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China and the United States: Between Cold and Warm Peace

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Abstract

Global order depends significantly on the US and Chinese roles in global politics as well as the relationship between them. Cooperation in three issue areas – the global economic crisis, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and climate change – would be beneficial to the maintenance of a stable and peaceful global order. But four factors make sustained cooperation difficult to achieve: exceptionalism in both political cultures, the problems of policy implementation in the two political systems, the elements of hierarchy and power transition that need to be negotiated, and the deep-rooted issue of mutual strategic distrust. The two states' bilateral relationship can be characterised now, and for some time to come, as resting between a cold and warm peace.

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Notes

As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it in remarks at the Asia Society in New York on 13 February 2009: ‘An ancient Chinese story tells of warring feudal states, whose soldiers find themselves on a boat together crossing a wide river in a storm. Instead of fighting one another, they work together and survive. Now, from this story comes a Chinese aphorism that says, “When you are in a common boat, you need to cross the river peacefully together.” The wisdom of that aphorism must continue to guide us today.’ Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, in a speech given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC on 13 March 2009, put it thus: ‘At a time when the international financial crisis continues to spread and develop, the primary common interest of China and the United States is to weather the storm together like passengers in the same boat and support each other to get through the tough times and emerge from the crisis victorious.’

For an explanation of purchasing power parity, see http://www.oecd.org/std/ppp.

The Asian Development Bank's pessimistic assessment in April 2009 was that ‘more than 60 million individuals who would have been lifted above the extreme income poverty line of $1.25 per day had the region's high growth continued in 2009 will remain mired in poverty instead’. See Global Economic Crisis: Challenge for Developing Asia and the ADB's Response, Asian Development Bank Report, April 2009, p. 6.

Quoted in Bonnie Glaser, ‘U.S.–China Relations: A Good Beginning is Half Way to Success’, Comparative Connections, vol. 11, no. 1, April 2009.

David Leonhardt, ‘The China Puzzle’, New York Times Magazine, 17 May 2009, http://www.nytimes/com/2009/05/17/magazine/17china-t.html. Geithner also revealed that during the April G20 meetings he had travelled to the hotel suite of Vice Premier Wang Qishan to further their discussions. At the beginning of June 2009, Geithner was in Beijing, where he met President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and other highranking officials. During a speech at Peking University he stated: ‘China and the United States individually and together are so important in the global economy and financial system that what we do has a direct impact on the stability and strength of the international economic system.’ See David Barboza, ‘In China, Geithner Backs Cooperation’, New York Times, 1 June 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/01/world/asia/01china.html.

Nicholas R. Lardy, ‘China's Role in the Origins of and Response to the Global Recession’, transcript of testimony at the hearing before the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 17 February 2009, http://www.piie.com/publications/papers/print.cfm/doc=pub&ResearchID=1165. China's stimulus package is supposed to contribute to 3% of GDP.

Fan Gang, ‘China's Capacity of Managing Impacts of Global Crisis and Potentials for Further Growth’, lecture given at Oxford Forum on China and the World Economy, 18 May 2009, Oxford. Fan was referring to items such as low labour costs, the high savings rate, urbanisation and globalisation effects, among other factors.

Michael Wines, ‘China “Worried” about safety of U.S. Treasuries’, New York Times, 14 March 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/14/business/worldbusiness/14china.html.

See Zhou Xiaochuan, ‘Reform the International Monetary System’, 23 March 2009, http://www.pbc.gov.cn/english/detail.asp?col=6500&ID=178.

However, even as Chinese growth rates have returned to something close to 8%, one report from China noted that one-third of China's recent university graduates cannot find work. Aliza Rosenbaum, ‘China Preserves Jobs while Pushing up Oil Price’, International Herald Tribune, 12 August 2009.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report (Geneva: IPCC, 2007), Summary for Policymakers, p. 2; International Scientific Congress on Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges and Decisions, Copenhagen, 10–

12 March 2009, ‘Key Messages from the Congress’, 12 March 2009, http://climatecongress.ku.dk/newsroom/congress_key_messages/.

‘China's Policies and Actions for Addressing Climate Change’, 29 October 2008, http://english.gov.cn/2008-10.29/content_1134544.htm.

‘Predictions of Mayhem as the Globe gets Warmer’, International Herald Tribune, 10 August 2009.

Kenneth Lieberthal and David Sandalow, Overcoming Obstacles to U.S.–China Cooperation on Climate Change (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2009).

A Roadmap for U.S.–China Cooperation on Energy and Climate Change (New York: Pew Center/Asia Society, 2009), p. 18. This study was co-chaired by Steven Chu before he became Obama's energy secretary. Both governments are now making more serious attempts to address the problem, the Obama administration by committing the federal government to the post-Kyoto process and promising mandatory reductions in the country's emissions targets of 80% by 2050. (He is, however, meeting a great deal of domestic resistance.) China, while it continues to rule out mandatory targets for itself or to make absolute cuts in emissions, has agreed a number of national targets designed to cut the rate of increase in its CO2 emissions. Its 11th five-year plan (2006–10) announced energy-intensity goals that included reducing its per unit GDP energy use by 20% by 2010 over that of 2005; adopting the target of renewable fuels for 10% of its total energy consumption by 2010, rising to 15% by 2020; and increasing its take-up of hydro and nuclear power.

Karl Hallding, Guoyi Han and Marie Olsson, A Balancing Act: China's Role in Climate Change (Stockholm: Commission for Sustainable Development, April 2009), p. 96.

This and the next paragraph rely substantially on Lieberthal and Sandalow, Overcoming Obstacles; Michael P. Vandenbergh, ‘Climate Change: The China Problem’, Southern California Law Review, vol. 81, July 2008, pp. 905– 58; and Zhang Zhongxiang, ‘China, the United States and Technological Cooperation on Climate Control’, Environmental Science and Policy, vol. 10, nos 7–8, November–December 2007, pp. 622–8.

US Energy Secretary Steven Chu made headlines when he suggested in March 2009 that carbon tariffs on goods entering the US market might be used to create a level playing field where countries have not applied a cost to carbon. See Trevor Houser, ‘Why Carbon Tariffs are a Bad Idea – For Now’, The Argument, ForeignPolicy.com, 26

March 2009, http://experts.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/26/why_carbon_tariffs_are_a_bad_idea_for_now.

Todd Stern and William Antholis argued in 2007 that developing countries 'must be treated differentially' with the poorest among them exempted from climate-change commitments, but the more advanced, including China, committing to actual 'targets, albeit less stringent than those of the industrialized countries, or policy undertakings by sector'. See Todd Stern and William Antholis, 'A Changing Climate: The Road Ahead for the United States', Washington Quarterly, vol. 31, no. 1, Winter 2007–08, p. 184. Todd Stern has since become the US State Department's climate-change envoy.

'UN Climate Summit: Key Quotes', BBC News, 22 September 2009, http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci.tech/82693.

William Chandler, 'Breaking the Suicide Pact: U.S.–China Cooperation on Climate Change', Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief 57 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

Christopher P. Twomey, 'Chinese– U.S. Strategic Affairs: Dangerous Dynamism', Arms Control Today, vol. 39, no. 1, January–February 2009, pp. 17–20.

For two recent expositions see Michael Ignatieff (ed.), American Exceptionalism and Human Rights (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Rosemary Foot, 'Exceptionalism Again: the Bush Administration, the "Global War on Terror" and Human Rights', Law and History Review, vol. 26, no. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 707–25.

Harold Hongju Koh, 'America's Jekyll-and-Hyde Exceptionalism', in Ignatieff, American Exceptionalism, p. 112.

Edward C. Luck, 'American Exceptionalism and International Organization: Lessons from the 1990s', in Rosemary Foot, Neil MacFarlane and Michael Mastanduno (eds), US Hegemony and International Organizations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 27.

Vivienne Shue, 'Legitimacy Crisis in China?', in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (eds), State and Society in 21st-Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 31.

W. Michael Reisman, ‘The United States and International Institutions’, Survival, vol. 41, no. 4, Winter 1999– 2000, pp. 71–2.

Lieberthal and Sandalow, Overcoming Obstacles, p. 33.

Ibid., p. 77, n. 40.

A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, The War Ledger (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980.) See also John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) where he reverses the source of danger: ‘The emergence of a potential hegemon, however, makes the other great powers especially fearful, and they will search hard for ways to correct the imbalance of power and will be inclined to pursue riskier policies toward that end. The reason is simple: when one state is threatening to dominate the rest, the long-term value of remaining at peace declines and threatened states will be more willing to take chances to improve their security’ (p. 345).

Jonathan Broder, ‘Power Playing with Others’, CQ Weekly, 20 April 2009.

Joshua Kurlantzick, Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); and Yu Xintian, ‘Soft Power Enhancement and China's External Strategy’, China International Studies, no. 12, Fall 2008, pp. 20–35.

Rosemary Foot, ‘Chinese Strategies in a US-Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging’, International Affairs, vol. 82, no. 1, January 2006, p. 83.

Wang Jisi, ‘China's Changing Role in Asia’, in Kokobun Ryosei and Wang Jisi (eds), The Rise of China and a Changing East Asian Order (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2004), p. 14.

James B. Steinberg, ‘Keynote Address at the Center for a New American Security’, Washington DC, 24 September 2009.

Broder, ‘Power Playing with Others’, p. 898.

That the Obama administration uses the language of partnership and equality with China may reflect not just China's growing power, but also a deeper set of beliefs given that the administration has approached other states in a similar manner.

For one excellent critique see Steve Chan, China, the U.S. and the Power- Transition Theory: A Critique (London: Routledge, 2008).

SIPRI Yearbook 2008 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 177.

The Military Balance 2009 (Abindgon: Routledge for the IISS, 2009), pp. 365, 375.

SIPRI Yearbook 2009 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Summary, section 5, Military Expenditure, p. 11.

SIPRI Yearbook 2009, Table 8.1, p. 346.

Chan, China, the U.S. and the Power- Transition Theory, introduces some of these additional measures.

Robert Dahl, Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).

Robert Zoellick, 'Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility', remarks to the National Committee on US–China Relations, US Department of State, 25 November 2005, http://www.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm.

For a fuller exposition of ideas akin to these see Yuen Foong Khong, 'Negotiating "Order" During Power Transitions', in Charles A. Kupchan et al., Power in Transition: The Peaceful Change of International Order (Tokyo: The United Nations University Press, 2001), p. 34.

See the Chicago Council on Global Affairs report 'Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion', based on more than 6,000 interviews in China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and the United States in January and February 2008 (before the unrest in Tibet).

See also the results of a PIPA study of 22 countries in 2005 which revealed that an average of 59% of the 22,953 respondents concluded that a militarily more powerful China would generate negative reactions, http://www.pipa.org/onlineReports/China/China_Mar05/.

Evelyn Goh, 'Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies', International Security, vol. 32, no. 3, Winter 2007–08, pp. 113–57;

David M. Lampton, The Three Faces of Chinese Power (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), esp. ch. 5.

For a useful analysis of the BRIC summit, see ‘Quarter Defined by Differences’, Financial Times, 16 June 2009, p. 8.

Charles A. Kupchan, ‘Introduction: Explaining Peaceful Power Transition’ in Kupchan et al., Power in Transition, pp. 7–9. He adds also the condition of legitimation, whereby the parties ‘forge a consensus not just on rules, but on the values that underlie those rules’ (p .9). This is a particularly demanding condition to meet.

For example, the Bush–Hu era's strategic economic dialogue and high-level political dialogue has been maintained in the Hu–Obama era, even if under a slightly different name.

Peter Baker, ‘Obama Calls for Military Dialogue with China’, New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/washington/12web-china.html.

Steinberg, ‘Keynote Address’, 24 September 2009.

Additional information

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Rosemary Foot is Professor of International Relations and John Swire Senior Research Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford University. With her co-author, Andrew Walter, Foot is working on a book, China, the United States and Global Order, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

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