

Small Mercies

China and America after 9/11

—David M. Lampton—

“THIS CHANGES everything” was Senator Chuck Hagel’s verdict as he surveyed the transmogrified landscape of international and domestic politics in the immediate wake of the “911” attacks. Others, such as retiring senator and China nemesis Jesse Helms, asserted that nothing fundamental has changed in U.S.-China relations, and that nothing should change. As for Taiwan, it hopes Helms is right but fears Hagel may be. It worries that Washington may seek to win Beijing’s help in the struggle against global terrorism at its expense; as the *China Post* in Taipei put it: “Communism . . . is no longer considered a serious threat but rather a helping hand in the new war against terrorism.”¹

The unsurprising but useful truth is that some things have changed and others have not. The trick is to figure out which is which.

What has *not* changed is the careful calculation of national interest that guides

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Beijing’s decision-making process. What *has* changed is that the United States is now more focused and disciplined in defining its interests with respect to China. In dealing with Beijing, Washington has learned quickly to pursue a less cluttered agenda, with sharper priorities filtered through the lens of national security. This is imposing a discipline on the U.S. political system that has not existed since the Tiananmen bloodshed of 1989. As for Beijing, its elite sees an opportunity to improve relations to an extent that it has not perceived possible for over a decade.

The principal feature of U.S.-China relations for the foreseeable future will be that two realist decision-making elites will be dealing with each other within the constraints of their respective domestic political circumstances and the uncertainties inherent in wartime. But while the two governments have stumbled into a new framework for limited security cooperation, other realms of policy will be affected minimally—unless the common threat to both nations rises further, making more intimate cooperation both necessary and politically feasible.

Security cooperation will be limited because important constituencies in each nation remain skeptical of the other’s

¹“Anti-Terrorism Helps Mainland China Rise, But...”, *China Post*, October 16, 2001.

long-term intentions. Both sides are uncertain about which forms of cooperation would serve its interests. For example, in October as Washington sought Chinese support for the struggle against terrorism, and tried to create a positive atmosphere for President Bush's meeting with President Jiang Zemin in Shanghai, the Bush Administration found itself internally divided over whether to waive a Tiananmen-era sanction against supplying the Chinese with spare parts for previously sold Black Hawk helicopters. The administration demurred. In short, while there is a new context that fosters some cooperation, old problems ranging from Taiwan to proliferation to human rights have not disappeared.

Amid this mixed circumstance, four questions beg further examination. First, how do Beijing and Washington define their strategic circumstances, and how do those circumstances differ from the 1971–72 era when Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger went to China? Second, what domestic constraints may make intimate cooperation difficult for both Beijing and Washington? Third, what can Washington expect in terms of Chinese cooperation, and will it be significant enough to overcome deeply embedded problems in the bilateral relationship? In turn, what steps might the American side take to facilitate more meaningful cooperation with Beijing?

A New Basis for Cooperation?

WHEN President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong set U.S.-China relations on a new trajectory in Beijing on February 21, 1972, the U.S. President said, "What brings us together is a recognition of a new situation in the world and a recognition on our part that what is important is not a nation's internal political philosophy. What is important is its

policy toward the rest of the world and toward us."² The shared perception of threat from Moscow was so powerful that Beijing and Washington subordinated their many disagreements about territory (Taiwan) and ideology (human rights and democracy) to the exigencies of security cooperation. Thereafter, the United States and China engaged in parallel opposition to Soviet proxy wars in Africa, and Washington sought to deter Moscow from using armed force against China in the late 1960s and the late 1970s. The two governments cooperated in monitoring Soviet missile tests from western China. And most intimately, the two cooperated in opposing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by supporting the Afghan *mujaheddin*.

The comparatively long period of Sino-American security cooperation was brought to an end by a series of developments, the principal ones being that China's national power grew much more rapidly than had been anticipated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the sharp reaction of Americans to the 1989 Tiananmen bloodshed. The *coup de grâce* to strategic cooperation was delivered when the Warsaw Pact crumbled and the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. With security concerns no longer a trump card to discipline potentially dissenting voices in Congress and deter other claimants on America's China policy (such as economic and human rights organizations), interest group politics in America filled the void.

The new disciplining effect of renewed security cooperation in the wake of September 11, however, will be considerably weaker now than it was in the 1970s and 1980s—again, unless the

²Nixon quoted in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Secret Talks with Beijing & Moscow* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 64.

perceived common threat to China and America rises further. Security cooperation in the war against terrorism is likely to be limited and ambivalent because constituencies in both countries are deeply divided over how much of a long-term threat each society poses to the other, because Beijing is so focused on its domestic problems, and because China does not feel as threatened as America. As a senior Chinese scholar put it to an American group in October 2001, the events of September 11 are "still regarded as an American misfortune, still very far away. So, how much political risk will Chinese leaders take?" Consequently, in both Washington and Beijing, defining a common security agenda has become much more complex than it was for Nixon and Mao.

The ambivalences created by the tension between the need for short-term security cooperation in the war against terror and long-term strategic distrust is nowhere so well illustrated as in the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), issued by the U.S. Department of Defense almost three weeks after September 11, 2001. While some hasty revisions were made in the QDR after "911", neither the U.S. effort to build a global coalition nor President Jiang's almost immediate personal pledge to President Bush on September 12—that "China is ready to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with the United States and the international community in combating all manner of terrorist violence"³—prevented the following from appearing in the QDR: "The possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region [East Asia and the East Asian littoral]."⁴

To Beijing these words mean that Washington sees China as a potential security challenge and that the United States is building future capabilities with that in mind. This posture clearly weakens

the elite and popular basis for Chinese cooperation with the United States, but it does not remove it altogether. Beijing will still provide meaningful assistance to the struggle against terrorism because it, too, fears Central Asian and Middle Eastern terrorism (particularly with the 2008 Olympics coming up in China), and because it wants to protect its economic interests with the United States. In addition, America and China now share an obvious interest in a stable Pakistan, and Beijing does not want to be isolated regionally or globally. The point of departure for Chinese strategic thinking is the need to maintain a set of external relationships and conditions that permit internal development to proceed with minimum feasible difficulty. Among external players, the United States has the greatest impact on that environment and hence on China's prospects for development.

Nonetheless, as China's leaders survey their country's periphery they see one major trend and from it they sense one major fear. The trend is that most of the major states around China are aligning with the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism to various degrees and for undefined durations. Russia has veered considerably closer to the West by allowing U.S. military overflights destined for the Afghan theater; making it clear that Russia has no objection to former Soviet Central Asian republics being used as staging grounds for U.S. military and intelligence operations in Afghanistan; indicating that it will consider modifications to the ABM Treaty; and suggesting a

³Jiang Zemin quoted in Reuters World Report, September 13, 2001.

⁴*Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 30, 2001), pp. 2, 4. The East Asian littoral is defined "as the region stretching from south of Japan through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal."

desire for closer relations with even a further expanded NATO. Washington's relations with a nervous New Delhi have improved, as have U.S. ties with Pakistan, Beijing's long-time ally on the subcontinent. Japan has taken the opportunity (some Chinese call it a "pretext") of the coalition against terrorism to be more helpful than it was in the Gulf War, and has broadened its security role in the rear-area support dimension, a sensitive issue throughout Asia. Even Iran, by indicating a willingness to assist with downed American aircraft, may be setting the stage for improved relations with Washington. That the United States could emerge from the present conflict with a stronger diplomatic position in the region—and perhaps a larger military presence as well—is a concern to Beijing.

This trend around its periphery feeds into China's millennia-old fear: encirclement. One Hong Kong analyst admirably summed up the perspective of at least some in Beijing: "To China, it means that the United States fills the last gap in the northeast of its ring of encirclement. . . . China will feel prickles down its back."⁵

Other factors will also affect the level and tone of U.S.-China cooperation. One is China's relative propinquity to the action. If one conceives of the coalition against terrorism as a series of concentric rings, where countries closer to the core cooperate more extensively with Washington than those toward the periphery, China lies at some intermediate point moving toward the outer rings. NATO will be close to the center, with Pakistan, selected Central Asian and Arab states, Japan, and India occupying progressively more distant rings. President Bush, through his telephone calls and other communication with President Jiang, as well as his compressed trip to the APEC leaders' meeting in Shanghai on October 19–21, has pro-

moted cooperation with Beijing, but there are constraints on how far he can, will or should go. His discussions with President Jiang in Shanghai and their joint press conference there on October 19 made clear that China is not at the core of the coalition.⁶ President Jiang did not explicitly endorse the use of force against Afghanistan and raised the Taiwan question. President Bush noted issues of proliferation and human rights, saying, "The war on terrorism must never be an excuse to persecute minorities", a reference to initial Chinese attempts to link "separatist" tendencies in China's west to terrorism.

Not only can the coalition against terrorism be visualized as a set of concentric rings, but the actual and potential targets of U.S. action can be thus arrayed as well. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda are the core targets, and every critical government has agreed initially with that. Building a broad coalition to deal with those targets, to include China, has been comparatively easy. But if the military phase of the campaign spreads beyond Afghanistan, then Washington must anticipate increasing misgivings and perhaps resistance from Beijing, among others. Moving toward the next ring of target states (Iraq springs immediately to mind) would be very difficult for Beijing to support, unless such a state were shown unambiguously to have been actively complicit in terrorist attacks on the United States—or, in the future, on other coalition members. As Walter McDougall put it in a broader context,

⁵Ba Ren, "The United States Meddles with Afghanistan to Kill Three Birds with One Stone", *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong Internet version in Chinese), September 24, 2001.

⁶Office of the Press Secretary, October 19, 2001, "Remarks by President Bush and President Jiang Zemin in Press Availability", Western Suburb Guest House, Shanghai, People's Republic of China.

Beijing may be “in for a dime, but not necessarily for a dollar.”⁷

More immediate considerations also preoccupy Beijing. With roughly 19 million Muslims in China, Beijing is anxious not to be seen as participating in a clash of civilizations. This internal security fear is mirrored externally, with so many Muslim states to its vast, sparsely populated and vulnerable west. China is also becoming increasingly dependent upon oil supplies from abroad (30.1 percent dependent in 2000, and an anticipated dependence of 60 percent in 2020). The Middle East is particularly important, accounting for 60 to 70 percent of China’s crude oil imports, and so, quite predictably, Beijing is reluctant to alienate the major oil supplying countries or see the price of crude jump because of instability.

Domestic Limits to Cooperation

BYOND THE strategic and security inhibitions noted above lies the critical realm of domestic politics in both America and China. Domestic constraints in the United States inhibit Washington from taking certain steps that Beijing’s leaders could use to justify positive steps of their own toward America. Similarly, domestic constraints in China make it hard for Beijing to take certain steps that might lead to change in Washington. The modesty of the cooperation that is likely before us makes it hard to justify a transformation of the overall relationship in either capital—though both President Bush and President Jiang probably desire such an outcome. For example, Chinese leaders must ask themselves, “If the Americans won’t even sell us spare parts for grounded Black Hawk helicopters that they sold us more than a decade ago, what will our cooperation achieve?” The American response is that these helicopters can be (or have been)

used in theaters such as Tibet and the Taiwan Strait where Washington does not want them employed.

Looking more deeply into domestic constraints in both societies, when George W. Bush came into office, his administration was divided over China policy, and the schism deepened with the April 2001 incident involving the collision between a Chinese jet fighter and a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane. The contours of this ongoing division are complex, but the principal protagonists are Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is in the broad “engagement school” of the preceding six U.S. administrations, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who is more impressed by China’s suspected and documented proliferation activities and Beijing’s muscular posture toward Taiwan. The President seemed positioned mid-way between his two subordinates. He has pointed continuously to the importance of economic and cultural engagement and “productive relations”⁸ with China (by supporting Beijing’s entry into the World Trade Organization, extension of normal trade relations to China, not opposing the selection of Beijing as the site for the 2008 Olympic Games, and by traveling to Shanghai for the APEC meeting as anthrax attacks were unfolding in the United States). But by saying on April 25, 2001 that he would do “whatever it takes” to resist an attack on Taiwan by the PRC, he sought to deter possible Chinese adventurism; and in early September 2001 the President imposed sanctions on a Chinese arms manufacturer for allegedly proliferating missile technology to Pakistan.

The result of these twin impulses

⁷Walter A. McDougall, “Cold War II”, *Orbis* (Winter 2001).

⁸“Bush on China: ‘Different Values, Common Interests’”, *New York Times*, April 13, 2001.

within the administration—and seemingly *within the President*—was that by the time of the September 11 attack, the President and his colleagues had slid from campaign formulations of China as a “strategic competitor”, through interim formulations of “*We view China as a partner on some issues and a competitor on others*” and “*China is a competitor and potential regional rival, but also a trading partner willing to cooperate in areas such as Korea, where our strategic interests overlap*”, to simply dropping the “competitor” formulation altogether. As Secretary Powell put it in July 2001, indicating that he wished to dampen the differences within the administration, “*The relationship is so complex, with so many different elements to it, that it’s probably wiser not to capture it with a single word or single term or cliché.*”⁹ In Shanghai, on October 19, 2001 Bush simply said, “*America wants a constructive relationship with China.*”

Another constraint on U.S. action is public opinion. Public attitudes are not immutable, and they are subject to the *influence of strong leadership*. Nonetheless, public opinion toward China has not improved in the dozen years since the violence at Tiananmen.¹⁰ While lukewarm public opinion does not *make improved bilateral relations impossible*, neither does it create any pressure on the President to act. A pre-September 11 survey reported that, “*Most [Americans] see China as at least a serious problem, but only one-in-five call it an adversary.*” Further, “*Overall, a 46 percent plurality believe that Bush is taking the right approach with China, while 34 percent say he has been too soft.*”¹¹ In short, *with the administration divided*, Chinese cooperation in the struggle against terrorism limited (but positive), and public opinion ambivalent about improved relations, something dramatic is needed to overcome the inertia. Thus far, Beijing has not provided anything

dramatically positive.

Single-issue interest groups and the mass media invariably move into any significant vacuum created by bureaucratic division and popular skepticism. Shortly after September 11, pro-Taiwan interests began to argue that the island should not be “sold out” to win Beijing’s cooperation; Chinese domestic and exiled pro-democracy forces urged that their cause not be forsaken for geostrategic reasons; Western human rights organizations argued that their issues should be pushed harder with Beijing; and anti-proliferation and conservative security organizations asserted that China is part of the problem, not the solution. *Once again, these pressures could be overridden by American statesmen, but those who would do so must plausibly show both that Beijing’s cooperation is essential to core U.S. security interests and that it is attainable.*

President Jiang faces his own constraints. Beyond the suspicions that Chinese security, intelligence and military officials have of the United States, *China’s civilian leaders judge almost every policy issue from the perspective of how it will affect prospects for domestic economic growth and socio-political stability.* They face serious problems. *China’s financial system is in an advanced state of disrepair.* The rate of its export growth is sagging due to the global economic slowdown. Unemployment is already high and is likely to increase dramatically with

⁹Powell quoted in “China is ‘Strategic Competitor’ No More”, *Agence France Presse*, July 30, 2001.

¹⁰See my *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 385.

¹¹The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “Public Behind Bush on Key Foreign Issues: Modest Support for Missile Defense, No Panic on China”, <http://www.people-press.org/china01rpt>.

China's entry into the WTO. Rural dissatisfaction with mounting inequalities and slow rural income growth is spilling over into confrontation and violence as income-starved local governments impose arbitrary fees on increasingly estranged peasants. Within this combustible domestic setting, China confronts independence tendencies in both Tibet and the western region of Xinjiang. Beijing fears that if China becomes too closely aligned with Washington in the struggle against terrorism, it could dangerously energize some parts of its own Muslim population, particularly the Uighurs in Xinjiang, a small number of whom China alleges have ties to Osama bin Laden.

Beyond all this, President Jiang is widely perceived in China to have been too accommodating to U.S. pressure in the past, whether in his having accepted minimum compensation and expressions of regret for the 1999 Chinese Embassy bombing in Belgrade and the April 2001 reconnaissance plane incident, or for having accepted very stringent terms for Chinese accession to the WTO. This charge of "soft" on the Americans comes against the backdrop of a popular undercurrent of anti-Americanism, an undercurrent to which the regime has contributed in the past when it seemed expedient to do so. With the rough Chinese equivalent of general elections coming up in the fall of 2002 (the Sixteenth Party Congress), and President Jiang desirous of either holding onto some significant position himself or, at a minimum, having trusted protégés succeed him, he must not allow himself to be seen as putty in American hands. In short, he needs something significant from Washington before he can be as forward leaning as he otherwise might wish to be. Thus far, however, he has not even been able to get Washington to lift some sanctions imposed as long as twelve years ago.

Modest Prospects

BEIJING AND Washington will both seek to avoid any appearance of deteriorating relations during the war against terrorism, and modest progress will likely be made in trade and leadership exchanges. Bilateral discussions about contentious issues such as human rights and proliferation will continue, but results will probably not be dramatic. With respect to Taiwan, China will continue to employ a mixed strategy of coercive diplomacy (e.g., missile deployments, force modernization and international isolation) to deter Taipei from moving toward independence, while simultaneously seeking to integrate Taiwan's economy ever more closely with that of the mainland and building a "united front" with all Taiwanese political forces opposed to the government of President Chen Shui-bian. As long as Beijing continues to believe that a Taiwanese declaration of independence is unlikely, and that current policy makes eventual reunification at least plausible, China's current leaders are unlikely to use force against the island. That said, the outcome of Taiwan's December 2001 legislative elections, and the character of future U.S. weapons sales to the island, could change the dominant assessment in Beijing.

With respect to the global struggle against terrorism, Beijing has its own reasons to cooperate in the intelligence sharing and money laundering areas, as it already has done. In the United Nations, we can expect Beijing to support General Assembly and Security Council actions that give the United States considerable practical latitude, but which do not formally endorse specific forceful U.S. actions in specific places. Beyond the visible spectrum of cooperation, China may provide further help "behind the curtain" (*mubou*). Some policy analysts and low-level

Chinese officials have suggested to me that U.S. aircraft forced down in China would now receive a much friendlier welcome than did the crew of the U.S. EP-3 in April 2001. Were wounded Americans to need treatment in China, that too is possible. These are small mercies.

Even within this context, each capital could take modest steps that would provide the other with reasons to enhance cooperation. For instance, the Pentagon is still stuck in neutral on military-to-military exchanges with China's People's Liberation Army. Renewing contact with forces that one may wish to cooperate with in the struggle against terrorism seems elementary. Likewise, with Beijing entering the WTO, the world economy slowing, and U.S. firms still investing heavily in China, the long-standing prohibition against Overseas Private Investment Corporation activity in China is, at best, silly. For its part, Beijing needs to stop doing counterpro-

ductive things, most notably its attempt to use dangerous weapons and technology transfers as leverage against U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan. Moreover, China could publicly support the movement of humanitarian relief to Afghanistan through its territory. Many things are possible, but until Americans see real cooperation from the Chinese side, the gridlock will continue in Washington.

When all is said and done, unless the perceived common threat to both nations rises sharply, driving both political leaderships to further subordinate domestic divisions to security cooperation, Sino-American cooperation will remain limited and ambivalent. This adds up to a good prospect for marginal improvement in U.S.-China relations, but not for anything resembling strategic transformation. Yes, then, the world has changed; in this regard, however, it has not changed much. □

All in Good Time

'We have nothing to do with each other', one Uighur said. 'The Chinese here act like they see right through us, like we're not people to them.'

Then there is the issue of the time. Big stores, or those owned by Chinese, mostly quote opening hours in Beijing time, as if it were their umbilical cord to civilization. Those owned by Muslims, which tend to be small businesses, are two hours behind.

'We Chinese go by Beijing time', said a bartender named Wang, whose father was sent here to work 20 years ago. 'But the Uighurs do not.'

—Elizabeth Rosenthal, *New York Times*, November 19, 2000