

Can 9-11 Provide a Fresh Start for Sino-U.S. Relations?

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By Phillip C. Saunders

I. Introduction

This essay is by Phillip C. Saunders, Director of the East Asian Nonproliferation Program for the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Saunders asserts that the September 11 attacks present a real opportunity for Sino-US cooperation. Saunders outlines the potential areas of US and China cooperation in terms of shared security interests such as terrorism, nonproliferation, economic and energy security, while also detailing the respective and relevant obstacles that may impede cooperation. Ultimately though, he argues it is imperative that neither the US nor China allow long-term strategic and domestic interests undermine the possibility of positive short-term cooperation.

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II. Essay By Phillip C. Saunders

"Can 9-11 Provide a Fresh Start for Sino-U.S. Relations?"

By Phillip C. Saunders, Monterey Institute of International Studies

Economic, cultural, and educational contacts between the U.S. and China have deepened steadily over the last decade, yet official relations between the two states remain marked by mutual suspicion and outbreaks of crises. In both countries, Sino-U.S. relations have become the object of intense domestic political conflicts, with military planners on both sides beginning to focus on scenarios for possible conflict. Efforts by U.S. and Chinese leaders to define areas of common security interests and cooperate in addressing them have been crushed under the weight of domestic opposition and longer-term security concerns. China's worries about Taiwanese independence, American military intervention, and U.S. hegemony mirror America's concern that a

rising China will eventually challenge the United States.

Nonetheless, the United States and China share common interests on transnational security issues such as terrorism, nonproliferation, economic security and energy security, all of which demand international cooperation in order to develop effective solutions. Unfortunately, without strong leadership, areas of potential security cooperation are likely to be overwhelmed by bilateral security issues.

The September 11 attack has reordered American security priorities and is consequently providing an opportunity for the U.S. and China to begin security cooperation anew. Leadership and high-level political commitment from both sides, especially from China, is necessary if this opportunity is to be seized. The challenge is to avoid the historical pattern of allowing initial efforts toward cooperation to be progressively eroded by domestic politics and longer-term security concerns, while also building a mature relationship whereby both sides cooperate toward common goals and constructively manage areas of conflicting interest.

Terrorism

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon dramatically highlighted the threat international terrorism poses to the United States. Fighting terrorism and bringing the perpetrators of the September 11 attack to justice are now top U.S. security priorities. The September 11 attacks caused more casualties than the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor (and killed more PRC nationals than the accidental bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade). China must understand that U.S. popular feeling makes a "business as usual" approach to terrorism impossible.

Chinese leaders share U.S. concerns about terrorism, although the issue is less exigent. Uighur separatist groups (some of which have reportedly received training and financial support from terrorist groups in the Middle East) have mounted bombing attacks on targets in China. The PRC government has responded to domestic terrorism by working to co-opt ethnic minorities, repressing groups that advocate separatism and maintaining good relations with states where terrorists are trained in the hope that China will not become a target.

Areas where China and the U.S. could cooperate against terrorism include:

- * intelligence sharing
- * use of Chinese airfields and airspace to support humanitarian or combat operations against Usama bin Laden
- * diplomatic support in the United Nations
- * export controls for small arms that might reach terrorist groups
- * sanctions against states that refuse to cooperate with anti-terrorist efforts

Obstacles to cooperation: China's tendency to equate separatism with terrorism, regardless of whether separatist groups use violent attacks or peaceful political means. The United States will not endorse Chinese efforts to define peaceful protestors in Tibet or Taiwan as terrorists. Any attempts to link the two could potentially erode any goodwill produced by anti-terrorism cooperation. Chinese firms that sell small arms and militarily useful technologies to countries such as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan will also stand in the way of cooperation, especially if the United States pressures other countries to impose sanctions and cease doing business.

China worries about setting precedents for open-ended U.S. military intervention and wants the UN Security Council to authorize any expansion of U.S. military responses. Although the United States believes that more specific UN authorization is not necessary, it should be noted that Chinese concerns (including the desire that U.S. military response be based on clear evidence, strictly

targeted at guilty parties, and executed in a way that minimizes civilian casualties) are similar to those expressed by U.S. allies in Europe. China also worries that the war on terrorism will result in a long-term U.S. military presence in Pakistan and Central Asia.

Nonproliferation

Although nonproliferation has been a contentious issue in Sino-U.S. relations for the last 15 years, the range and scope of U.S. concerns about China's proliferation behavior have narrowed appreciably as China has joined the major arms control and nonproliferation treaties and strengthened its export control laws. Cooperation between the United States and China was particularly strong from 1995-1998, with the two countries working together on the Chemical Weapons Convention, UN Security Council resolutions in response to the 1998 nuclear tests in South Asia, final negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This cooperation gradually ended as Chinese concerns about U.S. ballistic missile defense plans increased. China and the United States still share numerous common interests in fighting proliferation, including mutual opposition to the introduction of nuclear weapons onto the Korean peninsula and to India's efforts to build an operational nuclear arsenal. Both countries want to find ways to avoid destabilizing arms races in Northeast Asia and to strengthen treaties banning chemical and biological weapons.

Obstacles to cooperation: China has received little political credit from the United States for its significant nonproliferation accomplishments, which have been overshadowed by a small number of continuing weapons transfers (including exports of ballistic missile technology to Pakistan and dual-use technology which can be used for chemical and biological weapons to Iran). Moreover, the September 11 terrorist attacks and current military conflict in Afghanistan have turned these abstract proliferation concerns into concrete threats to American lives.

China, for its part, argues that U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and proposals to provide theater missile defense systems to Taiwan and Japan should be considered a form of proliferation. China has tried to link its bilateral proliferation commitments with American restraints on conventional arms sales to Taiwan. China is a member of the major international arms control treaties, but has significant reservations about export control regimes such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). The United States is still waiting for China to issue export control laws governing missile technology that were promised in November 2000.

Bush administration officials have emphasized that missile defense is a necessary response to proliferation threats. China worries that U.S. deployment of missile defenses could undermine the credibility of its nuclear deterrent and leave it vulnerable to nuclear blackmail. These conflicting perspectives have produced a deadlock in international arms control efforts, made Sino-U.S. strategic dialogue difficult, and are likely to continue to impede efforts to cooperate on nonproliferation issues.

Economic Security

The United States and China have a shared interest in a stable and growing world economy, but the 1997 Asian financial crisis highlighted the costs of globalization. Economic security does not depend solely on monetary stability. Concerns about bad loans (especially to state-owned enterprises) and about the solvency of China's banking system could cause a Chinese economic crisis with international repercussions. China's entry into the World Trade Organization will also create new concerns for economic security, as China loses some of its ability to use government policies to cushion risk. Another danger is the potential impact of a global recession. If the U.S. economy falters -a distinct possibility- it is not clear what countries or regions can pick up the slack.

Obstacles to cooperation: The United States is committed to the current set of global economic

institutions, where it enjoys significant advantages. China has much less of a voice in these institutions and would prefer not to strengthen the dominant U.S. position. Forms of cooperation that exclude the United States—such as bilateral agreements to hold the currency of other countries or to provide guarantees of emergency loans—are unlikely to be sufficient in the face of a major crisis. China may have to choose between accepting the increased risk of a global financial crisis and supporting changes that strengthen the economic power and position of the United States. A related question is whether China's growing trade surplus with the United States is sustainable. Tensions between the U.S. and Japan over trade issues in the 1980s and 1990s were buffered by a U.S.-Japan security alliance, but the United States and China have no similar mechanism.

Energy Security

China and the United States both depend on energy imports from the Middle East. Ensuring stable and secure supplies of energy at an affordable price is critical to continued economic growth in both countries. Although China is currently working to tap natural gas and oil supplies in western China, Central Asia, and the East and South China Seas, the PRC will be unable to meet growing energy demands without increased imports from the Middle East. Despite efforts to increase domestic oil production and diversify sources of energy, the United States will also remain dependent on supplies of oil from the Middle East.

Obstacles to cooperation: The United States has emphasized political and military alliances with key oil-producing states and the use of naval power to maintain access to Middle Eastern energy supplies. China's strategy has focused on good political relations with oil-producing states, including countries like Iran that are on poor terms with the United States. China worries about the U.S. ability to use naval forces to cut off Chinese oil imports from the Middle East. A key question is whether China is willing to rely on the United States to protect the shipping lanes from the Middle East to Asia. If China seeks to develop power projection capabilities to secure its supply of energy independently, this may provoke conflict with the United States.

Approaches to Cooperation

The United States and China share common interests on a wide range of important security issues. Despite these common interests, security cooperation has proven to be elusive and transitory. The United States emphasizes functional cooperation and gradually building trust by working together on practical issues, while China emphasizes the overall relationship. Chinese officials require high-level political commitment to make low-level cooperation possible, while American officials are reluctant to make high-level commitments without a solid record of lower-level cooperation. The complicated domestic politics surrounding Sino-U.S. relations in both countries add an additional barrier to security cooperation.

Another question is whether different means of structuring Sino-U.S. security cooperation might produce more durable results. Several different models are possible:

* High-level summits - Regular summit visits between senior leaders could mobilize the bureaucracies in each country to produce concrete accomplishments. Presidents Clinton and Jiang tried this approach in 1997-98, but the effort unraveled due to domestic political opposition, accusations of Chinese nuclear espionage, and the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

* Functional commissions/working groups - This approach brings experts in a particular functional area together to devise cooperative solutions and implement policy changes. Because working-level officials do not have sufficient influence to keep functional ties going if unrelated events disrupt the broader relationship, this approach is unlikely to stabilize relations in difficult periods.

* Premier-level commission - Another approach is regular meetings at the vice-presidential/premier level, modeled on the Gore-Chernomyrdin commission. By delegating responsibility for cooperation to senior political leaders who meet every six months, this mechanism combines high-level political support with regular meetings and the opportunity for the second-in-commands to build a personal relationship.

Regardless of the mechanisms, political commitment from senior leaders is required to sustain cooperation. Without high-level approval and prodding, it will be difficult for bureaucracies in the United States and China to work together to address these pressing non-traditional security issues. It is unclear whether Chinese political leaders are prepared to make this kind of commitment, and whether the Bush administration is prepared to reciprocate.

The September 11 terrorist attack provides an opportunity for a fresh start in relations between the Chinese government and the Bush administration. The challenge is whether the two sides can use this opportunity to build a framework for more stable relations. This will require developing the ability to focus on short-term common interests while temporarily putting aside longer-term potential conflicts of interest. It will demand discipline to resist the tendency to turn each opportunity for cooperation into leverage that can be used on other issues. This ability to compartmentalize cooperation and conflicts is a necessary part of a more mature, realistic Sino-U.S. relationship. The record of security cooperation to date is not encouraging, but the pressing and important issues discussed above demand renewed efforts.

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Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org