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IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION FOR EAST ASIA:
A CHINESE VIEW by Shen Dingli

ABSTRACT

Since George W. Bush became the new U.S. President, the U.S. foreign policy toward East Asia has seemed to present a somehow different contour. While the U.S. has continued to adhere to its alliance relationship with Japan and South Korea, it has much emphasized such traditional relations with them, especially with Japan. The Bush team has suggested that China-U.S. relations are of the nature of strategic competitor, rather than what the Clinton Administration has termed as "strategic partnership." President Bush has even committed to defending Taiwan with "whatever" means. The U.S. has until recently distanced from Clinton's engagement policy with North Korea. Such prioritization of the U.S. foreign policy in regard to East Asia hardly promotes Beijing's confidence of its relationship with Washington. In fact, the recent air collision of the two countries has further strained their relations.

The Bush Administration has distinguished itself by strongly advocating the build-up of ballistic missile defense system. George W. Bush has chosen Donald Rumsfeld as his Pentagon chief, for Rumsfeld's hallmark of strong proponent of missile defense. Bush's propensity for missile defense, nation-wide and theater-wide, as again indicated in his speech delivered at National Defense University on May 1, has created a division of opinions in East Asia in this regard. For its part, Beijing has vehemently opposed to such defense, considering it most negating to China's limited strategic deterrence, and risking their bilateral relations as the defense system is perceived to embolden the pro-independence force in Taiwan. Missile defense is also viewed to promote a sense of being safe if the U.S. steps in China's domestic affairs.

Not only Bush's decision of missile defense has alarmed China, his campaign declaration of "defending Taiwan" bodes ill for Sino-U.S. relations. During the Presidential campaign, George W. Bush committed to the aid of Taiwan's security. He has even repeated this commitment since assuming the Presidency. Given White House's decision of arms sales to Taiwan this spring, Washington's relations with Beijing have been further deteriorating.

Looking from Beijing, such three issues -- redefining bilateral relations, transfer of advanced conventional weaponry to Taiwan, and determined development and deployment of missile defense system -- have exposed their relations to significant pressures. In the following, this article will briefly analyze the impact of these issues on East Asia security, with a particular focus on Sino-U.S. relations.

REDEFINING CHINA-U.S. RELATIONS

Since the Bush Administration shifted the view of China-U.S. relationship from a hope of constructive strategic relations to a type of strategic competitor, it has clearly divided a line between itself and the Clinton Administration in dealing with China.

Honestly speaking, when President Jiang and Clinton met in Washington in October 1997, and declared to build together a constructive strategic partnership toward the 21st century, there was no inference that such a relationship had existed. Instead, it reflected their hope of an ideal relation due to its importance. Clearly, as a hope, it was not a reality, but rather the direction to work toward. As such, their bilateral relations deserve particular care. By nature Sino-U.S. relations were, and still are, vulnerable to various challenges. After all China and U.S. have vast difference in terms of institution and value system.

Such vulnerability has been fully demonstrated since the declaration of the "constructive strategic partnership". President Clinton was under attack for his "failure" of engagement with China. He was thought to mislead, as simply the strategic partnership didn't exist. In the aftermath of bombing Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the term of strategic partnership seems to have almost vanished from political dictionary of both states.

A somber look at the bilateral relations would suggest that although a strategic partnership is much desirable, it might indeed not have been a reality, simply because of the U.S. weapons sale to Taiwan. Unless such weapon transfer to a part of China would end, a strategic partnership by definition is impossible. The two countries can at any time be held hostage and be forced to show down by Taiwan if it would announce independence.

Then, without an existing strategic partnership, Washington and Beijing are still possible to engage in strategic cooperation. There are many strategic issues in which they share common interests: stabilizing situation of Korean Peninsula, stemming proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, controlling spread of missiles, etc. Actually the two countries have collaborated in these areas in the past decade. For instance, they worked effectively in response to nuclear weapon tests in South Asia in 1998.

Although strategic cooperation cannot suffice strategic partnership, it is a helpful substance toward building a strategic partnership. However, to point out the strategic competition between China and the U.S., it views their relations too much simplistically. Sino-U.S. relations are more complex than simply a strategic competition or a strategic collaboration can indicate.

Obviously nations and states compete, which provides incentives of their development. Due to the importance of China and the United States, their competition may often be strategic as well. However, one shall note that competition is not the sole content of Beijing-Washington relationship. It is even not yet the major part of their relations. China-U.S. relations are a complicated mixture of cooperation, competition, as well as rivalry. Their rivalry comes from the U.S. interference of China's domestic issue, most notably by selling weapons to Taiwan. However, China for years has exercised restrain regarding this matter so as to stabilize its relations with the U.S., and to stabilize cross-Straits relations. Most observers would agree that on a number of issues Beijing and Washington have sought cooperation and tried to avoid military confrontation.

It might be worthy not to omit the part of relations that are strategic competition between China and the U.S. Nevertheless, one would not be misled if the overall relations, consisting of cooperation, competition and rivalry, could be noted. Emphasizing any single part of this complex relationship could lead to over optimism or pessimism.

As a rising state, China feels a pressing and legitimate need to address its unification problem, desirably through peaceful means. Such a course of unification certainly would affect status quo balance of powers and subsequently the U.S. interest. However, this is not a problem caused by China. It is China to resolve a problem imposed on it. A rising state isn't automatically equal to a challenger. In reality China's national interest per se has long be challenged. If the Bush Administration would retain its view of China as a strategic competitor, it could only handle its relations with China with an incomplete understanding that would undermine stability in East Asia.

"DEFENDING" TAIWAN

Keeping weapon sales to Taiwan is an important approach of the U.S. to balancing military powers across Taiwan Straits. The Taiwan Relation Act of 1979 mandated U.S. right to intervene the Taiwan question at a crisis time, and to sell arms to Taiwan at peacetime.

From 1979 to 2000, for 22 years the U.S. has transferred to Taiwan arms worthy more than 40 billions. Since China and the U.S. "normalized" their relations, the U.S. has taken special care to maintain superiority of Taiwan's air force over mainland in terms of advanced jet fighters. The Bush Administration has taken one step further: it decided in April that the U.S. would sell weapons this year for at least 4 billions, doubling the annual average sale of the past two decades.

On the selling list are 8 diesel-electric submarines, 4 Kidd-class destroyers, as well as 12 P3-C anti-submarine helicopters, among other items. Apparently the Bush Administration is determined to cut mainland's edge of submarine force. Both P3-C and Kidd-class destroyer have strong ant-submarine warfare (ASW) capability. The P3-C helicopters are also capable of striking submarine from air. Most significantly, the diesel-electric subs the U.S. is going to sell will not only provide Taiwan ASW ability, but also an offensive means which destabilizes across Taiwan-Straits situation.

The U.S. often claimed that the weapons transferred to Taiwan are only for defensive purpose. The Taiwan Relations Act required also providing Taiwan with defensive equipment. The reality, however, has been often not the case, and the 12 submarines the Bush government decided to sell are particularly questionable. While China is opposed to any weapons transfer to Taiwan, it is noted that submarines are especially troublesome: submarine apparently is not a weapon only for defense.

As noted above, such sales are even not in compliance with the U.S. long-held argument to justify its weapon transfer to Taiwan. Submarine can disrupt, at both peacetime and crisis time, social order and civilian life of the mainland. It can also inflict damage on the mainland side even without absorbing an offense.

One would question why Taiwan couldn't acquire submarines but the mainland can. The answer is quite straightforward: as part of China, Taiwan is not entitled to receive foreign weapons. Taiwan's external security shall be provided by a unified central Chinese government. Prior to that, foreign arms to Taiwan are perceived to strengthen Taiwan's resistance to unification and therefore be harmful to China's national interest.

Why the U.S. made a major breakthrough of its restrain on offensive weapons sale to Taiwan? One may link this move to the U.S. perception of China's rise and its impact on Asia. To hedge against China, or to prevent Mainland China from potentially challenging the U.S., America may have sensed a need of checking and balancing a growing China. On the Taiwan "security" question, the U.S. may need most urgently to provide Taiwan with i) ASW capability, ii) theater missile defense (TMD) system, and iii) air force superiority with third-generation jet fighters.

Given China's strong opposition, Washington has decided not to equip Taiwan with Aegis-class destroyers, a platform of Aegis radar system that can detect attack missiles, coordinate and command the interception with TMD. However, Washington has not excluded the possibility of selling it to Taiwan at a later stage. In fact, the Bush Administration has abolished the mechanism of Washington-Taipei annual meeting of April discussing weapons sale of the year. In the future, the U.S. weapons sale to Taiwan can be more quickly requested as long as Taiwan perceives a need. This gives the U.S. a more readily available means to play the game of weapon sales to Taiwan.

The stepping up of the U.S. weapons sale to Taiwan reflects the hardliner position of the Bush Administration of its first few months. Consequently this stance will be viewed negatively by Beijing, and arms race across Taiwan Straits will ensue. Under this circumstance, "peace" in East Asia secured by external interference is fragile and can't last. With Mainland China's growth, military balance across the Straits will tilt in favor of Beijing in the long run. Some even speculate that this will come true in less that a decade. After all, arms sale doesn't equip Taiwan with fundamental security. It increases rather than defuses resentment of Chinese people toward U.S. government.

BUILDING UP MISSILE DEFENSE

In recent years, a dividing issue between China and the U.S. is missile defense. The U.S. claims new threat from "countries of concern" (previously termed as "rogue" states). At theater level, the U.S. troops were hit by scud missiles of Iraq in 1991. The U.S. National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) of the recent years have predicted that with a decade few "countries of concern" will acquire international-range ability of attacking the continental United States.

Given this estimate, U.S. Congress has made a law that declared, "Missile defense is the U.S. national policy". President Clinton approved research and development of missile defenses. For National Missile Defense (NMD), the U.S would deploy it should criteria of threat assessment, financial affordability, technical feasibility, and international response are met. Given only one "success" out of three interception flight tests thus far, Clinton deferred last September his decision of deployment. At the same time, the U.S. is continuing its TMD programs, with success in its upper-tier THAAD already.

NMD has met almost global critique or opposition. Major players of the world, Russia and China, strongly oppose to NMD as they deem NMD destabilize the world order. NMD would make the U.S. immune of missile attack or retaliation, while retaining its most powerful offensive capability at the same time.

To be sure, no country in the world should be subject to missile threat. In this context, the U.S. fear of missile attack on it needs to be studied, and perhaps deserves sympathy. This said, the same argument applies to other countries: no other countries should be threatened with missiles.

A review of the world security situation, however, suggests that the U.S. NIE reports may not be substantiated. One would question if those countries could really pose an ICBM threat to the U.S. in some ten years. Also, if missile defense, as expensive as US$60-100 billions, is the best approach to addressing such unfound threat?

What matters is that the U.S. cannot pursue its own security while undermining other countries' security interest. The U.S. possesses the most powerful conventional and non-conventional offensive means. But, there have been cases when the U.S. projected its military powers without much reason. The U.S. used to bully China and is still militarily intervening China's internal business. Seeking security of one's own while depriving security of the others is not a selling logic, and obviously will meet opposition.

China might have less difficulty with the U.S. missile defense should Washington have respected Beijing's sovereignty. China has sound reason to suspect the U.S. to abuse its own right of security. In Beijing's view, given a history of weapons sale to Taiwan for over half a century, China has absolutely a necessity to oppose the U.S. move that might reduce the strategic deterrence of Beijing. China doesn't want to threat the U.S., but cannot allow its security interest to be eroded by America's national missile defense.

On TMD question, China's opposition to introducing it to Taiwan has the same Taiwan root. On the one hand, TMD sale to Taiwan constitutes a weapon sale, unacceptable to the mainland. On the other hand, Taiwan may feel more secure after acquiring TND, more likely to prompt a crisis.

On May 1, 2001, President Bush announced his approval of missile defense's deployment. Media leak indicates that the U.S. may deploy ten interceptors in Alaska by 2004 even if the system is not mature. In July this year a new interception of NMD will be carried out. Though one cannot exclude the political consideration behind this timeline, the deployment itself would project a very negative shadow upon China's perception of the U.S. strategic intention.

Therefore, a U.S. move of NMD will force China to respond at strategic and global level, which has become affordable now. If the U.S. would transfer later advanced TMD system to Taiwan, China's political relations with the U.S. will be further weakened. None of these would improve security situation in East Asia.

To sum up, the Bush Administration has taken a number of actions that weaken China-U.S. relations. Viewing China as a "strategic competitor", and dealing with China accordingly, can be self-fulfilling. Elevating weapons sales to Taiwan only creates newer difficulty for China's unification, rather than addressing true security of Taiwan. These actions could not be perceived well. Rather, it reinforces China's suspicion of the U.S. strategic intention. With this background, it is unlikely China would sit idle with America building up missile defense and revising/abolishing ABM. Meanwhile, there may be no need for a rush of response. As long as the U.S. policy is inherently flawed, there will be backlash upon the Bush Administration. After all, the U.S. has an internal check and balance institution, and it shall be able to adjust those parts of the policies that undermine American interest and destabilize Sino-U.S. relations. East Asia will be better off if the new U.S. government will be sooner or later more sensible. The White House has already tried to fix its mistake after speaking out defending Taiwan with "whatever" means. Missile defense deployment has yet to take time and no one can guarantee its success. So long as one realizes the complexity of China-U.S. relations, one has to deal with it with international norm and mutual respect when pursuing respective national interest. Their handling of EP-3 issue has proven that both administrations have a willingness and ability to treat their relations in a problem-solving way. In this context, their constructive and healthy cooperation and competition shall be a stabilizer for East Asia.

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