



## 9/11 AND U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

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In several respects, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington led to improvement in United-States-China relations. But what has been good for the U.S.-China relationship has not been as good for the United States and, specifically, the American interests at stake in the bilateral relationship.

Initial responses to the incidents ten years ago brought warmer U.S.-China relations. A “shocked” Chinese President Jiang Zemin was quick to express sympathy for the United States and the families of the victims and to condemn “all violent activities by terrorism.”<sup>1</sup> Beijing supported Washington’s call for cooperation and responsive action, including the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolutions that condemned the attacks, called on all states to take measures to combat and prevent terrorist activities and organizations generally and al-Qaeda and the Taliban specifically, endorsed international efforts to oust the Afghan Taliban regime that had provided shelter and support for al-Qaeda, and demanded that Iraq cease obstructing UN-mandated inspections for weapons of mass destruction<sup>2</sup>.

While a similar pattern characterized the U.S.’s interactions with many states, it was particularly significant in relations between Washington and Beijing. In the immediately preceding period, tensions had been rising between the two countries. During the presidential campaign, George W. Bush had criticized the Clinton administration for being too soft on China, arguing that China was a “strategic competitor” rather than a “strategic partner.” To some extent, this reprised a theme of standard-bearers of the out-of-power party in several presidential election cycles since the normalization of relations between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of China. Candidates Ronald Reagan (in the aftermath of mutual recognition between the U.S. and the PRC and the accompanying termination of formal U.S. ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan)) and Bill Clinton (in the long wake of the Chinese regime’s crackdown on the pro-democracy Tiananmen movement in 1989) were the most notable—and successful—precedents. When such contenders have won, as George W. Bush did, they predictably have faced a miffed or wary Beijing and calls to repair ties and show good will.

During the Bush administration’s first months in office, several incidents had increased friction in bilateral relations, including: China’s detention of a damaged U.S. reconnaissance plane and its crew after a mid-air collision by a shadowing Chinese air force jet; Bush’s proclamation that the U.S. would do “whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself”; the administration’s criticism of China’s “intensifying attacks” on religious freedom, targeting Christians, Muslims, followers of the Dalai Lama (whose Washington meeting with Bush brought an angry PRC response) and the banned Falun Gong sect; and friction over weapons issues, including the U.S.’s planned missile shield and China’s proliferation of missile technology.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, among foreign policy commentators and international relations analysts (and especially among conservative ones), the notion of a “China threat” and the related view that China’s rise would inevitably (or likely) bring conflicts with the United States and peril for American interests had been gaining traction before 9/11.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Chinese President Jiang Zemin Expressed Condolences by Telegraph over Terrorist Attacks on America and Talked with President Bush on Telephone to Show China's Position against Terrorism” (Sep. 13, 2001), available at <http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/thematicissues/counterterrorism/t26903.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> See U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1368, 1373, 1378, 1386 (2001), 1390, and 1441 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> “Bush Vows Taiwan Support” (ABC News Interview, Apr. 25, 2001), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93471&page=1>; “Remarks of President George W. Bush to American Jewish Committee” (May 3, 2001); Steven Mufson and Philip P. Pan, “U.S., China Set for More Talks; Powell Raises Rights, Arms Issues” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2001, p. A1.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Mosher, *Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000); Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the*

Beijing's relatively cooperative response to Washington's post-9/11 agenda not only came against this background of increasingly troubled bilateral relations. It also was especially important for the success of U.S. strategy. In turning to the UN Security Council in the wake of 9/11 (and less often and less successfully in the longer term "war on terror"), the United States depended on China's cooperation as a veto-wielding member of the Security Council—one that frequently takes positions at odds with Washington's. In addition, U.S. military action in Afghanistan and, later, elsewhere in South and Central Asia would send American forces into regions that Beijing clearly—and credibly—portrayed as affecting its security interests. In attempting to fold North Korea and its nuclear weapons program into a broader anti-terrorism agenda at the UN and beyond, the Bush administration became still more dependent for success on China and targeted a region that China saw as more vital to its security concerns.

As the U.S. pursued China's backing or at least acquiescence, it reduced the emphasis in its China policy on issues that brought friction with Beijing. Human rights critiques became more subdued, with Bush making relatively narrow and moderate remarks on the topic during Jiang's 2002 visit to the president's Texas ranch, and the U.S. dropping its habitual post-Tiananmen sponsorship of a resolution criticizing China's record at the UN Human Rights Commission in 2003.<sup>5</sup> Although partly reacting to Taiwanese leader Chen Shui-bian's status quo-shaking initiatives, the Bush administration also notably took a tougher and more Beijing-accommodating line toward Taiwan during much of the post-9/11 period. More broadly, in his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush asserted, with reference to relations with China (as well as Russia and India), that "in this moment of opportunity, a common danger is erasing old rivalries."<sup>6</sup>

This shift toward the positive is often—and not implausibly—characterized as an implicit *quid pro quo*.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not Beijing extracted—or the Bush administration undertook anticipatorily—a retrenchment of criticism and a reduction of demands targeting China in order to secure cooperation, the broader and enduring change that 9/11 wrought in Washington's foreign policy priorities reduced U.S. pressure on and, in turn, friction with China. The predominant focus on al-Qaeda, kindred groups and suspected allies and facilitators—and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—meant that the U.S. would pay less attention to China issues and, thus, to irritants in the U.S.-China relationship.

Although 9/11 and the developments that followed ushered in a positive turn in U.S.-China relations, their impact on the U.S.'s China-related interests has been a more complicated and less happy story over the ensuing decade. Although it has become commonplace after 9/11 to think of terrorism emanating from radical Islam as the most important change in foreign affairs in the post-Cold War era, the rise of China is likely to be far more important for the United States in the long run. Although the People's Republic still badly lags the United States in per capita income, prowess in some key economic sectors, military capacity and "soft power," some of these gaps have been closing and—absent severe crisis or exogenous shock—are likely to continue to do so. Sheer scale and physical location matter a great deal in international relations. So do political will and state capacity. And all of these factors weigh significantly on Beijing's side. In China, the U.S. faces a giant nation with: an economy that soon will be the world's largest, already is deeply integrated with its dynamic neighbors, and routinely generates outsized foreign exchange surpluses that it has been recycling largely into U.S.-owed debt; a rapidly modernizing military that is pursuing the means to deny U.S. forces access to strategically vital areas in the far Western Pacific or to increase the risks to the U.S. of intervention in the region; and a generally capable leadership and party-state apparatus that pursue, with a vengeance, the venerable Chinese goal of building a rich and powerful—and internationally respected—country.

The 9/11-driven dominance of anti-terrorism in U.S. foreign policy—including the wars it has spawned—has compromised the U.S.'s ability to respond effectively to China's remarkable, game-changing ascent in several ways. First, and most simply, it has distracted U.S. leaders and policymakers from focusing on the consequences of China's rise and China's agenda. Simply, in Washington as elsewhere, foreign policy resources are limited, with high-level attention among the scarcest. This attention deficit has been greatly welcomed in many Chinese policy circles, especially among those who see the U.S. as an inevitable or likely adversary or who imagine a U.S. plot to keep China down. Unquestionably, Deng Xiaoping's injunction to "hide

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*People's Republic Targets America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2000); Edward Timperlake and William C. Triplett II, *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China's Military Threat to America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1999); Joe Barnes, "Slaying the China Dragon: The New China Threat School," *China and Long-Range Asia Energy Security* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1999); Charles Krauthammer, "Why We Must Contain China," *Time*, July 31, 1995. See generally John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) and compare John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* (Apr. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> "The President's News Conference with President Jiang Zemin of China in Crawford, Texas" (Oct. 25, 2002)

<sup>6</sup> "President Delivers State of the Union Address" (Jan. 29, 2002), available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

<sup>7</sup> Chien-peng Chung, "September 11 and Uighur Separatism," *Foreign Affairs*, July-Aug 2002 (discussing Beijing's aims); James Gibney, "Chinese whispers: Why has the Bush Administration Stopped Fighting Beijing's Human Rights Abuses?" *Slate*, April 21, 2003; Colin Powell, "September 11, 2001 : Attack on America, Secretary Colin L. Powell Remarks With Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Tang Jiaxuan After Their Meeting," September 21, 2001 (discussing and denying *quid pro quo* on terrorism and Taiwan); Michael Szonyi, "Commentary No. 81: The Effects of September 11 and Its Aftermath on China, and The Chinese Response," (Ottawa: Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2002) (noting "*quid pro quo*"-seeking character of initial Chinese response).

[China's growing] brightness"—and the potential for threats to other states' interests that China's new power implies—has proven increasingly untenable for Chinese leaders and unappealing for those among them who crave near-term international stature and influence commensurate with China's growing prowess. Nonetheless, Washington's post-9/11 preoccupation with terrorism and its pursuit of Beijing's cooperation in its anti-terrorism agenda have given China an extended respite from unwanted scrutiny and the nettlesome (or worse) U.S. foreign policy initiatives such scrutiny might bring.

If one subscribes to the view that China's arrival as a great power is likely to echo the challenges to the existing international order and pro-status quo dominant powers that accompanied the rise of Germany or Japan, then the U.S.'s 9/11-induced lack of focus on China-related issues is profoundly dangerous for U.S. interests. If one is more agnostic or optimistic about the future course of U.S.-China interactions, the reduced emphasis on China (relative to terrorism and radical Islam) in U.S. strategic and foreign policy thinking is at least a risky and troublingly misguided departure from a principle of allocating resources generally in proportion to an issue's importance (adjusted for the prospects that well-chosen policies will be effective). Reasonable analysts may differ about what policies would best serve U.S. interests in responding to such challenges as China's military modernization, deepening economic ties in East Asia, growing role in Africa, support for what Washington regards as rogue regimes, highly managed currency policies and vast accumulation of reserves, sovereign wealth and state-linked enterprise foreign investment practices, human rights transgressions, industrial and technology policies, and so on. Whatever one's views on such substantive issues, the post-9/11 non-China-related preoccupations of U.S. foreign policy—and the concomitant indeterminacy, evanescence, fragmentation or strategic thinness of much post-9/11 U.S.-China policy—give reason for concern that too little has gone into formulating and implementing policy responses.

Second, the U.S.'s post-9/11 wars and other costly anti-terrorism efforts have reduced the assets Washington can deploy in the service of any policies—policies it has had, or those it might have, or those it should develop—to engage a rising China and address the implications of China's growing military and economic power. Many of the capabilities developed for the post-Cold War national security agenda of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and post-invasion nation-building are either already expended or not easily redeployed to meet the types of threats that China is likely to pose if the U.S. and China come into conflict or if the U.S. seeks to deter China from pursuing agendas adverse to U.S. interests. The expenditure of so much blood and treasure—more than 6,000 American military deaths and well over \$1 trillion spent—on anti-terrorism efforts and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has meant less investment in capacities that are more likely to be useful in a twenty-first century great power rivalry. With growing public and political elite weariness of war and foreign entanglements more generally and with steeply mounting pressure to contain defense and other government spending, both the will and the cash are less likely to be forthcoming to produce the means—whether military or economic or even political/diplomatic—that a prudent future U.S. China policy might demand.

Third, post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy famously eroded American soft power, and it did so at a time when China's soft power was waxing.<sup>8</sup> For much of East and Southeast Asia, the U.S.'s focus on terrorism and related international security issues contrasted sharply and unfavorably with Beijing's emphasis on economic matters. Where the U.S. came across as sometimes hectoring and principally concerned with issues that regional governments considered secondary to goals of growth and development, China spoke directly to those economic issues. Where Washington pressed for cooperation in the war on terror and sometimes criticized its counterparts' lack of zeal or skill, Beijing pursued a free trade area with the ASEAN states, worked hard to reassure nervous neighbors that China's rapid rise was an economic opportunity rather than an economic and political threat, and hewed to its long-standing emphasis on state sovereignty and, in turn, opposition to criticizing how other states conducted their internal affairs. At the same time, China's sustained breathtaking economic development amid social and political stability fed talk of a "China Model" that drew significant admiration in the developing world—and not only among the authoritarian regimes that especially prized state-led prosperity without political democratization. In contrast, U.S. anti-terrorism and related efforts came to be seen as anti-Islamic, especially in the Muslim world, including the countries along the arc that runs from the southeast to the northwest of China. Some of the means the U.S. government used or condoned among its collaborators—torture and "enhanced interrogation," prolonged detention without trial or formal charge, and departures from the restraints U.S. laws ordinarily impose on prosecutorial and investigative processes—appeared profoundly inconsistent with the ideals of the American model. This further tarnished U.S. soft power.

To be sure, during the last few years of the first post-9/11 decade, China has lost—and in some respects squandered—some of its earlier soft power gains relative to the United States. The increasingly inescapable fact of China's ascension as a major power, Beijing's shift toward more assertive policies on matters ranging from maritime territorial disputes to regional security architecture, and the PRC's heightened demands to be at the table in shaping international rules and institutions have been corrosive for China's recently accumulated soft power. But this trend, plus concerted U.S. efforts to rebuild its war-on-terror-damaged image, brought only limited reversal of post-9/11 trends. The growing clout that made China seem more threatening to weaker states also made it, for some, potentially even more compelling as an object of emulation. And the U.S.'s soft power recovery was undercut by the Obama administration's continuation of many of the 9/11-spawned policies and practices of its

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<sup>8</sup> On the soft power issues discussed here, see generally, Joseph S. Nye, "The Decline of America's Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2004; David E. Sanger, "Obama's Advisors to Back Soft Power," *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2008; Jacques deLisle, "Soft Power in a Hard Place: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations and U.S. Policy" *Orbis*, Fall 2010; Carola McGiffert, ed. *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2009).

predecessor and by the shadow that the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath cast over the American economic—and, increasingly, political—model, especially when measured against China’s comparatively successful weathering of the worldwide economic storm.

Fourth, and relatedly, the U.S.’s response to 9/11 has diminished its ability to press certain goals that seek changes in China’s behavior. Perennial American critiques of the Chinese regime’s human rights record have had to face rebuffs that invoke Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the erosion of civil liberties in U.S. law, and so on. Such American sequelae of 9/11 have lent additional force to a long-standing Chinese rejoinder in bilateral human rights discourse—one that amounts to China’s saying that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Beijing has zealously invoked the post-9/11 U.S.-initiated UN Security Council anti-terrorism resolutions—and the norms associated with the U.S.-driven “global war on terror”—to defend, and legitimate, repressive actions at home. The most prominent examples have been the laws and coercive measures targeting alleged “terrorists”—with purported links to enemies abroad—in China’s restive Muslim northwest and Tibet.<sup>10</sup> This loss of moral high ground and the leverage it might have provided for the United States is a troubling change if a more liberal or democratic or human rights-regarding China is indeed good for American interests. (The claim that this is the case is not without controversy, but it is plausible and accords with the democratic peace thesis, some variants of interdependence and constructivist theories of international relations, and values-based definitions of U.S. foreign policy interests.)

Finally, a further fading of the 9/11 effect in U.S. foreign policy is certainly possible and seemingly increasingly likely, but in the short run it is not necessarily very helpful for the U.S. interests at stake in relations with China. A decade is a very long time in American foreign relations, and we have seen in recent years renewed emphasis on China-related questions. The Obama administration, especially the State Department, has taken numerous steps that show, or seek to show, that the U.S. is “back in Asia” (which in large part means engaging issues that arise from China’s rise and growing international role) or that the U.S. had “never left.”<sup>11</sup> Notable examples include a pair of high-profile U.S.-China presidential summits and multiple sub-presidential-level visits, an upgrading of the U.S.-China bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s and President Obama’s early tours to Asia, Clinton’s later adumbration of a robust U.S. role in addressing the South China Sea territorial disputes, Defense Department-led moves to expand or shore up military ties with Vietnam, South Korea and other regional states and broader efforts to build on Bush’s initiatives in U.S.-India relations (all of which can help to balance or hedge against a rising China).

While such a reorientation toward China-related issues is generally salutary, there will remain, for some time, risks rooted in another, very different aspect of the 9/11 effect in U.S. foreign policy. Deeply conflicting assessments of trends in the U.S.’s and China’s relative power abound in Chinese foreign policy circles. But there is a significant strand of thinking that holds that the U.S. has been on a steep and irreversible decline, at least relative to China. Thus, to pursue effectively an appropriate, national interest-serving, “post-post-9/11” China policy, the U.S. will not only need to have the will and commit adequate political and material resources. Washington also will have to convince skeptics in Beijing (and likely elsewhere) that it does in fact have the requisite determination and means. Unless it does so, there will be risks born of possible Chinese misperception—principally risks of underestimation—that could make China-related U.S. policy goals more difficult to achieve and that could lead to additional friction and perhaps crisis in what has been a generally positive bilateral relationship in the decade since September 11, 2001.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, *Human Rights Record of the United States in 2004* (Mar. 3, 2005); Nicholas Kristof, “Repression by China and by Us,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 8, 2007, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> See generally, Jacques deLisle, “Security First? Patterns and Lessons from China’s Use of Law to Address National Security Threats” *Journal of National Security Law and Policy* 4:397 (2010).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities,” Jan. 12, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135090.htm>; Assistant Secretary of State Kurt M. Campbell, “Remarks with Pacific Island Journalists,” June 23, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2011/06/167388.htm>.