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China abroad

United States India Japan Taiwan

Bush China Policy a Successful Balancing Act

Interview with Scott Kennedy

Q: **IA Forum: How would you describe Sino-U.S. relations under the Bush Administration?**

A: **Scott Kennedy:** I think they're generally cooperative and constructive, particularly since late summer 2001. The relationship got off to a bad start with the EP3 [spy plane] incident. When the problems with that were identified, in the summer of 2001 the Bush Administration realized that a confrontational relationship with China was not in the U.S.'s best interest and so they started to change. That sentiment was magnified with 9/11, and so the problems we had with China were put on the back burner and the much larger problems the U.S. faced took center stage. Gradually, over time, the two sides developed a pretty good working relationship. Right now U.S. policy toward China under the Bush administration has to be one of its most obvious successes, which I think distinguishes it from U.S. foreign policy generally during this period.

Bush changed the language of the relationship between the U.S. and China from strategic partner to strategic competitor. Rhetoric aside, how much of a shift has there been in substance from the Clinton administration, and which administration do you think struck a better balance?

I know when President Clinton was trying to improve relations with China in his second term—the first term was really difficult because of tensions related to having

conditioned MFN and the Cross Straits conflict that emerged following Lee Tenghui's 1995 visit to Cornell—he emphasized establishing China as a strategic partner with the U.S. He didn't say the two countries had become strategic partners - that was still just a goal - but, nevertheless, there was that language, and the Chinese are very sensitive to language and how things are framed.

Bush, during his first presidential campaign, said we are not strategic partners; we are strategic competitors, which misstates what Clinton described as the status quo of the relationship. My sense is that going into his presidency President Bush thought he could take a somewhat tougher line with China, and when it didn't work out, he reverted to essentially a Clinton-style China policy, which is very similar to that of George H.W. Bush's policy, which is very similar to Reagan's, Carter's, back to Nixon's. They basically all have reverted to the mean over the course of their presidencies. What's really different between Bush and Clinton is the extent to which there have been such significant changes to U.S. foreign policy and also in China's standing in the world. Those broader dynamics have an effect on the relationship as much as anything.

Even though from the perspective of the China desk in the State Department and the North American Affairs Bureau within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there has not been a whole lot of change, the two countries' global foreign policies have shifted enough that that's not really the only important

measure anymore of how to come up with a yardstick for saying whether U.S. foreign policy towards China or China's policy towards the U.S. is successful.

The U.S. government has come in for criticism from both the right and left for taking too soft an approach with China over issues such as Taiwan and human rights abuses. What do you make of these criticisms?

I think each one is actually a little different. On Taiwan, the U.S. has handled things relatively well. The measure for policy towards Taiwan at its heart is: has there been a conflict, or is a conflict likely to occur soon? And the U.S. vital national interest is in preventing a conflict that would require U.S. forces to intervene and would change the foundation of the U.S.'s relationship with China and China's relationship with others in the region. So to the extent that we are able to prevent a crisis and instill some sense of stability between the two sides, I think that's a good measure and I think so far we've been able to achieve that. The U.S. basically looks like it leans towards one side or the other when the other party looks like it's trying to change the status quo. And so in the late 1990s it looked like China was ratcheting up the pressure through its

exercises, so the U.S. looked like it was leaning towards Taiwan for a while. And then Taiwan started talking about having special state to state relations with China. Lee Teng-hui revealed more about his own sense of Taiwan's evolving place in the world, but then the U.S. issued the Three No's, and it looked like it was leaning more towards China.

In the very beginning of the Bush Administration, the U.S. announced plans for weapons sales towards Taiwan, but when the Chen Shui-bian administration started walking away from its commitments to not make independence a hallmark of its foreign policy, the U.S. started putting pressure in the other direction. So the U.S. leans back and forth, and I think that's what it's supposed to do to maintain a sense of balance and stability. And the election of Ma Ying-jeou has shown that it hasn't been changes in U.S. foreign policy that have been critical, it's the changes in Taiwan's domestic politics that are so important. And so the election of Ma has had an immediate positive effect on cross-strait relations. On Taiwan one can't really find too much at fault with the U.S.—maybe at the margins—but overall I think it's really positive. On human rights—again, this is really tough because the U.S. by the nature of its political system and the overall goals of its foreign



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policy places human rights and the dignity of human life quite high—dealing with China is difficult because we have such varied and multiple interests with China given her size and international position. Pushing China to change its human rights policy is extremely difficult. You can achieve marginal successes, but achieving fundamental changes is something that, if pursued aggressively, puts you at loggerheads with the other elements of your foreign policy with China that are very important and that probably shouldn't be sacrificed at the altar of human rights. So I think American presidents have this impetus to regularly raise human rights issues but they consistently fall short of their mark, understandably, because of the multiple goals that have to be achieved.

I can understand the disappointment that human rights groups have with American foreign policy towards China, but I can also appreciate the difficulties any administration has in trying to balance the multiple goals. The other problem with our human rights policies towards China is that U.S. foreign policy has lost some credibility on this issue because of how we've prosecuted the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. So it makes it much harder for us to take a tough line on the human rights practices of other countries. When the U.S. says that it can't repatriate the Uighurs who are held in Guantanamo Bay because it fears the type of treatment they may receive back in China, everyone has to raise an eyebrow because it's been demonstrated how the U.S. treats its own prisoners. I think the U.S. is at a very low point in its ability to carry out an effective human rights policy.

What did you make of calls to boycott the Beijing Olympics?

The calls for a boycott were originally in reaction to China's policy towards Darfur and then more recently towards the protests in and around Tibet. People were raising the idea of boycotting the Games as a whole and that didn't receive any positive attention so activists began raising the idea of boycotting just the opening ceremony as a fallback position. Then they realized that for the Chinese the Olympics is a sort of "coming out party," that they want the Games to provide a sign of China's growing reputation and acceptance internationally so boycotting the opening ceremony would be that type of signal.

I think the campaign to have this occur hasn't been carried out in a very consistent manner. There was no unanimity or consensus among activists that this would be the place where the global community should take a stand. So when this call reached its height in March around the Tibet protests, it didn't carry a lot of power or force behind it. You saw short-term political reactions in some capitals in Europe and by the Democratic political candidates in the U.S., but it really didn't have a strong force behind it. So I'm not surprised it didn't get a lot of support by the U.S. and others, and frankly—I know President Bush is saying he's just going as a sports enthusiast and it doesn't signal anything when obviously it signals much more than that—I think given the overall situation, attending the opening ceremony isn't necessarily saying to China "we think your human rights policies are totally fine and perfect." Having China host the Games, and having everyone there, brings

a spotlight on China that is both good and bad. It shows the progress China's made over the last 30 years and it also shows the places it hasn't achieved success and in fact still has very serious problems, by measure of both its international partners and segments of China's own population. Personally, I didn't think a boycott would be a wise decision. Attending fully in the Olympics doesn't necessarily suggest condoning all of the Chinese policies.

The New Republic editorialized recently that U.S. presidents tend to talk tough before taking office and then back pedal. Is this a fair assessment?

Yes, the New Republic is right on the money. I think it's entirely accurate; every candidate going back 20 or 30 years has done so on one issue or another. This time it's on economic issues for the most part because of the decline in the U.S. economy and the sense that China's winning unfairly in some areas. There's been some discussion of security issues by Senator McCain. But it's my feeling that once a candidate takes office their overall posture towards China evolves in a less aggressive direction.

The New Republic's editorial suggests this is a bad thing—that if we talk tough towards China we should stay tough. But I personally think this is a welcome adjustment. The reason candidates talk tough during their campaigns is they are trying to win votes. Particularly they're looking for votes from several labor constituencies in the Midwest, such as in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio—places whose economies aren't doing very well and where it is relatively easy to criticize China and our other trading partners

for engaging in unfair trade practices that then explain those economic problems. Whether or not the Chinese are engaging in unfair trade practices is another issue, but it does not entirely explain the economic situations in those states or the positions of the candidates. I think the fact that China is one of the last remaining Communist countries in the world also makes it easier. It also has a growing military and therefore, again, there are no points to be lost in taking a harsh position against China in a political campaign. I think once candidates get in office their perspective changes a lot. First because they don't need to win those votes anymore and they can think from a more balanced perspective where they have a variety of interests and policies to pursue. For example, trying to resolve the North Korea problem, as well as dealing with global proliferation issues, the environment, etc. The perspective of a president is different than a candidate.

The other reason that presidents shift is that those that do come into office and try to take a more aggressive approach fail. When President Clinton was elected he initially conditioned MFN, seeking Chinese concessions on human rights. He got very limited, token concessions from the Chinese who told him, essentially, we're not going to do anything else—we're going to call your bluff. They called his bluff and he had to back down. During the opening months of the current Bush administration the same type of thing occurred. We tried to be tough with China in response to the EP3 crisis, and people realized that a whole lot of issues that needed to be addressed might not be addressed if that approach were continued. And then 9/11 came along and that reinforced the idea that if we're really going to try to

achieve larger goals in U.S. foreign policy, following the strategy of the campaign isn't the right way to go. So the New Republic is correct; I just think the conclusion they draw is probably the opposite of what I would draw.

You wrote a book, “China Cross Talk,” looking at the U.S. debate over China policy. Do you think the debate taking place in the U.S. over China is a healthy/constructive one?

One thing that's important to recognize is that there is a public debate. The Chinese have internal debates about their own foreign policy, but they tend to be hidden and not in the open. And when you do see open disagreements about foreign policy, they tend to be reflected in protests in the streets, whether it's Chinese nationalist protesting about Japan or Taiwan. And one of the great things about our country, and democracies in general, is we have these open debates consistently where sides that have very different starting points and goals openly engage each other. And this has really been a hallmark of how U.S. policy towards China has been developed. There is this vigorous debate over time. One of the things I find troubling about the debate in the U.S., though, is that our basic goals with regard to China and our expectations of what we want to achieve with them has basically remained unchanged. We want a China that is open, peaceful, transparent and cooperative. These are laudatory goals, but they tend to have been the same in the 1970s as they are now; the call for China to be a responsible stakeholder is essentially a rewording of the same goals enunciated by President Carter when relations were formally established in the late 1970s. The idea of

China being a responsible stakeholder from a U.S. perspective is that China cooperates with the U.S. on the range of issues that affect the relationship and behave in a way that the U.S. finds acceptable. That is a somewhat different perspective from saying China is an international power in the global community, it has interests which are similar to ours, which diverge from ours, and we hope to engage it on a range of issues like we engage any other major power in the world today.

So the U.S. policy and the paradigm in which it occurs is about trying to change China, and that's not the nature of the way we talk about policies toward Japan, the European Union, or others. And I think this to some extent reflects the fact that China is still led by the Communist Party, and it also reflects our approach towards China since the mid 19th century—we have thought of China as a place that needs to evolve and adapt to the modern world. And we haven't updated our framework. It's the same feeling we have towards a lot of the developing world. And I find that element of the American debate frustrating because it's repetitive and it doesn't go away.

Perhaps we are moving towards a time when China is becoming a much more important force economically and becoming much more engaged politically in global affairs (in resolving the North Korea crisis, in other security areas, in climate change, and in the WTO). So if China becomes a more important voice in these various forums, perhaps we will talk less about needing to see change in China and more about dealing with China in a more mature fashion. I'm not sure exactly at what point that will occur, but I hope it arrives sooner rather than later.