Shaping Compatible Sino-U.S. Relationship in Asia

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Asia, as the region in which China is located, occupies top priority in Chinese foreign policy. China’s strategic goal in this fundamental region embodies two basic objectives: First, to maintain lasting peace and stability; and second, to promote sustainable development and prosperity in the regional economy. China finds the two objectives not only meet its own need to focus permanently on domestic reform and development, but also are in line with the common interests and aspirations of all other Asian countries.

In order to achieve the two objectives, the Chinese government has implemented its Asian policy characterized by “treating all neighboring countries as good neighbors and cooperative partners.” China believes that it can, through such policy, maintain and enjoy peaceful, friendly and cooperative external environments for domestic development.

The basic elements of the Chinese Asian policy are as follows:

------ Keeping efforts to improve and develop bilateral relations with all neighboring countries friendly and cooperative.

------ Playing an active role in regional/sub-regional cooperation mechanisms in a variety of fields. Currently, there are about 40 plus multilateral cooperation mechanisms or organizations in Asia, and China has taken part in almost all of them.

------ Promoting bilateral and regional/sub-regional trade liberalization. China was the first non-ASEAN country to sign an FTA with ASEAN, and has established a free trade zone with ASEAN. A feasibility study on a China-Japan-South Korea trilateral FTA is still ongoing.

------ Enhancing regional peace and stability through comprehensive, non-discriminatory, equal cooperation among all countries concerned in order to establish common security for all countries, rather than for only some countries, or
country groups.

China believes that the U.S. shares common strategic interests with China in: a) maintaining lasting peace and stability, and b) promoting sustainable prosperity in Asia. In other words, neither the U.S. nor China intends to disorder regional peace and stability; both the U.S. and China hate to experience disruptions of the trend towards economic prosperity in Asia. Theoretically, the two shared objectives should lay a solid common ground for the U.S. and China to conduct comprehensive cooperation in Asian affairs.

In practice, however, a number of political and strategic factors hinder the two great countries from having in-depth comprehensive cooperation in the region:

------ Different doctrines in foreign policy: The U.S.’s Asia policy is based on leadership/partnership, while China’s is based on independence/interdependence. For China, independence means it hates to either lead, or be led; and interdependence means it is ready to be responsible and cooperative. Obviously, there are, in terms of partnership vs. interdependence, some overlap between the U.S. and China. Additionally, there are differences in policy orientation in terms of leadership vs. independence.

------ Mutual suspicions and distrust: There have been quite a number of mutual suspicions and distrust between the two powers. Primarily, the U.S. thinks that China’s military modernization is directed at the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific; while China has been, for a long time, suspicious of the U.S. strategy designed to contain and surround China by establishing networks of military alliances and arrangements with Asian countries.

------ Different approaches to enhance regional peace and stability: The U.S. used its bilateral alliances as the base, especially the U.S.-Japan alliance as the cornerstone, of regional security. In fact, such alliance-based security strategy can
only contribute to a zero-sum-game style security architecture. For having a positive-sum-game style security structure in Asia, China has raised the “New Outlook of Regional Security,” in which China seeks comprehensive and common security for all countries concerned, rather than for only some countries or country groups. China opposes “absolute security” for some countries or country groups at the cost of other countries’ security.

Compared with the above-mentioned differences, the common objectives of maintaining peace, stability, sustainable development and prosperity are much more important for both countries. The two commonly shared objectives can, and will, be able to prevent China and the U.S. from engaging in strategic competition in the region, and will be able to reshape the Sino-U.S. relationship in Asia toward a compatible structure. Furthermore, some of those aforementioned differences can be addressed or resolved in the course of comprehensive cooperation between the two countries.

Needless to say, current levels of cooperation on Asian affairs between China and the U.S. are far from enough, though there has been positive Sino-U.S. cooperation on a wide range of issues in Asia. Greater potential remains to be explored. Currently, the two sides should focus on urgent issues and challenges facing the region, such as:

------- Cooperation on pulling Asia as a whole out of the financial crisis. China has joined in the “10 plus 3” effort to set up an Asian Foreign Exchange Reserve Pool that will give financial stability to the regional economy. China hopes that the U.S. can play a constructive role in cooperation with China and other Asian countries to stabilize this region’s financial markets, and enhance free trade across the Pacific.

------- Cooperation on the resumption of the Six Party Talks to pull North Korea back on the road toward denuclearization. Currently, China and the U.S.
need closer coordination on keeping a low profile towards the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the two sides should make a joint effort toward building architecture in which U.S.-DPRK bilateral talks and the Six Party Talks can coordinate with each other. China and the U.S. should also work to compose a two wheel vehicle to bring about what both want, specifically, denuclearization on the Peninsula. At this point, it is vital to reiterate that denuclearization is a goal that the two great powers are unable to compromise.

----- Cooperation on the Pakistan/ Afghanistan issue. The international community needs to assist Pakistan’s fight against terrorism in the Pakistan/ Afghanistan border areas. The U.S. and China can have a sort of “labor division” on this issue. For China, it can play a positive role in encouraging and assisting Pakistan, with necessary and proper means, in campaigns against the fundamentalists and terrorists in the areas bordering Afghanistan. The U.S. should persuade India to reduce military pressures on Pakistan, and take positive, cooperative measures to improve its relationship with Pakistan, so that Pakistan can believe that their primary threat comes from terrorism, instead of from India, and therefore input the majority of their forces to fight the terrorists.

Besides these hot issues, some strategic and long term questions relating to the region should be addressed by China and the U.S. through strategic dialogues and real cooperation, such as:

----- What kind of role can and should China and the U.S., respectively, play in building a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula? What kind of role should China and the U.S. play in the future of Korean Peninsula?

----- What visions and long term strategies do China and the U.S.
respectively have on a security cooperation mechanism in Northeast Asia, and how should they go about making them compatible, rather than competitive? How can they bring about common security for all countries in the region? 

----- How can a new style of compatible military-to-military relationship be built up between an already existing power, the U.S., and a rising power, China, for lasting peace and stability in Asia Pacific?