Prospects for U.S.-China Global Cooperation:

An American Perspective

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While the Chinese government has been relatively silent on the issue, the United States government speaks increasingly of U.S.-China global cooperation. In fact, some might argue that it has become the *leitmotif* of U.S. policy towards China in recent years.

**The American Case for U.S.-China Global Cooperation**

This new paradigm began to gain ascendance with then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick’s famous 2005 call for China to become a “Responsible International Stakeholder” (R.I.S.) in world affairs. Zoellick’s concept provided the intellectual underpinnings of the Bush engagement policy toward China. Zoellick’s concept was important for three new reasons. First, it called on China to assume a greater global role and responsibility for addressing a broad array of global governance issues (and was implicitly critical of China for not shouldering a proportionate share of responsibility or “free riding” in global institutions). Second, it therefore implicitly recognized China as a global actor (if not power) and thus redefined the Sino-American relationship as a global one—not merely as a bilateral or regional Asian relationship. Third, by calling on China to be a global partner of the United States, it implicitly rejected the view among the hawks in the administration that China needed to be “contained.” The R.I.S. concept gave rise to a deeper institutionalization of U.S.-China relations, as it stimulated the “Senior Dialogue” between Zoellick (later, Deputy Secretary Negroponte) and Executive Vice-Foreign Minister (now State Councilor) Dai Bingguo. The Senior Dialogue, in turn, spawned a series of regional and functional dialogues on different parts of the world and pressing functional issues.

Since coming to office, the new Obama administration, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in particular, have embraced this paradigm (although not using the same terminology). As Secretary Clinton put it upon arrival in Beijing on February 22, 2009: “The global community is counting on China and the United States to collaborate, to pursue security, peace and prosperity for all.”

1 This was also made clear in Secretary Clinton’s speech to the Asia Society on February 13, 2009: “You know very well how important China is and how essential it is that we have a positive, cooperative relationship. It is vital to peace and prosperity, not only in the Asia-Pacific region, but

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worldwide.” Clinton then went on to implicitly undercut the arguments of the “strategic hedgers”: “Now, some believe that China on the rise is, by definition, an adversary. To the contrary, we believe that the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other’s successes. It is in our interest to work harder to build on areas of common concern and shared opportunities.”

In these brief but key sentences, Clinton signaled both strong continuity with the Bush administration’s emphasis on Sino-American global cooperation as well as the possibility of deemphasizing the element of strategic hedging. While she did not use the term “R.I.S.” on her visit to Beijing, Clinton did call for a “positive and cooperative relationship” with China, and while en route to Beijing she called for a “comprehensive partnership.” During her confirmation hearings she also twice used the formulation “positive and cooperative relationship.” Since that time, an implicitly agreed terminology “cooperative, comprehensive partnership” has been adopted by both sides. While the terminology is slightly different from the Bush administration, the substance of the policy remains the same: engage China comprehensively and globally.

Additionally, in Beijing, Secretary Clinton unveiled a second priority of the new Obama administration: a broadening of the strategic agenda with China. During her swing through Asia and her visit to Beijing, Secretary Clinton reiterated several of the longstanding areas of U.S.-China security cooperation—notably North Korea, Iran, counter-terrorism, and military-to-military exchanges. But she went further by placing four new issues on the bilateral agenda and identifying them all as strategic issues: climate change, energy security, arms control, and global financial stability. With the addition of these four new and important areas of strategic collaboration, Clinton signaled a broadening of the strategic agenda from traditional security to include non-traditional security issues concerning energy, the environment and finance.

Thus it is clear, from the American side, that the last and current administrations are placing priority emphasis on pursuing global cooperation with China. The basis for this lies in the fact that, for the first time in history, China is now truly acting on the global stage—on every continent, in virtually every country, and on most global issues.

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This is new in international affairs. China’s presence spans the spectrum of diplomacy (bilateral and multilateral), commerce, military affairs, cultural affairs, science and technology, and other spheres. In certain areas—such as military affairs—China does not possess the capability to project power around the globe, but it does engage in military exchanges on a truly global basis. No other nation except the United States is such a global actor across all these spheres—not the European Union, not Japan, not Russia, or any other state. We have reached the point where the United States and China are the two most important actors on the global stage. To be sure, their relative power remains significantly skewed—as the United States far outstrips China across a broad range of indicators. Nonetheless, the reality is that China is also now a global actor if not global power.

**The Potential, Pitfalls, and Agenda for U.S.-China Global Cooperation**

On this basis, some notable American experts such as Zbigniew Brzezinski have even called for an “informal G-2” to be formed to contend with a wide variety of global challenges.  

3 Brzezinski, no stranger either to China or global strategic affairs, argues that Washington and Beijing need to “widen and deepen their geo-strategic cooperation,” including in the following areas: global financial stability; Iran; Afghanistan and Pakistan; Israel-Palestine; climate change; global peacekeeping; preventing the collapse of “failed states”; non-proliferation; sustainable development; and eliminating nuclear weapons.4

The idea of an informal G-2 makes Japan, the European Union and other American allies very nervous—for fear of exclusion as a Sino-American condominium emerges on the global horizon. Such fears are unfounded. While the U.S. and China are both global actors, the two nations have a number of deep differences in the way they see the world and international order. These are reinforced by deep differences in their domestic polities. Their global interests may intersect, but this is not the same as their sharing the same interests. In some areas and on some issues (see below) intersecting interest become shared interests—but as the U.S. and China move down the road of potential global partnership, one must remain aware of the significant differences in worldview and respective preferences for world order. For example, China’s preference

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for non-interventionist policies (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, New Security Concept, Harmonious World, etc.) is fundamentally at variance with America’s preference for actively shaping the global environment and occasionally inducing change inside of states. China’s preference for “comprehensive security” is at variance with Washington’s preference for institutionalized alliances. American preferences for universality of norms, such as human rights, are at variance with Beijing’s preference for the relativity of such norms. And so on.

Thus, however appealing on the surface, there are deep and significant differences in worldview and policy preferences of both countries that will restrict the emergence of such a condominium in world affairs. Some American observers are very skeptical of the basis for Sino-American global cooperation. Moreover, to date, it is the American side that has raised this concept, while the Chinese side has been noticeably quiet about it. Indeed, discussions with scholars and officials in Beijing indicate a distinct discomfort with the concept. Thus, the United States needs to be careful not to oversell itself on either the concept of an informal G-2 or the actual potential for U.S.-China global cooperation. It is entirely possible that, having sold itself on the concept, Washington would ask things of Beijing that it was neither willing nor able to do.

Despite these potential shortcomings of the G-2 concept, there is significant scope for global cooperation between Beijing and Washington and Brzezinski has identified several important areas for Sino-American collaboration. One could add several other potential areas of Sino-American global cooperation to Brzezinski’s list. I would add two items in particular:

(1) Reforming global international and regional institutions across a broad range of economic and security issues. The United States has been at the heart of the post-war international institutional order, while China has joined this order progressively over the past three decades. The United States has also been deeply involved in regional multilateral institutions—particularly in Asia, Europe, Middle East, and Latin America—while China has now become a member of many of these regional organizations while starting some new ones in which the U.S. is not present (SCO, ASEAN + 3, EAS, etc.).

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There is an increasing recognition that global institutions such as the United Nations, the IMF, the G-8, and the World Bank are in need of reformation—but so too are many regional organizations in need of rethinking and reform. To be sure, many nations need to be active in this process, but the United States and China are key actors.

(2) Working to make China’s global ODA more transparent, in line with OECD standards, and identifying an appropriate division of labor in aid to developing countries (to avoid duplication, ensure effective distribution of scarce resources, and improve domestic governance in recipient countries). China is an increasing aid donor (as well as recipient) to developing countries (particularly Africa), while the U.S., Japan and the European Union remain the leading global donors (as well as Australia and Canada). Yet China remains outside of the international donor institutional community and does not adhere to global standards in this area. Significant efforts need to be made to bring China inside this donor community and to adhere to global standards.

Several of the papers prepared for this conference suggest other possibilities as well.

American Suggestions

American contributors to this conference have identified a number of suggested areas for U.S.-China global cooperation. Nicholas Lardy notes the need to lead the fight against trade protectionism and toward reducing global economic imbalances. David Pumphrey points out the important shared interests in energy security, harnessing clean energy technologies to become low(er) carbon energy economies, and avoiding disruptions to international oil supplies or price spikes. Daniel Erikson points to the potential for closer U.S.-China cooperation in Latin American regional multilateral institutions. Edward Gnehm notes the potential roles the U.S. and China can both play in providing economic assistance to the Palestinians; working to stabilize the government and economy in Iraq; working to engage Iran with the international community while halting its nuclear weapons program; and countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden. David Shinn identifies a long list of potential areas of U.S.-China cooperation in Africa in the fields of energy extraction, aid assistance, agriculture, public health, peacekeeping, anti-smuggling and anti-piracy operations, environmental protection, and other areas. Robert Sutter identifies several potential areas of cooperation in Asia, including disaster relief;
public health and countering pandemics; anti-piracy and other non-traditional security measures; fostering open trade and economic recovery; counter-terrorism; North Korea’s nuclear program and social stability; maintaining stability and continuing to improve relations across the Taiwan Strait. Sutter identifies three other possible areas of cooperation: Myanmar; Afghanistan and Pakistan; and U.S.-China-Japan trilateral economic cooperation.

**Chinese Suggestions**

Chinese contributors have also identified a number of areas of potential Sino-American global cooperation.

Zhen Binxi argues that the two governments have coordinated and cooperated quite well during the current global financial crisis and that the institutional mechanisms have been strengthened (the U.S.-China Strategic Global and Economic Dialogue as well as the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade). But Zhen also offers five further suggestions:

--for the U.S. to take appropriate measures to safeguard China’s investments in the United States, particularly in U.S. debt instruments;

--use the aforementioned existing institutional mechanisms to boost strategic mutual trust and resolve differences;

--resist protectionism;

--identify new areas of economic cooperation;

--develop new channels of multilateral and regional trade and economic consultation.

With respect to the Asian region, Yang Xiyu argues that regional Sino-American cooperation remains far from sufficient. Cooperation on regional financial stabilization and redoubling efforts in the Six Party Talks to denuclearize North Korea are pressing, but he also suggests that there is scope for closer cooperation on Afghanistan and Pakistan. More broadly, Yang is right to raise three longer-term questions for Sino-U.S. relations in Asia: (1) what kind of long-term permanent peace regime can be put in place on the Korean peninsula? (2) what are the mutual visions for a Northeast Asian Peace and Security Cooperation Mechanism? (3) how can bilateral military-to-military exchanges
become compatible and conducive to long-term regional peace and stability? These questions are all worthy of contemplation by each side and mutual exploration.

Concerning Latin America, Wu Hongying suggests that the dialogue mechanism established at the Assistant Secretary of State level during the Bush administration should be maintained, deepened, and enlarged (she also suggests the possibility of bringing Latin Americans into such talks so as to avoid the appearance of exclusion). Wu also argues that China’s new membership in the Inter-American Development Bank is an opportunity to deepen cooperation.

Guo Wensong and Liu Qing both discuss the potential for energy cooperation. Guo argues that energy security cooperation is imperative and pressing in a range of areas. The existing institutional mechanism, such as the Sino-American Energy Policy Dialogue within the framework of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, needs to be broadened, deepened, and strengthened, and that a variety of exchanges need to be commenced for joint training, developing a joint energy database, and other collaboration. Mutual assistance to develop clean sources of energy and improving energy efficiency offer multiple opportunities for collaboration. As the world moves closer to the Copenhagen Conference in December 2009, Guo argues there should be closer coordination and dialogue between the two governments. Finally, Guo argues that both countries have a mutual interest in maintaining regional stability in energy producing regions and ensuring open and secure sea lanes. Guo’s colleague Liu Qing echoes many of these suggestions but also offers useful ones for cooperation and innovation in clean energy technologies.

**Modalities for Forging U.S.-China Global Cooperation**

From the above suggestions, and bearing in mind the previously-discussed limitations to the G-2 concept, it is abundantly evident that there is both a strong need and great potential for U.S.-China cooperation on a wide range of pressing and longer-term global issues.

Surely, as many of these issues are pressing, several priority areas will have to be established. In addition to the question of prioritization, there is also the issue of institutionalization. Are the modalities and institutional mechanisms sufficient to meet the needs outlined above? That is, in this observer’s view, the multiple issues on the bilateral global agenda can be best pursued through a combination of (1) establishing...
institutionalized inter-governmental working groups that communicate regularly and meet periodically; and (2) high-level meetings at the ministerial, vice-presidential and presidential levels. The latter will energize the former. Too often in the past, the two sides have had the latter without the former. Both sides like to claim that there are now more than 60 bilateral dialogue mechanisms in existence, but these are episodic and not regular. The relationship needs, I believe, a deeper degree of institutionalization—through the establishment of bilateral ministerial working groups (WGs). On some issues, when warranted, such WGs can involve other nations—such as Japan, Russia, or the EU—but the core would be Sino-American. This will perhaps give the appearance of a G-2, but in reality China already has such WG mechanisms with the EU and other countries. The virtue of this WG approach is that it would institutionalize cooperation and would infuse both bureaucracies with positive missions.

There is also a need to establish a series of designated “Track II” dialogue mechanisms to address many of the above issues and to feed into the governmental level. This very series of GWU-CIIS conferences, now in its fourth round over eight years, is an example (model?) of such Track II partnership. We began this series long before Robert Zoellick’s or Zbigniew Brzezinski’s calls for increased Sino-American cooperation on global issues, as we believed back in 2001 that as China became an increasingly global actor its activities would increasingly intersect with American interests and equities. We anticipated that in some areas of the world and on some issues Sino-American competition was to be expected—but we also believed that through such a series of dialogues at least four goals could be realized:

--each side could become better educated and sensitized to the other’s activities, interests, and equities around the world;

--such a sensitization would hopefully alert both sides to potential frictions, which could be avoided;

--areas of potential cooperation could be identified, on which the two governments would hopefully follow-through;

--professional experts on various parts of the world and various functional issues, who would not normally interact, would meet each other—hopefully forging lasting professional relationships and possible intellectual collaboration.
These original goals remain as valid today as when we initiated this biennial series in 2001. What has changed in the interim is the increased recognition that the United States and China can and should be *global partners*. The global agenda facing the two nations is complex. There is a pressing need to build intellectual and institutional expertise on global governance issues in Chinese universities, think tanks, and government (the United States enjoys a stronger capacity at present)—but also to bring together American and Chinese experts to begin building a global cooperative relationship from the bottom-up.