



## **Grading Bush's China Policy: A-** by Robert Sutter

President George W. Bush's February visit to Beijing and expected visits to the United States by Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao and President Jiang Zemin later this year mark an interlude for evaluating the effectiveness of Bush administration policy. Thus far, the current U.S. administration over the past year has done a better job developing and employing U.S. leverage regarding China than any U.S. government over the past three decades. It has established the basis for a delicate but sustainable balance in U.S.-China relations that is acceptable to Beijing and more favorable to Washington's key interests.

Chinese officials and commentators continue to express general satisfaction with the status of relations even though the U.S. government takes repeated actions that would have resulted in major Chinese outbursts in the past.

President Bush has followed his declaration to "do whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself (unprecedented in the past 30 years) with approval of large arms sales transfers and improved military cooperation, greater lee-way for Taiwan leaders visiting the United States, and repeated rhetorical support of Taiwan that also was unprecedented for a U.S. president visiting the PRC.

The administration's Quadrennial Defense Review unmistakably sees China as a potential threat in Asia; U.S. ballistic missile defense programs severely challenge China's nuclear deterrent and intimidation strategy against Taiwan; and rising U.S. influence and prolonged military deployments are at odds with previous Chinese strategy along China's western flank.

The Bush administration publicly and repeatedly warns and sanctions Chinese proliferators of weapons of mass destruction.

Sino-U.S. cooperation against Muslim extremist terrorism has not significantly lessened repeated and high-level U.S. criticism of China's human rights record in Xinjiang and against religious and political dissidents.

The Bush policy. Though early campaign rhetoric about China as a strategic competitor received heavy media attention, Bush gave relatively little attention to China and foreign policy during the campaign and early months of the administration, and he was careful to reaffirm strong interest in cooperative trade relations and China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). The administration's strategy toward China was part of a broader effort to improve U.S. power and influence in world and Asian affairs through U.S. economic and military strength, closer ties with U.S. allies and friends (in East Asia, especially Japan), and new openings with other world power centers, notably Russia and India. Unsure of rising China's implications for U.S. interests, the U.S. government cooperated in areas of common ground

while demonstrating stronger determination to defend U.S. security interests, notably regarding Taiwan and the western Pacific. The administration repeatedly downgraded China's priority for U.S. decision makers, placing the PRC well behind Asian allies and even Russia and India for foreign policy attention.

The EP-3 incident led to a sharp down turn in relations. Significantly, the Bush administration did not resort to high-level envoys or other special arrangements often used to resolve difficult U.S.-China issues and insisted on working through normal State Department and Defense Department channels that did not raise China's stature in U.S. foreign policy. The antiterrorism campaign saw an upswing in cooperation, though China was the most reserved among world power centers in supporting the U.S. war in Afghanistan. President Bush's visits to Shanghai in October and Beijing in February had as much to do with U.S. strategy in Asia as with China. They showed a willingness to meet Chinese leaders' symbolic needs for summitry, while sustaining a tough U.S. stance on bilateral differences and limiting U.S. requests for Chinese support.

China's calculus. Preoccupied with difficult leadership succession issues and protracted economic and social challenges to China's internal stability, Beijing leaders have sought to preserve advantageous U.S. economic contacts and avoid the broad and internally wrenching ramifications of any major change in China's U.S. policy. Seeking an Olympic bid for 2008 and a smooth transition into the WTO added to reasons for moderation. China also has become somewhat more optimistic about cross-Strait relations, though the military build-up opposite Taiwan continues.

The second Clinton administration was seen by Beijing as anxious to avoid major downturns or "swings" in the China relationship that might have jeopardized the passage of permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) legislation in Congress and called attention to the president's mixed record on handling China policy. Against this background, the Clinton administration gave China the highest priority in U.S. Asia policy - a potential source of leverage for the PRC. By contrast, the firm U.S. reaction to the EP-3 episode, markedly increased U.S. support for Taiwan, and new U.S. focus on China as a potential threat showed Beijing's leaders that the current U.S. government was prepared to see U.S.-China relations worsen if necessary. The firm U.S. stance seemed to have U.S. domestic backing, fitting well with mainstream congressional and U.S. media opinion regarding China. Thus, Chinese leaders soon recognized that if U.S.-China relations were to avoid further deterioration, it was up to China to take steps to improve ties. The result has seen Chinese officials more solicitous and less acrimonious in interaction with U.S. officials in many years, a toning down of Chinese rhetoric against U.S. hegemonism, and even some tentative signs of public PRC support for the U.S. military presence in East Asia.

Outlook. The current balance in U.S. policy toward China means that Chinese leaders are likely to continue to be solicitous of improved U.S. ties and less likely to pressure the U.S. government for concessions or threaten strong countermeasures to U.S. actions on Taiwan and other sensitive issues. Beijing is not compromising core interests regarding Taiwan, proliferation, human rights, and other issues, though it may be more willing to make some case-by-case concessions in the interest of stabilizing the relationship. U.S. business interests seem satisfied with the enlarging U.S.-China economic relationship, while U.S. friends and allies in Asia are reassured that the past year has seen relations move toward greater stability and reduced tensions. The war against terrorism has muffled much of the U.S. domestic debate over China policy, allowing U.S. administration leaders a freer hand in dealing with China.

However, the situation remains delicate - the administration has hardliners who could push too hard on Taiwan or other sensitive issues, prompting a strong PRC backlash; Taiwan supporters could seek advantage at the expense of U.S.-PRC stability. Moreover, the recent U.S.-China relationship based on a realist calculus of respective self-interests may hold little promise of building closer cooperation based on greater mutual understanding and compromise.

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