

## The Fifteen Years of China's Diplomacy and Strategy toward the United States: The Process of Evolution, Fundamental Experiences, and Remaining Problems

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At the present, China's relations with the United States is widely regarded both at these two countries and in the rest of the world as extraordinary good in comparison with the situation of the past three decades, in the most recent words of the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that is not too exaggerated. However, even an overwhelmingly majority of the "informed people" in China as well as in other interested nations does not clearly recognize in the first place, or strongly tend to forget, that this state of affairs results in a large or even primary part from a remarkably long process of emergence of China's grand strategy toward the United States and the related major issues of international politics, characterized by anguish learning and strategic balancing on the part of the government leaders and other foreign policy elites in China.

This complex evolution can be generally summarized in its essence as the following seven closely interconnected processes, with some explicit and implicit fundamental experiences accumulated thereby: (1) that from inconsistency to consistency in strategy and operation, with remarkably increase of strategic and operational patience; (2) from much less strong sense of priority of vital policy objectives to an almost very strong one, thus realizing of the vital principle of strategic concentration; (3) from a piece-meal approach to a generally systematic and integrated one; (4) from relatively weak determination to manage, guide or control disadvantageous public/institutional opinions to a stronger resolve to do so, or in other words, from certain timidity to somewhat sufficient bravery in this respect; (5) from less to much more sense and confidence in the positive political and diplomatic influence of the strong and growing economic intercourse or interdependence upon the bilateral political relations; (6) from lack of grand strategy to the contrary; (7) from frequent passivity or a reactive pattern of behavior to more activity and certain diplomatic initiatives.

The one and a half decades history of China's diplomacy and strategy toward the United States began with the change of leadership in China from the so-called "second generation" to the "third" one. It could be focused with much justification upon President Jiang Zemin's personal learning process in foreign policy, especially that toward the United States, based firstly on Deng Xiaoping's rich, complex, and somewhat self-contradictory legacy in that area and influenced strongly by his own personality, intellectual inclinations and power situation. Although the decade from 1989 to 1999 was definitely important for the purpose here, but it was still less significant than the dramatic events happened in only a very few months time-span: NATO's Kosovo intervention and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. There were major vicissitudes of perception and policy in their aftermath, accompanied with both strategic pessimism and optimism, as well as profound domestic ambiguities and controversies on major foreign policy assumptions.

This kind situation was dramatically furthered by the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attack on the U.S., with which began the most dynamic part of the whole evolutionary process discussed here, i.e., China's redefinitions of the world situation and its diplomacy since 9/11. Chronologically, it can be divided into three stages. The first stage was the six months immediately following 9/11, during which the most significant was China's perceptions of *the changes* since that date in (1) the U.S. national security priorities, (2) world power distribution; (3) China's geopolitical and security environment, together with that of the *intentions* of the U.S. in its "war against terrorism". There were substantial confusions, debates and zigzags in these issue areas, resulting in to some extent self-contradictions in China's opinion, attitude and policy toward the multi-front anti-terrorist campaign launched by the United States, and the effects of all these. The second stage began around March 2002 when Taiwan "Secretary of Defense" Tang Yiau-ming made an official visit to the United States and the U.S.-Taiwan growing military cooperation since 1997 became well known. In the context of this and other broader developments, there arise in China both in and outside the government very great resentment and even angry against American preponderance of power, its strongly unilateralist and hegemonic behavior, and its enhancement of military relations with Taiwan as well as its refusal to declare Eastern Turkistan Islamic movement as a terrorist organization. China developed grave suspicions on U.S. intentions in its anti-terrorist war after its

victory in Afghanistan. From all of these resulted quite strong public accusations by the Chinese government or official mass media against several major U.S. declarations, strategic doctrines, and other expressions of policy consideration or decision. However, in late summer and early fall of 2002 almost drastically came a “sea change”, as some Western media called at that time, of Chinese government’s attitude and policy toward the U.S. in the direction of moderation, and very remarkable improvement in the Chinese-American relations that have lasted through the present. A kind of realist perception, prudent optimism and improved strategic thinking, together with a positive change in the U.S. attitude toward China, brought about this remarkable change.

The 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CCP represents a further major strategic clarification and optimizing. It can be said that both symbolically and substantially a kind of “two-headed” (therefore balanced) grand strategy emerged from that Congress, which on the one hand characterized by the more determined, more consistent, and more patient pursuance of the moderate, prudently optimistic, and pragmatic principle of thinking and practice in China’s fundamental policy toward the United States, and on the other featured almost equally by the firm determination to accelerate China’s military modernization and to prevent or stop by almost any means the independence of Taiwan. With this, the ordering of strategic priorities and the conduct of strategic balancing have become much better in comparison with the situation most of the past fifteen years.

However, there are still two matters with the first-rate importance remain to be desired. One is the *initiation* and gradual development of institutionalized strategic dialogue between China and the United States on five groups of bilateral and strictly defined strategic issues. The other is a more self-conscious and really comprehensively implemented “strategy of balancing by double connections”, as this speaker calls it, requiring substantial improvement (or “normalization”) of China’s political and strategic relations with Japan, among *all* other great powers besides the United States.

Also very important are remaining problems, or at least potential strategic dilemmas in China’s present approach in dealing with the United States, a large part of them existing within the above-mentioned “two-headed” strategy as well as in the requirement of building and consolidating sufficient domestic consensus needed to support it. Moreover, there is remarkable “self-contradiction” in the sense of very strong negative views on the U.S. general national security strategy *versus* quite positive or optimistic views of U.S. China policy. Also needed to be taken into account, apart from those much discussed middle term and long range structural tensions, are several major and new complicating factors potentially damaging to the present Chinese-American relations and tending to increase (even greatly) China’s difficulties in policy-making, including the North Korea nuclear crisis, the growth of the forces for independence within Taiwan, and increasing monetary/ trade frictions between China and the U.S. Almost dramatically complicated problem of the Chinese-Japanese relations is also significant in terms of China’s position *vis-à-vis* the United States. Moreover, there are domestic factors of complication: the problem of “two-headed leadership”, especially in defense and major foreign policy areas; government intentions on foreign policy *versus* somewhat disadvantageous public opinion; domestic economic needs (including energy supply and trade expansion) for an assertive foreign policy *versus* international restraints and a generally conservative foreign policy tradition. In a sense, grand strategy toward the United States and its operations will be never an easy and cheap affair.