of the unarmed USNS *Impeccable* in international waters south of China in March 2009 demonstrates the need both for a continuing strong U.S. regional presence, and for the full restoration and enhancement of dialogues between the two nations’ militaries.

The early signs from the Obama administration are quite encouraging. Judging from Obama’s first meeting with Hu on April 1, 2009 at the London G-20 Summit, the administration appears set to maintain its predecessor’s basic approach toward China. According to the White House press release and press backgrounders offered by a senior White House official, the two leaders agreed to maintain the high-level security and economic dialogues begun under the Bush administration, though the meetings will occur less frequently and in a somewhat different structure, to include plenary sessions of the leaders of both dialogues each year. Presidents Obama and Hu agreed on the importance of enhanced dialogue and exchange between their two militaries. Continuing the trend created by the senior dialogue and the sub-dialogue system, the topics of discussions at the London summit meeting ranged far beyond traditional bilateral issues of Taiwan, trade, and human rights, to include problems in various regions of the world: Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, and Sudan. Finally, and perhaps most important, Obama reportedly distanced himself from voices on Capitol Hill, including many in his own party, by calling for the United States and China to enhance cooperation and to reject economic protectionism in these difficult financial times.¹² These early signs suggest that there will be much more continuity than change in the Obama administration’s China policy, and for that, the new president deserves high grades.

Notes

1. Robert Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” (speech, National Committee on U.S.–China relations, New York City, New York, September 21, 2005), http://www.ncuscr.org/files/2005Gala_RobertZoellick_Whither_China1.pdf.
2. In 1998, Kofi Annan said “Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development.” See Regina Birner, “Governance That Matters for the Rural Poor,” *IFPRI Forum* (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), March 2006), 7, <http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/newsletters/IFPRIForum/if14.pdf>. For similar sentiments, see Anne Stenhammer, “A Need for Good Governance” (speech, high-level dialogue on Financing for Development, UN, New York City, New York, October 23, 2007), <http://www.norway-un.org/Statements/>

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