
U.S. Policy Toward China: Security And Military Considerations

By

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee today to discuss security issues in U.S.-China relations.

These are important subjects, and this is an especially opportune time to be looking at our relationship with China. Much has been happening. Much is being debated. Tomorrow, Senator James Sasser will appear before the full Senate Foreign Relations Committee—having finally received agreement from the Chinese Government—to seek the committee's approval to become our next ambassador to China. The week after next, President Clinton will meet with President Jiang Zemin in New York, their third such meeting and an important component of our engagement strategy with China.

Before I deal with the topic at hand, Mr. Chairman, let me briefly address just where we are in our overall relationship with China. In the wake of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the U.S. in early June, China took a number of retaliatory measures that subjected our relationship to severe stress. Beijing employed harsh rhetoric about our motives and intentions. It suspended our dialogues on security, non-proliferation, and human rights issues. The Chinese recalled their ambassador to the U.S. and delayed granting agreement [i.e., approval of a diplomatic representative] to Jim Sasser. They sought assurances that there would be no more Taiwan leader visits like Lee Teng-hui's before agreeing to any movement in relations.

In the last 2½ months, through mutual efforts, we have made concrete strides toward stabilizing the relationship. We have done so by reassuring the Chinese about our policy without infringing on our principles. Beginning with Secretary Christopher's meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in Brunei on August 1, we have intensified our dialogue and relaunched some discussions and visits. The Chinese have made some adjustments in their previous posture.

- They expelled Harry Wu from China after a rapid trial.
- They granted agreement to Jim Sasser and assured us that the Chinese ambassador would return to the U.S. soon.
- Despite continuing disagreement on the question of future visits by Taiwan leaders to the United States, the Chinese have ceased to hold U.S.-P.R.C. relations hostage to satisfaction of their demands and have agreed to re-engage on a much broader agenda.
- They have confirmed forthcoming trips by Secretary of Commerce Brown and Assistant Secretary of Defense Nye.

The committee also will have heard of China's stated intention not to implement its contract to sell nuclear reactors to Iran—a welcome step.

I do not want to exaggerate the progress we have made. We have been successful in managing this important but difficult relationship through a period of considerable turbulence. That is a meaningful accomplishment and something that is viewed as essential throughout East Asia. Still, it does not for a moment suggest that we are satisfied with the progress we have made on a range of key issues, about which we care deeply.

Let me turn now to the topic at hand; namely, how we see China and the People's Liberation Army as factors in the security environment of East Asia and how this affects our policy judgments. First, a few well-known but important facts. China is not only the most populous country in the world, with 1.2 billion people, but it has the largest standing army. Even after a 25 percent reduction in its armed forces in the late 1980s, it still has 3 million men and women in arms. China is a nuclear power, and, along with France, the only country in the world still testing nuclear weapons, to our regret. China possesses ballistic missiles, including ones capable of reaching the United States. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, with the rights and responsibilities that go with membership in that exclusive club. It has major influence in regional conflicts, and it is a country with strong territorial concerns—for example, the Spratly Islands, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Such facts, plus others I will cite later, make China an extremely important and potentially difficult neighbor. How to integrate China into the rest of East Asia—not to mention the rest of the world—is a challenge that has preoccupied China's neighbors not just recently, but for generations. As recently as 25 years ago, China was a revolutionary power bent on the subversion of its neighbors. Its size and power make its behavior and evolution a source of intense interest to all of the countries of East Asia and a focus of their international relations.

It is not just China's size and potential, but some of its actions that have concerned its neighbors. Let me cite several.

- China's military budget and strategic plans are largely opaque to the rest of the world, developed behind a cloak of secrecy.
- China, under the control of civilian leadership, has been embarked on a modernization program in recent years aimed at developing a more professional army and at upgrading, in particular, its aerial and naval capabilities.
- It has sold technologies related to weapons of mass destruction, as well as missile delivery system technology, in sensitive regional hot spots.
- China has supported nuclear programs of concern in Pakistan and Iran.
- Its extensive claims in the South China Sea have been backed up by construction of a military installation on Mischief Reef, less than 150 miles from the main Philippine Islands. Of course, China has not been alone in staking a claim to the area.
- As I noted earlier, despite its general support for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), China has continued nuclear testing and been slow in negotiating a CTBT.
- Its two recent military exercises—including missile firings in the vicinity of Taiwan—surely did not contribute to the region's sense of peace and stability.

Does this all mean that China is an aggressive power bent on dominating or threatening its neighbors, and that the proper response should be one of containment, a kind of revival of SEATO? In a word, no. The picture is much more complex than these troubling signs.

It is critically important, as we consider China's position from a security perspective, to have a clear view of China's own priorities. Its number one priority is economic development, its transformation from a poor developing country into a wealthy country. This has been the driving idea dominating Chinese politics and Chinese life since the late 1970s when Deng Xiaoping threw out most of the reigning ideology and placed economic development at the top of China's agenda. China's foreign policy since then has been a function of this domestic priority. Put simply, China's development requires a peaceful international environment, and this has been China's goal in the last decade-and-a-half. What has this meant in practical terms?

- It has meant abandoning support of revolutionary movements in neighboring countries. Instead, China has pursued a policy aimed at developing friendly relations with its neighbors.

- It has meant negotiation of border agreements with Russia and Kazakstan. It has meant boundary negotiations with India and confidence-building measures along the Sino-Indian border. It has meant establishment of diplomatic ties with South Korea and development of a burgeoning commercial relationship with South Korean business, despite strong opposition from Pyongyang. It has meant improvement in its relations with Vietnam and support for a peace settlement in Cambodia. And it has meant extensive trade and investment ties with Taiwan.

- It has meant adoption of policies designed to assure foreign business people and leaders that China is stable domestically and averse to foreign adventure. China needs international capital to fuel an annual growth rate exceeding 10 percent. Business people do not like war and instability; China understands this.

- It has meant a policy of "opening up to the outside world," after years of self-imposed isolation. Though some in China wish to join the world exclusively on their own terms, most others have understood that extensive foreign interaction requires accepting global rules and disciplines. In the trade area, this has led to increasing conformity with international practices and membership in international trading and financial organizations. In the security area, it has had similar consequences. Of course, there is a long way to go in many of these areas, but there have been some encouraging signs in recent years.

- China has supported the indefinite extension of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It has accepted increasingly strict parameters for the sale of missiles, culminating in October 1994 in an agreement to refrain from selling MTCR-class missiles. China has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, and it has indicated willingness to conclude a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996.

- This past spring, China declared for the first time that it accepted the applicability of international law and the Law of the Sea Convention to disputes involving the Spratly Islands, although China still lays claim to the region's islands and atolls. This statement and China's willingness to negotiate with other claimants and pursue joint commercial development prior to the resolution of competing territorial claims, have eased the tension created by the Mischief Reef installation I noted earlier.

- China has concerns similar to our own over the dangers of the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea. China has played a helpful supporting role as we have sought to defuse the tensions created by the North Korean nuclear program.

How should the United States react in the face of this complex picture? We have shaped policies that we believe reflect a clear-eyed assessment of the opportunities and risks posed by China's emergence. Our fundamental policy in the security area is one of comprehensive engagement, consistent with our overall approach to China. This is a common-sense approach that reflects our natural interest. It assumes neither Chinese aggressiveness nor Chinese benevolence. It means neither acquiescence in what we see as inappropriate actions by China nor attempts to isolate the P.R.C. or frustrate its development. Containment would be a self-fulfilling prophecy of mutual enmity, and it would not be supported by our Asian partners. We seek to act in concert where we agree, foster greater consensus where the picture is mixed, and prevent or minimize conflict where we disagree.

In Assistant Secretary Nye's statement, he lays out cogently seven important reasons why we engage China on security issues. I commend these to you.

In the security area, the components of our policy include a program of military exchanges with China at various levels—a Joint Commission on Defense Conversion, dialogues on strategy and transparency, and ship visits. . . . It also entails bilateral dialogue with Chinese civilian and military leaders on arms control issues, a dialogue the P.R.C. has suspended, but which we hope to resume shortly. This dialogue is a centerpiece of a long-term effort to help bring China's leadership to an understanding of its own self-interest in conforming its international arms sale practices to world standards. Another crucial component is integration of China into regional security forums and discussions. This is an approach we have pursued with success under the Clinton Administration in the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Northeast Asia Regional Security Dialogue, where we have urged confidence-building measures and greater transparency in strategic planning.

Such policies are designed to reinforce the insight that inspired Deng Xiaoping's decision in 1978 to break decisively with the policies of isolation and autarky of the Mao years. At its core was recognition of the need for China to live at peace with its neighbors, to build up commercial relationships with its neighbors and the West, and to alter China's institutional and ideological landscape to gain the trust and cooperation of the international community.

Mr. Chairman, the question is not whether China will be a major player in global as well as regional security affairs, but rather when and how. China's rapid economic development, its growing military capabilities, and its historic international role will make it a major power in the coming century. The challenge we face is to assure that as China develops as a global actor, it does so constructively, as a country integrated into international institutions and committed to practices enshrined in international law. I believe that the policies we pursue should help encourage that evolution.