

The United States, China, and the North Korean issue: Why does Beijing cooperate closely with the United States over North Korea?¹

Background.

- Long history of Chinese antagonism toward US power and influence on Korean peninsula.
- Moderate PRC stance in 1990s still witnessed reluctance to get involved in dealing with North Korean nuclear issue—a more passive approach.
- Initial PRC reaction to 2002 crisis was to lay responsibility on the US while expressing skepticism regarding North Korean nuclear weapons

Recent developments

- North Korean provocations in face of US resolve and greater US tendency to resort to coercion and use of force provide sufficient rationale for more active Chinese diplomacy;
- Beijing seeks to avoid conflict and manage tensions in ways that hopefully will deal in appropriate ways with the North Korean nuclear weapons

Important underlying trends

- Improvement in US-China relations during George W. Bush administration (*see p. 2*)
- Moderate Chinese policies toward Asia, including Korean peninsula (*see p. 5*)
- Strengths of US leadership position in East Asia—not significantly affected by US unilateralism elsewhere—US remains consultative in East Asia (*see page 7*)

Limits of US-China cooperation on North Korea (*see page 8*)

- China seeks to avoid conflict/instability—does not seek regime change
- China fears US consolidation of influence on Korean peninsula

¹ Talking points for August 25, 2003 presentation in Tokyo sponsored by RIETI by Robert Sutter, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA.

Recently improved US relations with China

1. Contending US Views regarding the improvement in US-China ties

American specialists have different views about what factors were most important in causing the favorable turn in China-US relations in 2001-2003, but they tend to agree that the improvement in US-Chinese relations has reinforced Beijing's moderate trend toward the United States and more broadly in Chinese policy toward Asia and the world.

A. One view explains the improvement in US-China relations in 2001-2003 largely on the basis of a change in Bush administration attitudes rather than a change in China's approach. These specialists argue that most US governments enter office promising a harder line policy toward China, only to adjust and moderate their policy in the face of realities involving China's importance for vital US interests in Asian and world affairs. They aver that the September 11, 2001 attack on America added significantly to the Bush administration's imperative to work constructively with Chinese leaders in the global war against terrorism.

B. A second school of thought among specialists of US-China relations acknowledges that Chinese moderation and accommodation in the face of Bush Administration firmness played a key role in encouraging the upswing of relations in 2001-2003, but they aver that Chinese leaders came to the judgment largely on the basis of greater confidence in China's regional and international situation. Their concern over Bush administration firmness and maneuvers was low while their moderation and accommodation came from a judgment that amid strong economic growth and unchallenged political dominance, the Communist Party led-Chinese government was making significant gains in its global standing, notably around its periphery in Asia. Relations with Southeast Asia and South Korea were particular bright spots, while relations with Russia, Central Asian governments, and South Asia remained on a positive footing. Other sources of Chinese leadership satisfaction and confidence resulted from acceptance of Beijing as the site of the 2008 Olympics, China's relatively smooth entry into the World Trade Organization, and its concurrent status as the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in 2002.

C. A third view—including this writer--believe that the Bush administration's effective use of power and influence in Asia, its firmness on Taiwan and other disagreements, and an initial downgrading of China's priority in US foreign policy prompted Beijing to reverse course and work assiduously in offering concessions and removing irritants to seek better US ties. *A detailed explanation of this view follows.*

The success of the US policy rests to a substantial degree on the design of the Bush policy and advantageous circumstances

Design

Bush revises Clinton approach

- Clinton's first term confused; US domestic forces prominent

- Clinton's second term engagement—avoid swings—PRC gets top priority—avoid loss of PNTR vote—worry legacy—impact on Gore—need show progress, repeated negotiations/interchange to achieve such progress—compromises on US side as well as PRC side (e.g. summits, three nos)

GWB strategy/approach:

- National power and influence matter
- US military/economic power matter
- Rely on allies
- Seek support from other power centers (Russia/India)

Mixed View of China

- Cooperate on economics/other—summit meetings
- Wary on security issues—need deter on Taiwan; deal with PLA buildup

Initially downgrade importance of China connection—don't ask for or need much from China—little need for negotiation that would require US compromises on Taiwan or other issues.

Can deal with negatives if needed:

- Taiwan
- WMD sanctions
- Downgrade PRC prominence
- Don't disrupt trade.

Circumstances

- Anti-terror war and Middle East foci—preoccupy US leaders and also most world leaders. China seeking high profile would probably not get much sympathy.
- Diminish US domestic debate over China—issues less salient.
- US domestic interests favoring more extreme policy also held in check by Bush administration deliberative style and broad experience in foreign-security policy matters
- China's domestic focus—leadership transition on top of economic/social/political problems—not seeking confrontation regarding Taiwan or other issues—not anxious to revise policy toward US

2. Outcomes

These three different explanations--each in its own way—reinforce a common judgment that China will continue to follow a moderate and pragmatic approach in relations toward its periphery, along with continued US-China moderation and cooperation in Asia:

- In the first instance, the perceived positive Bush administration shift toward China seems to work to China's advantage. As the US government becomes more accommodating to Chinese interests, Chinese leaders presumably are in an ever more influential position in Asian and world affairs. The utility of a more assertive and potentially disruptive Chinese stance toward Asian affairs appears low in this context.
- In the second instance, a Chinese leadership that is confident of China's power and influence in Asian affairs appears unlikely to resort to an assertive or aggressive stance that could disrupt the many recent gains in relations. It has taken the Chinese leadership several decades to come up with a seemingly winning strategy toward China's neighbors, and circumstances do not appear to warrant major change in the recent approach.
- In the third instance, Chinese leaders see little to be gained from an assertive posture with pressure tactics directed against the United States and US interests in Asia. Such an approach risks friction and worsened China-US relations, calling negative attention to China at a time when the US superpower seems prepared to confront its enemies in strong and concrete ways. A better path for China is to endeavor to try to cooperate with or wait out the United States.

China Rise in Asia—Are US interests in jeopardy?

The rapid rise of China's power and influence in world affairs, especially around China's periphery in Asia, prompts a steady stream of commentary warning of PRC efforts to push the United States out of Asia. China's enviable position as the locomotive of Asian economic growth, a growing web of China centered trade and political arrangements with Asian partners and the rapid buildup of Chinese military power reinforce these arguments.²

In contrast, actual Chinese behavior in the region and in improving relations with the US George W. Bush administration seem to underscore strong awareness by Chinese leaders of the difficulties involved in China competing directly with the US superpower. Beijing has worked to sustain regional stability and has sought greater economic advantage and political influence, without compromising core Chinese territorial, security, or other interests. Its efforts encountered difficulties, notably in the early 1990s, when China's assertiveness regarding disputed territories along its eastern and southern flanks and its bellicose posture during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996 alarmed its neighbors. Subsequently, Beijing has followed a long-term strategy to pursue a range of Chinese objectives that avoid direct confrontation and conflict with the US interests while they gradually broaden Chinese influence relative to that of the United States in the countries along China's periphery. Chinese objectives include:

- Securing China's foreign policy environment at a time when the PRC regime is focused on sustaining economic development and political stability;
- Promoting economic exchange that assists China's economic development;
- Calming regional fears and reassure Asian neighbors about how China will use its rising power and influence; and,
- Boosting China's regional and international power and influence, and helping to secure an ambiguous world order.

Meanwhile, recently disclosed private deliberations of senior Chinese leaders revealed that Party leader Hu Jintao recognized China's relative weakness in Asia in the face of US global dominance and the "accelerated strategic eastward movement" of US power, notably under the George W. Bush administration. He and other senior leaders argued that US power and the US importance to China's development required a flexible and accommodating Chinese posture that would keep China-US relations on an even keel.³ Hu Jintao added:

² John Pomfret, "In its own neighborhood, China emerges as a leader," Washington Post, October 18, 2001; Jane Parlez, "China races to replace US as economic power in Asia," New York Times, June 28, 2002; US-China Security Review Commission, Report to Congress July 2002, <http://www.uscc.gov/anrp02.htm>; Eric Eckholm and Joseph Kahn, "Asia worries about growth of China's economic power," New York Times, November 24, 2002; Thomas Woodrow, "The new great game," China Brief III/3, February 11, 2003.

³ Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley, China's New Rulers: The Secret Files. New York: New York Review Book, 2002. p. 207-209.

“[The United States has] strengthened its military deployments in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthened the US-Japan military alliance, strengthened strategic cooperation with India, improved relations with Vietnam, inveigled Pakistan, established a pro-American government in Afghanistan, increased arms sales to Taiwan, and so on. They have extended outposts and placed pressure points on us from the east, south, and west. This makes a great change in our geopolitical environment.”⁴

The power and policies of the George W. Bush administration indeed did change the Asian situation in important and sometimes negative respects for Chinese interests, especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America. Chinese leaders nonetheless reacted with restraint and moderation—helping to set the stage for a significant upswing in US-China relations over Asian and other issues. As detailed earlier, American specialists have different views about what factors were most important in causing the favorable turn in China-US relations in 2001-2003, but they tend to agree that the improvement in US-Chinese relations has reinforced Beijing’s moderate trend in policy toward Asia.

Looking out, the balance of considerations argues for a Chinese posture in Asia that will give more emphasis to the positive than the negative in China-US relations. Growing China-US common ground in Asian affairs will help US-China relations develop in agreeable ways and reinforce China’s overall moderate approach to the region. But the continuing clash of long term US-China interests in the region—particularly the continued PLA buildup targeted at Taiwan and US forces that might help Taiwan-- suggest that a major breakthrough toward strategic cooperation is unlikely.

⁴ Nathan and Gilley, China’s New Rulers, p. 207-208.

US leadership in a strong position

US leadership in Asia is strong both at home and abroad. This has allowed Bush administration to sustain and enhance its regional leadership and promote regional stability and development compatible with US interests. Also allowed US to pursue war on terrorism (where much of Asia is a secondary focus); and to advance arguments for strategic preemption and continued US world dominance, as it prepared for a showdown with Saddam Hussein.

Underlying US policy strengths in post Cold War Asia

1. US remains economic partner of choice of vast majority of Asia states—increased economic contacts vital to nation building elites in Asia and welcomed in United States.
2. US security presence in Asia welcomed by vast majority of Asian states and enjoys broad US domestic support.
3. US post Cold War pressure on values and human rights muted somewhat in pragmatic US quest for allies in war on terrorism. This adjustment in previously more active US pressure for democratic and political change is generally welcomed in Asia and works to ease US differences with authoritarian Central and South Asian states and China.
4. US power in the region is stronger than at any time since the Vietnam War. (Note here the expansion of US military presence and influence in Central, South, and Southeast Asia.)
5. Asian powers are preoccupied with domestic concerns and the vast majority seek no major quarrel with the United States
6. Asian states maneuver actively in the post Cold War environment but they remain deeply suspicious of one another and show no inclination to unify in any sort of an anti-US effort.
7. US domestic pressures for more extreme policies in Asia in the post Cold War period, notably toward China and North Korea, have been held in check particularly by US concerns about terrorism and related issues.

US—great power relations in Asia

All have seen some upswing and prospects for continuing good relations are generally positive

1. Greater strategic cooperation with Koizumi's Japan
2. Continued marked improvement in relations with Russia
3. US-Indian ties greatly improved since Bush administration
4. The turnabout with China—several alternate explanations but the same bottom line—China-US ties stable and improving. (See next section on improved US-China relations)

Outlook for US-China cooperation regarding Korea, other issues

Looking to the future, some optimists foresee a major breakthrough in China-US cooperation in Asia, but skeptics take fuller account of the many deeply rooted differences that Chinese and US leaders will continue to grapple with in the years ahead. Though the United States and China are developing more common ground in Asia, they differ strongly over Taiwan, how to secure stability in Korea, and ultimately which power will be paramount in Asia. The Chinese military buildup focused on Taiwan and US forces that might assist Taiwan in a conflict is a major negative consideration that is little affected by Chinese leaders hinting at possible pullback of some missiles focused on Taiwan. China remains the sole large power today building an array of more modern military forces to attack Americans. Below the surface of amity also lie a wide range of contentious security, political, economic and other difficult issues that make the US bilateral relationship with China by far the most contentious and complicated US relationship in Asian or world affairs.

If the Bush administration were to become bogged down in Iraq, the war on terrorism, or elsewhere, and/or it were to lose approval at home and abroad on account of Iraq or a major US economic downturn, Chinese leaders would feel compelled to revive pressure tactics of the past in order to walk back recent advances in US policy in areas sensitive to Beijing, notably Taiwan. Not to seek gains over Taiwan at times of US weakness or dependency on China would go against many decades of Chinese leadership practice in dealing with the United States over this issue.

Regarding US-China relations over Korea, a more forceful US stance on North Korea, perhaps following the successful US military assault toppling Saddam Hussein, would alarm China, which very likely would take strong measures to block the US pressure. US opinion leaders could see China's refusal to exert substantial pressure on North Korea in a more negative light as an obstacle to the outcome sought by these Americans.

Meanwhile, the day-to-day interaction of US and Chinese military forces along China's periphery has not been without significant incident, even as the two powers endeavored to resume more normal ties after the April 1, 2001 EP 3 episode. An unarmed US Navy surveillance ship was harassed and rammed by Chinese boats in waters off the Chinese coast in 2002. US surveillance aircraft along China's periphery routinely encounter Chinese fighters, sometimes at close quarters.

In sum, the balance of considerations argues for a Chinese posture that will give more emphasis to the positive than the negative in China-US relations. Growing China-US common ground will help US-China relations develop in agreeable ways and reinforce China's overall moderate approach to foreign policy. But the continuing clash of long-term US-China interests are reflected in current US-China differences over North Korea and Iraq, and particularly in the continued PLA buildup targeted at Taiwan and US forces that might help Taiwan. They suggest that a major breakthrough toward strategic cooperation is unlikely.