



Impact of 9.11 on Sino-U.S. Relations: A Preliminary Assessment

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Nine months have passed since the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001. U.S. relations with the outside world have changed in many ways as a result. In what ways has 9.11 changed Sino-American relations? How should one explain the changes and continuities of the relationship? What does all this mean for the future development of the relationship? This paper represents a modest attempt to address these questions.

I. Sino-American Relations Since September 11

In retrospect, 9.11 has led to a significant improvement in Sino-American relations. The improvement is especially significant in light of the relationship prior to September 11.

1. Reduced Differences & Rising Tensions

The relationship between the two countries before 9.11 could be described as one of reduced differences and increasing conflicts. After twenty years of reform and openness, China has undergone some significant changes. As a result, the differences between China and the United States, be it economic, political, or cultural, have diminished over time. People traveling in China find that in major Chinese cities the streets are dotted with American fast food restaurants such as McDonalds, Pizza Hut, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Chinese department stores are filled with many well-known American brand names such as Colgate, Proctor & Gamble, Nike and Microsoft. Chinese movie theatres show Hollywood movies such as *Titanic*,

Antitrust, Moulin Rouge, A Beautiful Mind, etc. And Chinese youth are crazy about American athletes like Michael Jordan, Andre Agassi, and Greg Louganis.¹

The reduction of differences not only takes place on a physical level, but also in terms of cultural and political values and economic, social and political practices. Twenty years ago, China rejected the free market, upheld the principle of self-reliance in its foreign economic relations, maintained an ambiguous attitude toward the rule of law, forbade any discussion of the human rights issues, and avoided the concept of democracy. Now it enthusiastically embraces free market economics, actively encourages integration with the world economy, promotes the rule of law, supports discussion on human rights and in its own way advocates democracy. Granted, the gap between China and the U.S. in various aspects is still wide, but it is much narrower than what it used to be. Indeed, China has never looked more like the U.S. today than at any other time in its five thousand year history.

One irony in Sino-American relations before 9.11 is that whereas the differences between China and the U.S. was lessening, the two countries continued to find themselves in conflict with one another. Initially, the 1989 Tiananmen incident cast a long shadow over the relationship. In the wake of the incident, the U.S. imposed various sanctions against China. Just as the relationship was recovering, U.S. presidential election campaigns began. Then presidential hopeful Bill Clinton condemned the first Bush administration for “coddling” the Chinese “dictators” and vowed to get tough with China should he win the election.² During his first two years in office, President Clinton toughened China policy, but when he softened his tone after 1994, his political opponents seized the moment and condemned him for kowtowing to China. As relations between the two countries continued to be bogged down by endless and often acrimonious exchanges over human rights, arms sales, trade disputes, Taiwan and other issues.

Amid mutual recriminations, the two countries even got themselves into several crisis. In spring 1994, the two countries were at the brink of a trade war when the deadline Clinton set for China to meet his human rights conditions approached. Earlier he had vowed to suspend China’s most favored nation’s trade status (or normal trade relations status since there is really no special favor associated with the status) if China failed to meet his demands for human rights

¹ For another description of the growing similarities between China and the U.S., please see Elisabeth Rosenthal, “Beijing Journal; Buicks, Starbucks and Fried Chicken. Still China?”, *The New York Times*, February 25, 2002.

improvement.³ In 1995, the two countries almost had a diplomatic breakdown over Lee Teng-hui's visit to the U.S. In 1996, the two countries found themselves in a military standoff in the Taiwan Strait in the wake of China's military exercises there to deter Taiwan separatism and protest against perceived American encouragement. For the first time since Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s, the two militaries confronted each other face to face. In 1999, the two countries found themselves thrown into yet another crisis by the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. As angry Chinese youth demonstrated in front of American diplomatic and consular facilities in China, relations between the two countries plummeted to new lows.

In the mean time, the citizens of both countries began to view the other country very negatively. In the U.S., the media had little to say about China that was positive. It consistently painted China as an insensitive, unreasonable, brutal and irresponsible dictatorship that defies all the fine values that humanity stands for and cannot care less about the welfare of its own people. Various groups in the U.S. saw it as their mission to condemn China in every conceivable way (prosecution of political dissidents, torture, prison labor, forced abortion, selling of organs of executed prisoners, stealing of American military secrets, systemic killing of handicapped orphans, illegal campaign donations, corruption, dumping, intimidation of Taiwan, proliferation of weapons of massive destruction and missile technologies, and so on and so forth). Some American politicians were quick to cash in on anti-China sentiments by denouncing the Chinese government for anything remotely relevant to alleged "crimes" and demanded measures to penalize China for these activities.⁴

In China, the media was equally critical of the U.S. as well. It claimed that U.S. media was "demonizing" China,⁵ that the U.S. had a poor human rights record itself,⁶ and as an established power, the U.S. aims to perpetuate its hegemonic position in the world and therefore will not tolerate China's development. Accordingly the media depicts the U.S. as attempting to

² Jia Qingguo, "Shilun kelindun zhizheng yilai de zhongmei guanxi" (On Sino-American relations since Clinton assumed office), Liang Shoude et al, *Mianxiang 21 shiji de zhongguo guoji zhanlue* (China's international strategy facing the 21st century) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Publishing House, 1998), p.42.

³ Jia Qingguo & Tang Wei, *Jishou de hezuo: zhongmei guanxi de xianzhuang yu qianzhan* (Difficult cooperation: current status and future prospect of Sino-American relations) (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Publishing House, 1998), p.95.

⁴ Jia Qingguo, "Narrowing Differences but Diverging Priorities: Sino-American Relations 1992-2000", manuscript.

⁵ Li Xiguang et al, *Yaomohua zhongguo de beihou* (Behind Demonizing China), (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Publishing House, 1996).

⁶ Zhou Ruipeng, "Zhongguo fanji mei renquan baogao: fabiao '2000 nian meiguo requan jilu'" (China publishes 'human rights record of the U.S. in 2000': refutes U.S. human rights report), www.zaobao.com.sg, 28/2/2001.

sabotage the Chinese government so as to deny the Chinese people the opportunity to achieve modernization and national reunification. In some people's view the U.S. also enhanced its military alliance with Japan and encourage the latter to rearm in order to contain China. On top of all this, the U.S. was busy building missile defense systems that would neutralize China's limited deterrence capabilities, while actively preparing for a military showdown against China. Accordingly, these people believe that China can and must stand its ground against the U.S. to defend its national interests.⁷

The tension between the two countries reached a fevered pitch in the first few months of the Bush administration. During the presidential election campaign, George W. Bush vehemently denounced Clinton's engagement policy. He argued that, given China's ideological preferences and ill-conceived ambitions, it was inappropriate for the U.S. to regard it as a strategic partner. Rather, he viewed China as a strategic competitor⁸ and he lashed out at the Clinton administration for allegedly putting more emphasis on relations with China than with Japan, the most important ally of the U.S. in Asia, claiming that this compromised American security interests in Asia.⁹ He also announced that the policy of strategic ambiguity with regard to Taiwan was outdated. If elected president, he vowed to clarify the policy so that the U.S. could be more effectively help Taiwan defend itself.¹⁰

Upon entering the White House, President Bush honored his campaign promises by assuming a tougher position on China than that of his predecessors. He "telephoned every major world leader but Chinese President Jiang Zemin." His administration reportedly planned to "target more U.S. missiles against China." It gave serious consideration to "prioritizing preparation for conventional war in East Asia against China and has promoted enhanced strategic cooperation with India and Japan." It "encouraged Japan to loosen its restraints on a more active regional military presence" and "proposed development with U.S. allies South Korea, Japan and Australia of a 'regional' dialogue." It "stressed cooperation with Russia on missile defense seemingly at the expense of China." It decided to bar Chinese-made products and essentially stopped all contact between the Pentagon and the Chinese military, and it "reversed a twenty-

⁷ Song Qiang et al., *Zhongguo keyi shuobu* (China can say no)(Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshanjianhe Publishing House, 1996), p.61.

⁸ GOP Debate on the Larry King Show Feb 15, 2000.

⁹ James Conachy, "Bush Visit to Japan Cements Closer Ties Against China", March 1, 2002, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/mar2002/jap-m01.shtml>.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, p. A10 Feb 26, 2000

year U.S. policy by agreeing to sell submarines to Taiwan” and “allowed high-profile visits to the United States by Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian and the Dalai Lama.” On top of all this, the administration did not appoint “a specialist on China to any senior position in the government.”¹¹

The EP-3 incident in April 2001 highlighted the degree of mistrust and tension between Washington and Beijing. In the wake of the incident, both sides raised its voices and blamed the other side for the collision. Popular emotions in both countries ran high. To many in Washington, China’s objection to U.S. spy missions along the Chinese coast constituted an early indication of China’s international strategic orientation: as it grows in power, it is going to expand its security perimeter and deny American access to an ever larger area in the Asia-Pacific region.¹² To many in Beijing, the incident showed that the U.S. harbored ill intentions towards China and demonstrated how unreasonable Washington could be when something gets in its way.¹³

However, some efforts were made on the part of both countries to stabilize the relationship during China’s period of reform and opening up. At times, these efforts even brought some euphoria of cooperation. For example, in 1997 and 1998, China and the U.S. held summit talks and pledged to build toward a constructive strategic partnership. In the aftermath of the EP-3 incident, both sides tried to contain the damage to the relationship. President Bush sent Secretary of State Colin Powell to Beijing in July 2001. During the visit, both sides agreed that it was important to avoid similar conflicts in the future and pledged to improve relations between the two countries. Also during the visit, the administration dropped the term “strategic competitor” as a description of China.¹⁴

Despite these and other attempts, the bilateral relationship was largely out of balance before the 9.11. By the time of the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Towers, the Pentagon had not invited the Chinese military attaché for a visit in eight months. It did not even feel it appropriate to allow the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command (CINPAC) to

¹¹ Robert S. Ross, “The Stability of Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait”, *The National Interest* (Fall: 2001), pp.67-68.

¹² Jake Tapper, “Critics: Bush caved to China”, April 13, 2001, www.Salon.com.

¹³ “Jiujing shuizai weifa: cong guojifa jiaodu toudi zhongmei zhuangji shijian” (Who violated international law: examining the Sino-American plane-crash incident from the perspective of international law), April 15, 2001, _www.sina.com.cn; “Zhongguo qunqing fenkai: Jiang Zemin cumei tingzhi diandao shifei(Widespread anger in China: Jiang Zemin asked the U.S. Government to stop confusing right and wrong), April 5, 2001, www.zaobao.com.

¹⁴ “Interview of Secretary of State Colin Powell By CCTV” Beijing, China, July 28, 2001, Public Affairs Section, Embassy of the United States of America, *Backgrounder*, 01-19a, August 2, 2001, pp.2-3.

receive a group of Chinese college teachers in Hawaii in July 2001.¹⁵ And it was busy drafting the new *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, which treats China as a potential threat and outlines measures that the U.S. should adopt to cope with it.¹⁶

2. 9.11 and Improvement in Relations

It was against this background that 9.11 occurred. Initially, some Americans predicted even more trouble in the relationship. They believed that China would revel in the misfortune of the U.S., even if it did not have a hand in the attacks. At the very least, some thought that the Chinese government would not be able to handle the situation appropriately. Consequently, they believed that bilateral relations would further deteriorate, and the expressions of anti-American sentiment in Chinese internet chat rooms in the wake of the 9.11 appeared to have confirmed their suspicions.

However, it soon turned out that the situation was quite the contrary. The Chinese government quickly expressed sympathy for the human and material loss on the part of the U.S. and took a strong position in support of U.S. efforts to combat international terrorism. Subsequently, relations between the two countries experienced some improvement, something quite inconceivable prior to the 9.11.

To begin with, the political atmosphere for the relationship in the two countries improved significantly. In the U.S., the previous torrent of media criticism and condemnation of China slowed to a trickle. While anti-China diehards like Jesse Helms, Steven Mosher and Michael A. Ledeen,¹⁷ still issued hostile comments and dire warnings, the erstwhile deafening chorus became lonely tunes. Although few in the U.S. would publicly proclaim China a friend, many agreed that the U.S. should work out its relations with China, if only for its own best interests. In China, the media, which was quite critical of the U.S. prior to 9.11, began to churn out reports

¹⁵ My personal experience. I was the Chinese coordinator of the Peking University/East West Center program on teaching about China and the United States.

¹⁶ A sanitized version of the report was eventually issued after the September 11. It is said that post-September 11 revisions removed China from several places in the document. However, one can still see how Pentagon was thinking about China before September 11 in the passages such as the following one: "Although the United States will not face a peer competitor in the near future, the potential exists for regional powers to develop sufficient capabilities to threaten stability in regions critical to U.S. interests." Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p.4.

¹⁷ For example, Jesse Helms, "Beware China's ties to the Taliban", *The Washington Times*, October 14, 2001; Steven W. Mosher, "China's Role in the 'Holy War'", October 1, 2001, http://www.lhla.org/world/dsp_article.cfm?var=27; Michael A. Ledeen, "Black Shirts in Red China? Beijing today is more fascist than communist", *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2002

sympathetic to American efforts to combat terrorism. In sharp contrast to its coverage of U.S. military operations in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia a few years ago, few questioned the legality and morality of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. The Chinese media was also very low-key when discussing the differences between the two countries such as human rights, proliferation and national missile defense (NMD).

The two countries not only managed to avoid publicly lambasting one another, but also engaged in some substantive cooperation in fighting terrorism. The Chinese government voted in favor of the anti-terrorism resolutions in the UN Security Council, supported Pakistan's efforts to cooperate with the U.S. to oppose bin Laden and the Taliban, and provided the U.S. with intelligence information on terrorist networks and activities in the region. It froze the Chinese bank accounts of terrorist suspects, and it agreed to let the U.S. use the Shanghai APEC summit platform to promote the fight against terrorism.¹⁸ Contrary to the expectations of some Americans, China did all this without attaching any conditions.

These and other cooperative efforts on the part of China eventually evoked favorable reactions from the Bush administration. Secretary Colin Powell said in Shanghai, in October 2001, that the U.S. was encouraged by the support of the Chinese government. He said that despite the problems from the EP-3 incident earlier in the year, Sino-American relations were back on track.¹⁹ In his meeting with President Jiang Zemin in Shanghai in October 2001, President Bush thanked China for its speedy reaction to express its clear and firm support for the U.S. and for its efforts to cooperate in this regard. He stressed that his administration attached high importance to U.S.-China relations, that China is a great country and is by no means an enemy of the U.S. On the contrary, he views China as a friend, and his administration is committed to developing cooperative relations with China.²⁰ "The Chinese share our resolve to shut down the global terror network linked to Osama bin Laden," said Frank Taylor, the State Department's ambassador at large for counter-terrorism. "We're pleased with the cooperation we have received from China since September 11."²¹

¹⁸ Bonnie S. Glaser, "Northeast Asia After Sept. 11: Testimony on U.S.-Chinese Relations and the Taiwan Strait", FDCH congressional Testimony, 11/15/2001, Record: 1, 32y401591370920011115.

¹⁹ "Baowei'er cheng 911 hou mei dui laizi zhongguo de zhichi gandao guwu" (Powell said that the U.S. was encouraged by the support from China), www.peopledaily.com.cn, October 19, 2001.

²⁰ "Xiang xun: Jiang Zemin zhuxi yu bushi zongtong juxing huitan" (Detailed report: President Jiang Zemin and President Bush held talks), October 19, 2001, www.peopledaily.com.cn.

²¹ Erik Eckholm, "Official Praises China for Its Cooperation in Rooting Out bin Laden's Terror Network", *The New York Times*, December 7, 2007.

Finally, with regard to the differences between the two countries, the Chinese government and the Bush administration chose to adopt a more constructive approach.²² While maintaining their respective positions, the two countries tried to avoid politicizing their differences and dealt with them through dialogue and negotiation. Following Bush's announcement of his decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, the Chinese government reiterated its opposition to the decision but did so in a "mild" way.²³ The Chinese government even refrained from openly condemning the U.S. for bugging President Jiang's official plane.²⁴

On the U.S. side, President Bush said at the APEC Summit in Shanghai that there are differences between the two countries; however, his administration was going to deal with these differences on the basis of mutual respect and candor.²⁵ Despite the differences within the administration on how to deal with China, it tried to contain anti-China views. While it refuses to endorse China's intensified efforts to combat Xinjiang separatist forces, it does not make a big issue out of it.²⁶ President Bush made two trips to China within four months, setting a historic precedent in U.S.-China relations. And the administration invited President Jiang Zemin to visit the U.S. and successfully arranged for Vice President Hu Jintao's visit to the U.S. as well.

As a result of these and other efforts on the part of the two governments, China and the U.S. managed to cultivate their common interests while dealing with their differences in a pragmatic and flexible way. By early 2002, the relationship appeared to be in a good shape. Never before since the end of the cold war had the two countries had less over which to dispute since they agreed it would be more desirable to keep their differences as low profile as possible. Reviewing Sino-American relations in 2001, Secretary Powell said that he regarded the improvement in the relationship as one of the Bush administration's three major diplomatic achievements in 2001.²⁷

²² David E. Sanger, "Citing Support for War, Bush Plays Down Contentious Issues," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2001.

²³ Willy Wo-lap Lam, "China reacts mildly to ABM pullout", December 13, 2001, www.cnn.com.

²⁴ CNN, "China won't confirm, deny reports of bugged plane", January 20, 2002, <http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/01/19/china.plane.bug/index...1/19/2002>.

²⁵ "Xiang xun: Jiang Zemin zhuxi yu bushi zongtong juxing huitan" (Detailed report: President Jiang Zemin and President Bush held talks), October 19, 2001, www.peopledaily.com.cn.

²⁶ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Patterns of Global Terrorism-2001", released on May 21, 2002, Public Affairs Section, Embassy of the United States of America, *Backgrounder*, 02-21a, May 24, 2002, p.4. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Patterns of Global Terrorism-2001", released on May 21, 2002, Public Affairs Section, Embassy of the United States of America, *Backgrounder*, 02-21a, May 24, 2002, p.4.

²⁷ "Meiguo guowuqing baowu'er zonglun meiguo waijiao" (U.S. Secretary of State Powell on American diplomacy), January 11, 2001, www.xinhua.org.

II. Changing Priorities: Dynamics of Change

The single most important factor responsible for the improvement in relations between China and the U.S. after 9.11 is the change in U.S. foreign policy priorities as a result of the terrorist attacks. The priority shift provided room for China to assume a more cooperative posture in managing its relations with the U.S. This in turn generated good will on the part of the Bush administration and led to improved bilateral relations.

1. Diverging Priorities and Increasing Tensions Before 9.11

To understand the improvements in Sino-American relations after 9.11, one needs to explain why the relationship was in so much trouble before 9.11. In retrospect, the most important factor underlying increasing conflicts between China and the United States prior to 9.11 was the divergence in the priorities of the two countries and their negative interactions over time.

a. China's Priority: Maintain Political Stability

Broadly speaking, over the past twenty years, China has been undergoing three historical transformations: modernization, systemic transformation from a central planned economy to a market economy, and leadership transition from a generation of charismatic leaders to one of techno-bureaucratic leaders. All of these transformations are drastic and fundamental, and they generate tremendous challenges to China's political stability.

By nature, modernization is a very destabilizing process. According to Ted Gurr, the author of *Why Men Rebel?*, as a country's economy takes off, people's expectations grow at a much faster rate than what people can actually realistically obtain. As a result, people tend to develop a strong sense of relative deprivation and become restless and often rebellious during the process of modernization.²⁸ The fundamental changes in social structures and value orientation in the modernization process make the situation even more unsettling, providing fertile ground for social unrest and political rebellion.

Compared with modernization, the systemic transformation is no less psychologically traumatic and politically destabilizing. During systemic transformation, the centrally planned economy and the market economy exist side by side. Consequently, people are confronted with two sets of very different distribution principles and codes of moral conduct. On the one hand many in the state sectors complain about the “obscenely” high income people in the private sectors get and deplore the moral corruption associated with the market economy. On the other, many in market sectors complain about the “unearned” privileges (job tenure, free or subsidized housing, free medical care, as well as power) that people in the state sectors enjoy and ridicule the mores of the old days. As a result, literally everyone feels frustrated and unhappy. In addition to this, as the reforms deepen, official corruption worsens, the gap between rich and poor widens and increasing numbers of people in the state sector lose their jobs. All this has led to escalating frustration and resentment toward the government and its policies.

If modernization and systemic transformation generate increasing social frustration and political tension, leadership transition undermines the government’s authority to meet these challenges. Charismatic leaders derive power from either their blood or their legendary achievement in founding the state. They are the creators of the institutions, rather than the other way around. Accordingly, under charismatic leadership, individuals in leadership positions are strong while institutions are weak. Techno-bureaucratic leadership, on the other hand, represents a much different relationship between individual leaders and institutions. Having been promoted into leadership positions through various institutional channels, techno-bureaucrats derive their power from the institutions. In contrast to the case with charismatic leadership, institutions create individual leaders. Accordingly, under the techno-bureaucratic leadership, individuals are weak and institutions strong. Political stability is possible under either type of leadership; however, this is not necessarily the case when transitioning from one to the other, because when charismatic leaders pass away, they leave behind a set of weak institutions. Since techno-bureaucratic leaders are weak by nature and depend on institutions for power, their authority and powers are very politically vulnerable.

Both from a comparative and a historical perspective, any one of the three transitions would pose a serious threat to political stability and could potentially cause political collapse. China, however, has been undergoing all three simultaneously. It is precisely because of this that

²⁸ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

the Chinese government attaches such high importance to political stability. Successive Chinese leaders Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang and Jiang Zemin have all repeatedly stressed the need for maintaining political stability. They argue that political stability is the most important condition for China's development and reform. Without political stability, China cannot accomplish anything, not economic development, let alone social and political progress.²⁹

If China's priority is to maintain political stability, one of the priorities of U.S. foreign policy before the 9.11 was to change China.³⁰ China's sustained rapid economic growth over the past two decades, which led to increasing concerns on the part of some Americans about the potential implications of China's ascent for American security. With the belief that the Chinese political system has not changed much despite economic growth and liberalization, some American liberals became increasingly worried. If the current trend of economic growth in China continues, before long, China would become a superpower. If China remains communist or authoritarian then, it would pose serious challenges to American values and ways of life.

In the meantime, other Americans who subscribe to the view of aggressive realism believe that the interests of the established power and those of the rising ones inevitably collide. The U.S. is the established power and China the rising one. And given the current trend of development in China, China is the country most likely to present a serious challenge to the U.S. Thus writes an aggressive realist scholar, "Over time...China could become the most powerful rival the United States has ever faced."³¹ The sentiment also finds expression in the most recent *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* released by the U.S. Department of Defense: "Although the United States will not face a peer competitor in the near future, the potential exists for regional powers to develop sufficient capabilities to threaten stability in regions critical to U.S. interests."³²

²⁹ As Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and the President of the People's Republic of China, put it: "China cannot accomplish any thing without political stability." Jiang Zemin, "Gaoju dengxiaoping lilun weida qizhi, ba jianshe you zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi shiye quanmian tuixiang qianjin" (Uphold the great banner of the Deng Xiaoping theory and carry forward the course of building socialism with Chinese characteristics into the 21st century), *Shiwuda baogao duben* (Reader of the reports at the Fifteenth Party Congress (Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1998), p.18.

³⁰ "The long-term objective of U.S. political and economic engagement with China is the emergence of an open society that combines a market economy with democratic institutions." Michael Swaine & Minxin Pei, "Rebalancing United States-China Relations", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: *Policy Brief*, No.13, February 2002, p.4.

³¹ John J. Mearsheimer "The Future Of The American Pacifier", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2001.

³² Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p.4.

Consequently, both the liberals and aggressive realists in and outside the U.S. government share the view that China may become a serious threat to the U.S. if left unchecked. They differ, however, as to how to deal with the perceived China threat. To liberals, the only pragmatic and morally desirable way to deal with the problem is to make China a liberal democracy. Subscribing to the theory of democratic peace, they believe that if China becomes democratic, then its rise would not pose a threat to U.S. interests. And they believe that the best way to change China is through engagement. Essentially, a policy of engagement is one of carrots and sticks. On the one hand, the U.S. should encourage contacts and dialogue with the Chinese government. This would provide incentives for the latter to embrace further liberalization and eventually democratization. On the other hand, the U.S. should put persistent pressures on the Chinese Government, such as economic and political sanctions, to make the latter conform to liberal democratic standards.³³

The aggressive realists do not share the basic assumptions of the liberals on democratic peace nor their engagement policy. They regard them as too naïve, too idealistic, and, in the long run, working against the interests of the U.S. They believe that if China's current growth continues, China would threaten the U.S. regardless of whether it becomes democratic or not.³⁴ History of great power rivalries show that when a large country's power approaches or surpasses that of the dominant power, conflicts and sometimes even war between them are inevitable. Consequently, the only way for the U.S. to protect its interests is to slow China's economic growth and, if that cannot work, prepare for the forthcoming confrontation.³⁵ They have no objection to the idea of pressuring China for democratic change both because it is consistent with American values and more importantly it also serves the purpose of slowing down China's growth.

Actual U.S. policy is much less clear-cut than the views described above and their respective influence on U.S. China policy varies from administration to administration. The liberal approach appears to have had a larger influence on the Clinton administration's China policy. The aggressive realist approach, on the other hand, appears to have contributed more to

³³ Wang Jisi, "‘Ezhi’ haishi ‘jiaowang’?: ping lengzhan hou meiguó duìhua zhengce" ("Containment" or "engagement"?: on US China policy during the post-cold war period), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* (International studies) (January 1996), pp.1-6.

³⁴ "Mei jiangshi zhongguo wei weilai diren" (The U.S. sees China as the future enemy), May 13, 2001, www.kwongwah.com.my.

³⁵ Lichade Boensitan & Luosi Mangluo, *Jijiang daolai de meizhong chongtu* (Richard Bernstein & Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China*) (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1997), pp.169-183.

the development of the Bush administration's China policy, especially during its early months in the White House. Despite their differences, both administrations agree that it is in the best interest of the U.S. to change China into a liberal democracy.

When the U.S. government tried to change China, however, it always met resistance from the Chinese government. The latter found U.S. pressures objectionable for at least three reasons. To begin with, such pressures undermined its political legitimacy. By demanding liberal and democratic changes in China, Washington suggested that the Chinese government was undemocratic and not liberal. This made Beijing look bad in the eyes of the Chinese people. Moreover, this type of pressure generated strong resentment from Chinese citizens. As people in other countries, Chinese do not want their government to take orders from a foreign government. Thus even when some American pressures might be good for China, the Chinese government felt politically obligated to reject them. Finally, Americans and Chinese live in very different situations, and their priorities are often different. Therefore, what is good for the U.S. is not necessarily good for China. The kind of democratization process the U.S. tried to impose on China may be appealing to Americans but may also be politically destabilizing and even destructive for China. Out of its own national interest, Beijing often felt that it could not give in to such pressures.

Largely for these reasons, in many cases, the U.S. got the expected response from the Chinese government: resistance to and rejection of its demands. In reaction to U.S. pressure, Beijing appealed to Chinese nationalistic feelings and dismissed U.S. pressure as hegemonic interference in China's internal affairs in violation of the UN Charter and international law. And it was even ready to let the relationship unravel when the U.S. threatened sanctions. This was the case in 1994 when China rejected the Clinton administration's demands for improvement in the human rights situation despite the latter's threat to suspend China's most favored nation trade status.

China's rejection of U.S. pressures, in turn, helped re-enforce Americans' concern that China did not want to change in the right direction. Accordingly, liberals believed that the U.S. should redouble its efforts to encourage and induce pressure for democratic change in China whereas the aggressive realists argued that the U.S. should step up military preparations for an eventual showdown. Against this background, one witnessed increasing criticisms of China. And

the missile defense programs, initially proposed to cope with the rogue states, assumed new significance and urgency.

Greater U.S. efforts to change China constituted a more serious challenge to China's political stability and in turn led to stronger resistance on the part of the Chinese government. Stronger resistance on the part of the Chinese government in turn led to greater American pressures. Consequently, a vicious cycle evolved in relations between the two countries. This process dominated the better part of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Despite periodic improvements in the relationship as the governments of the two countries tried to arrest the trend of deterioration, conflicts generally prevailed.

b. Shift in Priorities and Improvement of Relations after 9.11

One unintended consequence of the 9.11 was that both China and the U.S. suddenly found it desirable and politically feasible to improve bilateral relations. The terrorist attacks inflicted tremendous damage on the U.S.: resulting in the death of thousands, seriously straining the already slowing American economy, and, more importantly, changing the American way of life in terms of travel, mail and privacy.³⁶ They disrupted the normal operation of American democracy by making elected officials less accessible to the common people.³⁷ As Secretary Powell pointed out, "Terrorism not only kills people. It also threatens democratic institutions, undermine economies, and destabilizes regions."³⁸ The attacks may be over for the time being, but the threat of another one remains with no finite end to the threat in sight.

9.11 forcefully demonstrated to the U.S. that China does not pose any threat to their freedom and way of life; international terrorism does. As one former American Assistant Secretary of Defense put it, after 9.11, Americans realized that the real threat to the U.S. is not rising states, but failing states.³⁹ The latter provided room for terrorism to develop.

³⁶ Susan Schmidt and Dan Eggen, "Ashcroft Removes Evidence Hurdle for FBI: Attorney General Unveils New Rules to Give Bureau More Latitude", Washington Post, May 30, 2002, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34880-2002May30.html>.

³⁷ According to some reports, during the anthrax scare, many letters to the congressmen were not even opened for fear of contamination.

³⁸ "Preface by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell", Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Patterns of Global Terrorism, released on May 21, 2002, Public Affairs Section, Embassy of the United States of America, *Backgrounder*, 02-19, May 24, 2002, p.2.

³⁹ Kurt Campell's discussion of Jia Qingguo's presentation "China-US Cooperation: Will It Last?", sponsored by Sasakawa Peace Foundation, USA, November 15, 2001, Capital Hilton Hotel.

Under the circumstances, the Bush administration quickly put fighting terrorism at the top of its policy agenda. On September 13, 2001, President Bush announced in a speech: “We will use all the resources of the United States and our cooperating friends and allies to pursue those responsible for this evil, until justice is done.”⁴⁰ On September 27, he said that the U.S. is determined to fight international terrorism: “we will use every resource at our disposal.” “We will use the military might of the United States. We will use our intelligence-gathering capacity of the United States. We will use every diplomatic means of the United States. We will disrupt their financial networks. We will do everything we can to achieve our objective, which is to rout out and destroy global terrorism.”⁴¹

When the Bush administration shifted its focus onto the war against terrorism and when it decided to make use of “every diplomatic means” available to forge an international coalition for this purpose, it reevaluated and adjusted its relationship with other countries on the basis of their respective positions on the war against terrorism. As President Bush put it bluntly, they are either “with us or against us.” What it implies is that if a country is with the U.S., the U.S. would regard it as a partner in the war. And as a partner, the U.S. was ready to be more understanding and tolerant of bilateral differences. The most obvious example is the way the U.S. dealt with the Chechen question. Previously, the administration regarded Russian suppression of Chechen separatism as a human rights problem. Now it has decided that it is an issue of terrorism.

When the U.S. shifted its focus from China to the war against terrorism, China felt that the threat to its domestic political stability from the U.S. had lessened and therefore had more flexibility to adopt a more cooperative posture toward the U.S. In addition, the terrorist attacks against the U.S. constituted unacceptable human behavior, and as most other countries, China felt it necessary to take a principled stand against it. Furthermore, as a long-term victim of terrorism itself, China had a vested interests in supporting the war against terrorism.⁴² Finally, Beijing genuinely hoped that its cooperation with the U.S. against international terrorism would contribute to the development of a sustainable bilateral partnership. For these and other reasons, China did what it could to support the U.S. at a time the latter most needed help from the other countries.

⁴⁰ “National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims Of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001”, by the President of the United States of America, September 11, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010913-7.html>.

⁴¹ “At O'Hare, President Says "Get On Board", remarks by the President to Airline Employees at the O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, Illinois <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010927-1.html>.

China's support to the U.S. evoked two different reactions from the Bush administration. Those in the administration who believed that it is in the best interest of the U.S. to engage China were relieved. They appreciated China's support and hoped that this would not only enhance U.S. efforts to fight the war against terrorism but also facilitate U.S. efforts to promote positive changes in China. They believed that the U.S. stood to benefit from a constructive and cooperative relationship with China. Accordingly, they genuinely hoped that the war against terrorism would present a new opportunity for the two countries to work together for their shared interests. Thus, they advocated U.S. support of China's entry to the WTO, enhancement of cooperation against terrorism, collaboration to stabilize the situation in South Asia and pragmatic management of bilateral disputes ranging from nonproliferation and human rights to Taiwan.

Initially, those in the administration under the spell of aggressive realism were surprised that China would ever want to cooperate with the U.S. According to their logic, China could not be happier to see its strategic competitor in trouble and would by no means come to the support of the U.S. The best the U.S. could hope from China therefore was that it would not create more trouble for the U.S. When China offered its support, they concluded that despite professed support, Beijing must have ulterior motives. Accordingly, they speculated that China would attach conditions to its support for the U.S. However, when China did not attach any conditions to its support to the U.S., they reasoned that China did not have much of a choice other than to cooperate with the U.S. given the flood of international support the U.S. was receiving and the sheer size of U.S. military might. Despite the cooperation between China and the U.S. on international terrorism, these people maintain the view that China is still a potential enemy of the U.S. The U.S. might have to focus on terrorism for the time being; however, it would have to face the China threat again sooner or later. Accordingly, the U.S. should prepare: it should re-target nuclear weapons at China; nor should it resume military contacts with Beijing; and it should enhance its security position in Northeast Asia especially its ties with Tokyo and Taiwan.

Despite their differences, for now both liberals and aggressive realists share the view that the U.S. should focus on the war against terrorism for the time being. And in doing so, they should make the best use of China's cooperation and refrain from taking action against China. In the months after the 9.11, this was what happened and it contributed to the improvement of Sino-American relations during this period.

⁴² Julie Chao, "Terrorism Also Worries China", *The Washington Times*, November 2, 2001.

III. Prospect for Development

Will positive changes in the relationship between the two countries last? To answer this question, one needs to look at both the short-term and long-term scenarios. In the short run, since the Bush administration is very much divided on its China policy, there are many uncertainties. On the one hand, some in the administration wish to develop a candid, constructive and cooperative relationship with China. The U.S. is waging a war against terrorism, and it needs all the international assistance it can get. In this regard, China's cooperation is essential because it is an important country and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In addition, the U.S. needs China's cooperation to deal with other international problems: proliferation, commerce, migration, crimes, drugs, etc. On top of that, as China rises, it is in the interest of the U.S. to help China change into a liberal democracy and the best way to do so is through cooperation. Accordingly, these officials show their appreciation for China's cooperation with the U.S., they assure the Chinese that the U.S. attaches high importance to the bilateral relationship, and they argue that the U.S. would adhere to the one-China principle and oppose Taiwan independence despite some rhetorical and behavioral deviation on the part of certain individuals.

On the other hand, the aggressive realists still hold on to the idea that China presents the largest potential threat to the U.S., while terrorism deserves special attention for the time being, the U.S. should not forget to hedge against the China threat now. As the military operations in Afghanistan appeared to be successful, they stepped up efforts against China. Among other things, they opposed to resuming military to military contacts with China; push for the sale of ever more sophisticated weapons to Taiwan; support expanding and upgrading official relations with Taiwan; and try to develop interoperability between the military forces of Taiwan and the U.S. Some are even pushing for Chen Shui-bian's visit to Washington.

Which group prevails over the administration's China policy will have important consequences for Sino-American relations. If the former group does, one is likely to see further improvement in the relationship. But if the latter group prevails, one is likely to see deterioration (if not outright confrontation) in the relationship. In this regard, the implications of the war against terrorism appear mixed. On the one hand, it favors engagement and cooperation with China. As long as the war goes on, the U.S. is likely to value China's cooperation and try to

contain the differences between the two countries. On the other hand, it also enhances the influence of the aggressive realists. They have a stronger presence in the institutions overseeing the war and therefore have more influence in shaping the security and military aspects of the administration's China policy. The ultimate policy outcome is likely to be a mixture of the views of both groups in the context of war against terrorism, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the two countries to manage their relations.

In the long run, one can take a cautiously optimistic view about the future of the relationship. To begin with, the war against terrorism is likely to be a long process. It means not only bringing those who conspired and engineered the 9.11 attack to justice, but also to make sure that other and new terrorist groups will not inflict death and suffering to innocent people again. This requires dealing with the root causes of international terrorism including worsening polarization of the world, cultural and religious conflicts, inadequate international law enforcement cooperation, and weak and inefficient international organizations. So long as these and other problems remain unresolved, terrorism is going to pose a serious security threat to the U.S. and also other countries. And as long as such threats persists, U.S. priorities are is also likely to remain focused on this issue and the U.S. and China are more likely to deal with the problems between them in a pragmatic and constructive way.

Moreover, with the expansion and deepening of their relations, the two countries share increasingly important stakes in bilateral cooperation. Confronted with fundamental transitions at home, China needs the understanding and support of the U.S. to cope with the challenges of development and reform. It also needs U.S. cooperation for its economic prosperity, security and peaceful management of the cross-Strait relations. Although the U.S. may need China less than vice versa—as many Americans have repeatedly stressed to their Chinese counterparts—the U.S. also needs the understanding and support of China to protect and advance its legitimate interests in the world.

Third, as China's reforms and international integration deepens, the two countries will not only share more common interests but also more common values. Over time, China has already made significant progress in reforming its economy and political system. If the current trend continues, given time, China will be able to prove that not only can it deliver a prosperous economy but also a viable and dynamic democracy even if it is not quite the same as that of the

U.S. Sooner or later, China and the U.S. will find that they have more in common than they have ever imagined.

Finally, as the largest developing country and the strongest developed country, China and the U.S. have important roles to play in world affairs. Their cooperation is important and increasingly crucial for international efforts to cope with mounting challenges in maintaining international peace and stability, preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivering vehicles, promoting international economic development, environmental protection, combating international terrorism and other transnational crimes, strengthening international law and order, enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of international organizations, dealing with global and regional crises, etc. Both out of moral and practical considerations, China and the U.S. will find good reasons to engage in such cooperation.

This of course does not mean that the differences between China and the U.S. will disappear. They will continue to differ on what constitutes protection of human rights in China, the pace of democratization in China, the meaning of free and fair trade, the role of international organizations and maybe the Taiwan problem if it is not solved by then. However, united by the common cause of anti-terrorism, increasing stakes in bilateral cooperation and greater responsibilities in world affairs, the two countries are going to be compelled to find more constructive ways to deal with these problems.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Sixty years ago, despite the vast differences between the two countries, China and the United States fought shoulder-to-shoulder against a common threat, international fascism. Thirty years ago, despite the vast differences between the two countries, they achieved a historical reconciliation. Today the differences between the two countries are far fewer and narrower than ever before, thus there is no reason for the two countries not to unite, to fight against international terrorism, and to build toward a better international order.

At the beginning of the new century, development of a constructive and cooperative relationship between China and the United States is critical to the interests of the two countries and the world more than at any other time in history. The broad trend of change in the

relationship between the two countries favors this process, and in this context 9.11 has only accelerated it.