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U.S. AND CHINA IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY:
COOPERATION, COMPETITION OR CONFRONTATION?

by Chu Shulong

ABSTRACT

When the world entered the 21st century, the nature and the future of Sino-U.S. relations once again became questionable. The limited consensus of the two governments on building a constructive strategic partnership was broken by the new Bush Administration. Ten years after the end of the Cold War, the nature of Sino-US relations is still unclear and uncertain. Although many people define them as "not friend, not partner, not enemy," no-one seems to be able to define what the relationship is. The terms competitor or competition are completely incorrect terms in which to define the relationship today or in the future because it is against reality. Confrontation is too costly to be adopted as a policy option even if there is the danger of limited Sino-U.S. confrontation over Taiwan. And besides Taiwan, there is actually no conflicting area of fundamental national interests between the two countries.

The real meaning behind "strategic partnership" is cooperation. Therefore, the United States and China can still build a cooperative relationship in the new century without being a "strategic partner" if partnership is not a welcomed term. There is no better choice between the two countries in the 21st century.

The current danger for building a cooperative relationship between the U.S. and China is the tendency of growing misunderstanding and miscalculation in both Washington and Beijing. There are politicians and strategists who do not fully understand the new world, the new century, and the new China. It is time to abandon the old thinking and models of "geostrategy," "zero-sum game," and "balance of power," and build a new model of major power relations in the new century.

The recent spy plane incident and the showdown between China and the U.S. clearly suggest that the two countries are badly in need of both strategic assurance and specific management in their complicated and comprehensive relationship in the new century.

I. PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP

At the beginning of the new century and the new American administration, China and the U.S. faced strategic choices: Will they choose cooperation in the new century and build a cooperative relationship? Or will they seek competition or even confrontation, following the pattern of traditional relations among great powers in the past several centuries?

The problem started with the concept of "building toward a constructive strategic partnership." In the Joint Declaration of the United States and China issued on October 29, 1997, during President Jiang Zemin's U.S. visit, the two governments announced that in the past-Cold War period and in the 21st century, "The heads of states of both countries decided that, through increased cooperation, China and the United States will meet the challenges from the international arena, promote world peace and development, and work together to build a constructive strategic partnership."

Since then and until early 2000, the leaders and important government officials from both countries repeatedly stated that the two countries would develop their relations along this line.

The Kosovo War and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999, have caused quite a number of people in the States to doubt and attack the "strategic partnership" between China and the United States. They said that because of the differences between the U.S. and China in international and regional strategic issues such as Iraq, Kosovo, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and missile defense systems, the conditions and possibility do not exist for the two countries to build a strategic partnership. China views the U.S. as the world's hegemony, and the U.S. regards China as a challenger and a potential threat, if not a rivalry. David Shambaugh said: "There is nothing strategic between China and the United States that would stick them together, and there is no consensus concerning Asia; on the contrary, what I see is a strategic competition in Asia and the world."(1) "There is considerable differences between Beijing and Washington; at least they do not concur in their plans for global strategic balance. In fact, when the two countries differ in so many strategic issues, the use of the term 'strategic partnership' is wrong."(2)

Former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski also said that it is a mistake to describe Sino-US relations as a kind of strategic partnership.(3) Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama said: "I think that we will never have a strategic partnership with China; we should see China as a strategic competitor; China is not our partner, and never will be."(4)

While on campaign trail, George W Bush said that China is not the United States' strategic partner; it is a competitor, and this competitor does not share the same values with Americans.(5) Secretary Collins Powell has repeated such statements recently.

The controversy surrounding the term "constructive strategic partnership" largely comes from a misunderstanding of the concept. This is because, in post-Cold War international relations, "strategic" is a term whose meaning has undergone great change, and the terms of "partner" and "partnership" are frequently used. Therefore, there is confusion, and people do not understand what they actually mean.

In the post-Cold War period and in the 21st century, a Sino-US strategic partnership actually means a kind of strategic cooperative relationship, or simply a cooperative relationship between China and the United States. Here, "strategic" no longer has the connotations of "war," "military," "threat," and "defense" in the traditional sense. It refers to comprehensiveness, an overall nature, a long-term nature and with high level of significance. "Partner" implies two sides to a cooperation. It implies that they are co-workers and colleagues who do things together and work together for a broad breadth of common interests and common goals.

Therefore, "Sino-American strategic partnership" actually means an overall, all-dimensional, and long-term cooperative relationship to be built by China and the United States for the common good of both countries and the world. As for the term "constructive" that precedes it, it means that the overall cooperative relationship to be built by the two countries in the post-Cold War period (unlike the relationships during the Cold War) is not aimed at a third country or any one else, and is, therefore, "constructive."

The core of "Sino-American constructive strategic partnership" is cooperation, and it means a new type of relation between great powers to be built by the two countries on the international, regional, and bilateral levels in the post-Cold War period and the 21st century. The significance of "building toward a constructive strategic partnership" is that it sends the clear signal to the two countries and the rest of the world that China and the U.S. are not seeking adversary or confrontation but cooperation. It signals that the two countries will not adopt hostile and confrontational strategies and policies towards each other and that the two countries are not enemies with each other.

It is fine for Americans to abandon the term of "strategic partnership" between the U.S. and China, but it is wrong and dangerous for them to deny the huge cooperative areas between the two countries in the post-Cold War and in the 21st century.

II. "STRATEGIC COMPETITION"

When denying the possibility that China and the U.S. can build a constructive strategic partnership, American politicians such as George W. Bush and Colin Powell, as well as some American scholars, thus give their definition of US-China relations as being in "competition" or "strategic competition." They say China is not an American partner but a competitor. Some Chinese scholars also regard Sino-U.S. relations as some sort of competition.

Such a view is completely wrong because it is neither describing the current reality between China and the U.S. nor correctly predicting the trend of global development and the future relationship between the two countries. China and the United States do not have competitive relations now and are not likely to develop such relations in the foreseeable future.

First, the two countries are not in an economic competition. The U.S. is the world's largest developed country, and China is the world's largest developing country. Although China's economy is developing rapidly and has good prospects and great potential, the reality is that in 2000 the gross domestic product (GDP) of the U.S. was about US$9 trillion, and China's GDP was only US$ 1 trillion. Sometimes in the 21st century, China's economy might catch up with the US economy, but it will not be very soon. Meanwhile, the two countries differ even more in economic quality and technology. Therefore, in terms of economic strength, neither the base nor the condition exists for competitive relations to take shape between the two countries. Japan and some developed European countries may have the ability to compete with the U.S., but not by China in the foreseeable future.

Second, in terms of military strength, the two countries differ greatly. National defense expenditure is an example. At present, the annual military expenditure in the U.S. is approximately US$300 billion, and in China it is US$15 billion, or one-twentieth of the American amount. Even if we take the most exaggerated figure provided by some western sources, which said China's military expenditure is about US$50 billion, China's defense spending is still one-sixth of the United States. How can a country compete with the other militarily when the latter is spending six to twenty times more on defense? China and the U.S. also differ greatly in military technology. In fact, the gap in military strength between the two countries has been widening - not narrowing - in the past decade of the post-Cold War era, and this trend will continue into the 21st century.

Third, in geostrategic terms, China does not have, and does not plan to have, a subjective will and a strategy to compete with the United States. The fundamental difference between Sino-American relations in the post-Cold War era and Soviet-American relations during the Cold War is that China and the U.S. are not competing for anything geostrategically. China has not and will not contended with the U.S. for the world. Unlike the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the past, China has not tried to scramble for territory in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa or Latin American. The relations between China and the countries in those regions are bilateral in nature, and China's goal in developing ties with them is to serve China's modernization drive and reunification, and to promote friendly cooperation with these countries.

Likewise, China has not struggled with the U.S. for Asia, which is of vital interest. China is opposed to a US military presence in Asia, the strengthening of US-Japan security alliance, and the development of the Theater Missile Defense system only because they all aim at China and include Taiwan in their purpose and undermine China's efforts for national reunification. Therefore, China's strategy in Asia is defensive, not offensive.

In the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Cambodian peace settlement, East Timor, Association of Southeast Asian Regional Forum (ARF), and other regional security issues, China and the U.S. have not confronted each other. On the contrary, they have carried on some consultation and cooperation.

Even on the Korean Peninsula, which is close by, China has carried out contacts and coordination with both Koreas and the U.S. in the four-party talks, working together for peace and stability on the peninsula.

Fourth, China and the U.S. differ in ideology. However, this does not mean they have rival or competitive relations. In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. has continued to stress ideological elements in its foreign relations. It has exerted pressure on China in an attempt to turn China toward an American favored direction. However, by contrast, China since early 1980s, has already started a foreign policy which does not emphasize ideology. In Sino-US relations, there have been a struggle between the attempt to evolutionalize and the efforts to resist being evolutionalized, and the move to pressure and the resistance against such pressure. But there is no ideological struggle nor overall ideological competition in Asia or in the world between China and the United States.

It is true that competition is neither a negative nor a frightening term. We cannot deny some kind of competition in international relations. However, using the term to generalize and define Sino-US relations today and the future falls short of describing the real situation and the direction of the relationship. Competition is normal and healthy in the economic field. Regrettably, even in this realm of benign competition, China has yet to acquire the ability to compete with the United States.

III. SINO-US RELATIONS IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY: NECESSITY FOR A NEW MODEL

Looking back at the 20th century, we see three major models of relations among major powers: hot war, cold war and alliance. In the first half of the century, great power relations went through two world wars; and in the second half, they experienced the Cold War and confrontation most of the time. And through the entire century, most of the major powers engaged alliances with each another.

Looking at the world today and in the future of the 21st century, those three models of major power relations are neither fit nor necessary.

The most basic reason is that the development of technology and production capability has led to an excessively high price in war and confrontation between major powers. In the new century, any country's national strategy that is characterized by the basic goal of pursuing and realizing its national interest will remain intact. However, the way to realize national interest will have a fundamental difference. It is too costly for great powers to use war and confrontation to realize their national interests, because the simple fact and the logic that lost will be bigger than the gain. We can only image the price of no trade and no economic, technological, information or personal exchanges between major countries in an interdependent, globalized and interconnected world.

Alliance is a kind of relative relationship which always targets a third party. Today and in the future, countries can be friendly and cooperative without being in an alliance. Closer cooperation does not need to be a relative matter.

Looking to the past, present, and the future, the Sino-US relations in the 21st century need new thinking and a new model. We do not know what it is exactly today, but we know and we have to know that going into "competition" or confrontation is not a good strategic choice for China, America and the world. Partnership may not be easy to build or even to imagine, but a more cooperative relationship is certainly desirable and achievable - if both countries want to go toward that direction.

The spy plane incident is almost over but the uncertainties of the Sino-U.S. relations remain. Similar incidents and other forms of crises may take place again between the two countries in the next couple of months or years if the two countries do not take the necessary measures to change and manage their relationship. What has been clear from the incident was that China and the United States are bound to be engaged more and more with each other in Asia and the world. If they do not engage positively, then they would engage more negatively like this recent incident.

The two countries need both strategic and specific managements in their complicated and comprehensive relations in the new century.

Besides a new understanding and vision of their relationship, the two countries need to work out more and better arrangements to avoid and handle possible incidents in the future. The Maritime Agreement is good but is not good enough for both countries to avoid and handle incidents on the sea and in the air. It did not work this time. Confidence building measures and code of conduct are two-way traffic. They need compromise and commitment from both countries. The coming talks on April 18 in San Francisco are doomed to be fail if America only emphasizes how China should react to "routine" American spying flights. The US need to be prepared to address the legitimate Chinese concerns of its own national security interest. Spy planes flying closer to Chinese territory and sharing the intelligence information about China with Taiwan, Japan, and others is an aggressive practice of hostility. Such practice will definitely continue to meet Chinese reaction. The U.S. should consider how it can change the hostile practice which threatens Chinese security interests.

The handling of the incident clearly shows the differences between the two countries in culture, language, logic, and common sense. To blame the other side is not useful. What the two countries need is to further develop their economic and social ties. Narrowing the cultural gap is long term work and is not easy, but it is badly needed for the two countries and societies if they want to understand and communicate better than this time.

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(1) Jane Periz, "White House Is Bracing For A Chinese Backlash," The New York Times, May 16, 1999, p.A11.
(2) Ibid.
(3) Bruce Gilley & Shaw W. Crispin: "Limited Engagement," Far Eastern Economic Review, April 22, 1999, p.12.
(4) The Washington Post, May 11, 1999.
(5) Xinhua News Agency, May 25, 1999.

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org