

Policy Forum 00-04A: The Future of US-China Relations



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The Future of US-China Relations: Do Progressives Have a Vision?

By Lyuba Zarsky

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I. Introduction

The following essay is by Lyuba Zarsky, Co-Director of the Nautilus Institute. Ms. Zarsky also sits on the Trade and Environment Policy Advisory Committee of the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

Zarsky argues that the debate over China is more about the World Trade Organization than about China itself. She criticizes progressives for focusing too strongly on the immediate tactical battle, and in the process, falling into the trap of China-bashing. Instead, she argues, progressives need to develop a vision for a future policy that embraces China as a member of the world community, in order to promote a multilateral approach to problems of environment and human rights.

II. Essay by Lyuba Zarsky

The Future of US-China Relations: Do Progressives Have a Vision?

There is something odd about the ever hotter debate in the U.S. over the normalization of trade relations with China: it is not really about China. Rather, it is about a host of other issues that currently, and to a large extent rightly, inflame popular passions.

For progressives, the target is really the WTO--its lack of democratic accountability, its greedy usurpation of national authority, its refusal to recognize environmental protection and human rights norms as co-equal pillars of global economic governance (and to derogate authority to nations and other international organizations to uphold them). At heart, the argument of the "Seattle coalition" against normal trade relations with China is really about the WTO, viz, "let's not strengthen an organization we oppose."

Although it is far from coherent, progressives have a broad common vision of change in the global economy. The vision flows from the notion that economies and the rules that govern them should rest on ethical principles: social justice, empowerment of the poorest and most marginal, ecological sustainability, democracy, public accountability. Whether the target is the WTO, multinational corporations, or governments, a wide and growing circle of progressive groups--including the Nautilus Institute--hammers the same theme: ethics must shape economics.

This is well and good. There is more to globalization than the WTO, however, and more to international relations than economics, even in an era of corporate-led globalization. Underlying progressive American opposition to Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China is the notion that states, including the U.S., are simply handmaidens of big business. In this view, there is no national-or global-interest beyond resisting corporate domination. Big business has the state in its pocket, they argue, so opposing one and the other is the same.

This is an overly simplistic view. Though the nature of sovereignty might be changing, nation-states still matter and the structure of international relations matters a lot. Have progressives forgotten that states, especially big states like the US and China, are still the primary loci of decisions about war and peace--and still hold vast arsenals of nuclear, chemical and conventional weapons? That international cooperation, especially between the US and China, is absolutely fundamental to solving many of the big, life-threatening ecological and social problems of the day--like climate change and poverty? That there are deep cultural and historical differences among societies, especially East and West, which make it difficult to even articulate common ethics, let alone take steps to actually

implement them? Have progressives simply written off the possibility that they might have allies within China-allies who feel deeply alienated by the China-bashing rhetoric that too many progressives have sidled up to, if not embraced?

Today, in the absence of normal trade or other diplomatic relations, the primary idiom of U.S. diplomacy-despite noises about "constructive engagement"-is shaped by the right wing national security establishment. Ten years after the end of the Cold War, defense advocates have reestablished the initiative - the "peace dividend" has vanished in a rising tide of rhetoric about an emerging "China threat" and a need for massive expenditures on missile defenses. At the center of this juggernaut is a willingness to demonize and ostracize China that is all too consonant with many progressives concerned over China's domestic social and political evolution.

The sad truth is that there is no progressive vision of US-China relations. Indeed, much of the current rhetoric, both progressive and right wing, has little sense of the medium to long term future at all. The progressive stance on China is thus informed by short-term tactics, rather than strategy. What strategic thinking there is rests on the notion that US insistence on unilaterally keeping China on a limb, even if China joins the WTO, will deal the WTO a fatal blow.

Such thinking is uni-dimensional. First of all, the Europeans will likely embrace normal trade relations with China, making the U.S. the odd man out and beefing up corporate pressure to normalize. Moreover, even if the WTO does collapse, the United States and China still have to deal with each other and do so in a dynamic and complex world. Defining and deepening a progressive basis for that relationship could hold the key to the future.

At the center of a progressive vision of US-China relations must be a blend of ethics and common interest. On the ethical side, progressives should be insisting that it is fundamentally unfair and immoral for the United States to be the gatekeeper to the world trading system, whether the WTO formally or simply as a regular trading partner of the US. The ethical issues rankle especially in relation to China, which has a fifth of the world's people.

Progressives should also be insisting that the United States take seriously its leadership on human rights and environment. US selectivity in protesting human rights violations has dogged U.S. credibility and effectiveness for a couple of decades. In case after case, in its relations with particular countries and in its diplomacy in international organizations, US diplomats have ignored, tempered, or even countered commitments to human rights and the environment when US commercial or strategic interests are at stake.

Taking consistent global leadership on human rights and the environment would require the U.S. to embrace a robust commitment to multilateralism-based on a clear understanding of why multilateralism and international cooperation, rather than the current style of unilateralism, is in the U.S. national interest. A unilateralist approach to foreign policy relegates the U.S. to the role of the playground bully. Bullies get what they want in the short term, but typically get their due in the end by angry gangs. Better to be a good leader.

Leadership in multilateralism requires the U.S. to build coalitions, listen to and respect people from other countries, especially developing countries, as well as U.S. NGOs and labor groups. It means skillfully striving to establish global consensus on environmental and human rights norms, rather than grabbing the flag and running towards home, hoping that everyone will follow, or worse, boxing people around the ears. Most important, a commitment to a robust and progressive multilateralism entails defining the goals of global governance as central to US foreign policy. These goals revolve around promoting global peace, environmental sustainability, human rights, and economic development

Finally, a variety of contrasting and confusing arguments have been made about whether normalizing--or not normalizing--trade relations will enhance prospects for human rights within China. One need not accept any of these arguments in order to argue that the relationship between China and the U.S. is important in its own right-and will become ever more so in the future. Normalizing trade relations would allow the U.S. to see China not as an alien "other"-the essence of a Cold War view-but as a member of the world community. And it is such a member, whether or not Americans understand or approve of it. With the US-China relationship on a normal footing, a deepening of diplomacy on other fronts, including arms control, human rights and the environment, becomes possible.

Rather than use a magnifying glass to reduce field of vision to the tactical issues of the moment, progressives should be getting into focus a more comprehensive and strategic view of building a global progressive movement. Treating China like a pariah state, like a disobedient child, even as it modernizes and develops relations with other nations, works against both world peace and a progressive global movement.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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