

POSITIVE EQUILIBRIUM IN USA - CHINA RELATIONS: DURABLE OR NOT?

Robert Sutter

Robert Sutter has been a Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University since 2001. Professor Sutter specialized in Asian and Pacific Affairs and US foreign policy in a US government career. He held a variety of analytical and supervisory positions with the Library of Congress, and also worked with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. After leaving the Library of Congress where he was for many years the Senior Specialist in International Politics for the Congressional Research Service, served as the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US Government's National Intelligence Council. He received a Ph.D. in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University. He has held adjunct faculty positions with Georgetown, George Washington, and Johns Hopkins Universities and the University of Virginia. He has published 18 books, numerous articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States.

Abstract

Repeated episodes of Chinese public pressure against the United States during 2009 and 2010 on a wide range of issues involving seas near China, Taiwan, Tibet, and economic disputes are subject to different interpretations but on balance they do not seem to seriously upset the prevailing positive equilibrium between the US and Chinese governments.

Keywords

The United States; China; engagement; assertiveness; push-back

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Introduction

Relations between the United States and China emerged as the most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century. China's global economic importance and rising political and military power came in a world order where the United States faced many challenges but still exerted broad leadership reflecting its superpower status. Whether the two powers will support international peace and development and pursue more cooperative ties, will become antagonistic as their interests compete, or will pursue some other path in world affairs, remains the subject of ongoing debate among specialists and policy makers in both countries.¹

Publicly, officials in China and the United States tended for much of this decade to emphasize the positive aspects of the relationship. These include ever closer trade and investment ties leading to deepening economic interdependence of the United States and China. Converging security interests involve dealing with international terrorism, North Korea's nuclear weapons program, UN peacekeeping and other issues involving sensitive situations in Asia and the world. China has come far in the post Mao Zedong (d. 1976) period in adopting norms of free market economic behavior supported by the United States and essential to China's success in dealing with the conditions of economic globalization of the current era. China also has substantially changed policies on proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to conform more to US-backed international norms.

US-China collaboration on climate change and environmental issues has grown in the recent period, and bilateral discussion on human rights continues amid mixed reviews on progress in China toward accepting US-backed international norms. US-China differences over Taiwan have subsided with the coming to power in 2008 of Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou, who has sharply shifted Taiwan toward a more cooperative stance in relations with China. In broad terms and with some reservations, the US government accepts and supports the Chinese Communist administration as a leading actor in world affairs; the Chinese administration has moved to accept, at least for now, the existing international order where the United States exerts leading power in Asian and world affairs.²

The benign image of China-US relations that flowed from recent public discourse of US and Chinese officials was reinforced by prominent commentators, particularly in the United States, emphasizing the convergence of interests between the United States and

¹ Aaron Friedberg (2009). "Is China a Military Threat?—Menace," *The National Interest* (September-October 2009, 19-25, 31-32.

² Kenneth Liberthal (2009). "The China-US Relationship Goes Global," *Current History* 108: 719 (September 2009) 243-246.



China. Some argued for an international order determined chiefly by cooperation between the two governments, what is called a "G-2" world order for the 21st century.³

In practice, however, Sino-American relations remain more complicated and conflicted than recent official discourse and arguments by commentators in favor of a Sino-American international condominium would lead us to expect. A review of the many decades on Sino-American relations shows enormous changes over time, with patterns of confrontation, conflict, and suspicion much more prevalent than patterns of accommodation and cooperation. The past four decades have featured sometimes remarkable improvements in relations as leaders on both sides have pursued practical benefits through pragmatic means. That the base of cooperation is often incomplete, thin, and dependent on changeable circumstances at home and abroad shows as the societies and governments more often than not demonstrate salient differences over a variety of critical issues involving security, values, and economics. If one gets below the surface of recent positive official discussion, a review of developments and trends shows officials, elites, and public opinion on both sides demonstrating suspicion and wariness of the other country and its possible negative intentions or implications affecting Sino-American relations.⁴

Positive Equilibrium in Relations between the US and Chinese Administrations

Fortunately for those seeking improvement in Sino-American relations, the many differences between the United States and China more often than not were off-set in the first decade of the 21st century by circumstances that caused the two leaderships to pragmatically manage their differences while seeking to avoid trouble and where possible develop common ground. The process was not uniform or smooth, but the result was a positive equilibrium between the US and Chinese administrations that appeared likely to persist into the second decade of the 21st century, despite many differences and disputes.⁵

During this period, both the US and Chinese administrations became preoccupied with other issues; they generally seemed reluctant to exacerbate tensions with one another. Growing economic interdependence and cooperation over key issues in Asian and world affairs reinforced each government's tendency to emphasize the positive and pursue constructive relations with one another. The emerging positive stasis in US-China relations provides a basis for greater cooperation over economic, security and other interests and issues.

Differences in strategic, economic, political and other interests also have remained strong; they represent major obstacles to further cooperation between the two countries. Policy makers in both countries also continue to harbor suspicions about each others' intentions. They remain on alert for changing circumstances regarding Taiwan, Japan, North Korea, international economic trends, US and Chinese domestic politics, and other developments that could seriously complicate the bilateral relationship.

³ Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal, "The G-2 Mirage," *Foreign Affairs* 88:3 (May-June 2009) 56-72.

⁴ Sutter, Robert (2010). *U.S.-Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

⁵ Sutter, *U.S.-Chinese Relations*:147-168.



A pattern of dualism in US-China relations has arisen as part of the ostensibly positive equilibrium in this decade. The pattern involves constructive and cooperative engagement on the one hand and contingency planning or hedging on the other. It reflects the mix noted above of converging and competing interests and prevailing leadership suspicions and cooperation.

Chinese and US contingency planning and hedging against one another sometimes involves actions like the respective Chinese and US military buildups that are separate from and develop in tandem with the respective engagement policies the two leaderships pursue with each other. At the same time, dualism shows as each government has used engagement to build positive and cooperative ties while at the same time seeking to use these ties to build interdependencies and webs of relationships that have the effect of constraining the other power from taking actions that oppose its interests. While the analogy is not precise, the policies of engagement pursued by the United States and China toward one another have featured respective "Gulliver strategies" that are designed to tie down aggressive, assertive or other negative policy tendencies of the other power through webs of interdependence in bilateral and multilateral relationships.

The recent positive stasis in US-China relations is based on an increasing convergence of these respective engagement policies and Gulliver strategies. But the fact remains that these Gulliver strategies reflect underlying suspicions and conflicting interests that feature prominently in the calculations of both the US and Chinese administrations as they pursue their relations with one another.⁶

Beginning in the last half of the 1990s, Chinese leaders reviewed and reassessed their previous more confrontational approach to US pressures against China and longstanding Chinese opposition to US dominance and so-called "hegemony" in Asian and world affairs. These US pressures and dominance previously had been seen as antithetical to Chinese interests and as requiring strong opposition and resistance by China.

There was debate among foreign and Chinese specialists regarding the significance of this reassessment. According to some foreign specialists who interviewed numerous Chinese officials and foreign policy specialists, the Chinese leaders by the latter 1990s settled on a strategy that played down differences with and resistance to the United States, in favor of an approach of ever greater cooperation with the American government. This approach was said to remain sensitive to US intrusions on important Chinese interests involving Taiwan, but it deemphasized past Chinese concerns regarding US policies and behavior designed to solidify US leadership in Asian and world affairs.⁷

Against this background, some US and Chinese specialists judged that the new Chinese approach of pragmatic adjustment met and would continue to meet US approval and result in ever greater convergence and cooperation in US-China relations. They maintained that the Chinese adjustment was based on greater maturity and confidence among Chinese leaders as they dealt with the United States and world affairs. Chinese

⁶ This dualism and respective Gulliver strategies are discussed in Robert Sutter, "China and US Security and Economic Interests: Opportunities and Challenges," in Ross, Robert and Tunsjo, Oystein (2010) eds., *US-China-EU Relations: Managing The New World Order* London: Routledge.

⁷ Goldstein, Avery (2005). *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.



maturity and confidence were seen as based on the Chinese leaders' success in promoting decades of remarkable economic growth along with military modernization and social change in China. Indeed, the maturity and confidence was said to lie behind much of the "new thinking" said to be influencing greater Chinese involvement in regional and other multilateral organizations, and to off-set traditional Chinese views of having been victimized by outside powers and needing to be on guard to prevent future exploitation or oppression.⁸

An opposing school of thought among US and Chinese specialists, which includes this writer, judges that the circumstances surrounding Chinese foreign policy and Chinese policy toward the United States have remained and continue to remain far too uncertain to posit a truly lasting Chinese strategy of cooperation and convergence with the United States. There have been remarkable twists and turns in Sino-American relations, even following the reported Chinese leadership decision in the latter 1990s to pursue a moderate policy toward the United States. The stability of what is seen as an inherently fragile relationship was challenged this decade by antipathy in the United States over Chinese policies and practices in economic, security, and other areas, and by the policies and practices of Taiwan, North Korea, Japan, and other international actors.⁹

This writer and other specialists in this group remain unconvinced that Chinese leaders are confident and mature in their recent moderate approach to the United States. Rather, Chinese leaders are seen as often vulnerable and uncertain as they react and respond to policies and practices, particularly of the powerful and sometimes unpredictable United States government but also including the leaders of Taiwan, Japan, Russia, North Korea, India and others. They adjust to changing circumstances, weighing in each instance the costs and benefits of maintaining or changing policies, and thereby seek to sustain key Chinese leadership priorities and advance the development of what they call China's comprehensive national power.

In recent years, Chinese leaders are seen by this group of analysts as hedging their bets as they endeavor to persuade the United States and other important world powers of China's avowed determination to pursue the road of peace and development. Thus, the new thinking seen in greater Chinese international activism and positivism regarding multilateral organizations and world politics highlighted in the December 2005 Chinese White Paper entitled *China's Peaceful Development Road* appears to be only one part of recent Chinese foreign policy. Such positive and cooperative new thinking seems balanced by a concurrent large-scale buildup in Chinese military forces backed by assertions in Chinese white papers on national security, other official commentary, and assertive diplomatic and military actions that make clear that Chinese leaders are quite prepared to protect their interests in strong and assertive ways under circumstances seen to warrant such actions. In the meantime, the new Chinese diplomatic and international activism and positivism not only fosters a positive and beneficent image for China. They are seen by these analysts as serving an important practical objective of fostering norms and practices in regional and

⁸ Medeiros, Evan and Fravel, R. Taylor (2003). "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82:6 (November-December 2003): 22-35.

⁹ Shirk, Susan (2007). *China: Fragile Superpower*. New York: Oxford University Press. Sutter, Robert (2007). *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield: 3-12.



international organizations and circumstances that create a buffer against perceived US efforts to “contain” China and to impede China’s rising power. Roughly consistent with the image of the “Gulliver strategy” noted earlier, they foster webs of interdependent relationships that tie down and hamper unilateral or other actions by the US superpower that could intrude on important Chinese interests in Asian and world affairs.¹⁰

2009-2010-a time of “testing” in Sino-American relations

Events in 2009

It was against this background that President Barack Obama took office in January 2009. 2009 showed the strengths and the weaknesses of contemporary American engagement with China. President Barack Obama entered office to face a host of major international and domestic problems. China policy was not one of them. The president’s campaign was unusual as China policy was absent as a significant issue of debate. Expert opinion urged the incoming US government to pursue the positive equilibrium seen in closer US-China engagement developed during the latter years of the George W. Bush administration.¹¹

As noted earlier, prominent Americans saw cooperation between China and the United States as the most important relationship in 21st century international politics. They argued for a “G-2” condominium between Washington and Beijing in order to direct major international issues including the global economic recession, climate change, conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and nuclear weapons development in North Korea and Iran.

The Obama government was more realistic about what could be expected in cooperation with China. It sought China’s assistance, as well as the assistance of other important powers, in dealing with complicated international issues. It tried to reassure Chinese leaders that the US government would not seriously challenge China in dealing with sensitive issues regarding trade protectionism, human rights, meeting with Tibet’s Dalai Lama, and arms sales to Taiwan. It followed the pattern developed during the Bush administration of dealing with the many differences in US-China relations through various bilateral dialogues. There are over sixty such dialogues, including an annual meeting led by the US Secretaries of State and Treasury, where American and Chinese leaders endeavor to manage their differences and broaden cooperation, out of the limelight of media scrutiny. As a result, the carefully managed public discourse between the US and Chinese governments continued to emphasize the positives in the relationship. Differences were dealt with in private meetings.¹²

Nevertheless, many significant differences became vividly clear as the year wore on, underlining the limits of positive US-Chinese engagement. Chinese officials criticized

¹⁰ Saunders, Phillip (2006). *China’s Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers, and Tools* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press Institute for National Strategic Studies Occasional Paper 4 June 2006): 8-9.

¹¹ deLisle, Jacques (2009). *China Policy Under Obama* Foreign Policy Research Institute *E-Notes* February 15

¹² Liberthal, “The China-US Relationship Goes Global.”



the Obama government's strategy in Southwest Asia and eschewed significant involvement against the Taliban. Chinese leaders complained frequently about US stewardship in the global economy and made repeated references to diversifying from the US market, investment in US government securities, and use of the US dollar. American complaints about restricted access to the Chinese market amid the massive trade deficit with China saw some moves to restrict Chinese imports and other actions which China greeted with trade retaliation and loud charges of protectionism.¹³

Chinese and American officials endeavored to develop common ground on climate change, but progress was limited and public acrimony between the US and Chinese delegations highlighted the December international meeting in Copenhagen. President Obama undertook extraordinary last minute efforts to get China, India, Brazil and South Africa to join in support of the limited accord that was agreed to.¹⁴

Sino-American cooperation was better in dealing with North Korea's second nuclear weapons test and other provocations, but the powers remained at odds regarding the utility of using international pressure to compel North Korean cooperation. Beijing was even more reluctant to apply pressure against Iran's nuclear development.¹⁵

Military relations remained tense. Chinese government ships confronted and harassed US Navy surveillance ships patrolling in international waters that China claimed as a special zone in the South China Sea. China blocked military exchanges for months because of a US arms transfer to Taiwan late in the Bush administration. Renewed military exchanges in 2009 featured strong Chinese warnings against US arms sales to Taiwan.¹⁶

Against this background, expectations for US-China relations were guarded. Deep mutual suspicion reportedly characterized official US-China interchange. Non-government demonstrations of antipathy showed, especially on the American side. The US media was very critical of President Obama's "weak" stance on various human rights, trade and other issues sensitive to Americans during his November trip to China. Majorities of Americans were unimpressed by the purported benefits of engagement as they continued to disapprove of the Chinese government and increasingly saw China as a threat to the United States.¹⁷

Despite their salience, disputes and differences in US-China relations in 2009 did not appear sufficient to substantially upset enduring patterns of pragmatic decision making among the Chinese and American leaders focused on continued engagement with one another. The Obama administration remained preoccupied with a wide range of important domestic and foreign policy questions. In this context, a significant dispute with China appeared among the last things the preoccupied US government would want; on the contrary, the incentive to continue at least a semblance of cooperation and to avoid conflict with China seemed strong.

¹³ Glaser, Bonnie (2010). "Obama-Hu Summit: Success or Disappointment?" *Comparative Connections* 11:4 (January 2010), 25-35.

¹⁴ Babington, Charles and Loven, Jennifer (2009). "Obama raced clock, chaos, comedy for climate deal," www.ap.com December 19 (accessed December 21, 2009)

¹⁵ Landler, Mark (2010). "Clinton warns China on Iran Sanctions," *New York Times* January 29, 2010 www.nytimes.com (accessed February 23, 2010).

¹⁶ Buckley, Chris (2010). "China PLA officers urge economic punch against US," *Reuters* February 9, 2010 www.reuters.com (accessed February 12, 2010)

¹⁷ Glaser, "Obama-Hu Summit."



The Chinese administration of President Hu Jintao set a central foreign and domestic policy goal for the next decade focused on China fostering a continuation of the prevailing international situation seen generally advantageous for China in order to allow for expeditious modernization in China. Exploiting this period of perceived "strategic opportunity" in international affairs seemed to require keeping US-China relations moving in positive directions.¹⁸

The Hu Jintao administration worked hard in fostering business-like and constructive relations with the George W. Bush administration. In 2009, the Chinese administration insured that its initiatives and probes did not seriously disrupt the advantages for China in sustaining generally positive relations with the United States. Thus, Chinese probes against US military surveillance in the South China Sea subsided. Despite public complaints and threats, Chinese investment in US securities continued and Chinese reliance on the US dollar remained. While Chinese officials planned for an eventual reliance on the Chinese consumer to drive economic growth, Chinese entrepreneurs seemed determined to sustain and expand their shares of the reviving US market. China also acceded to varying degrees to US arguments on North Korea, Iran, and climate change. It resumed active military contacts cut off because of US arms sales to Taiwan in 2008.¹⁹

Early 2010

Unfortunately for those seeking to strengthen the image of positive cooperation and engagement between the two world powers, 2010 got off to an acrimonious start. February was a particularly bad month. Chinese officials and authoritative commentary took the unusual step of escalating criticism and threats against reports of planned US arms sales to Taiwan. The Chinese administration well knew that the sales were expected and had probably been delayed in order to avoid controversy prior to President Obama's visit to China in November 2009. Nonetheless, official Chinese media was full of warnings in early 2010 against the sales. When the US package of \$6.4 billion of weapons systems was announced in early February, the Chinese reaction was publicly strong. Concrete retaliation included halting some defense talks, while threatened retaliation was directed against US firms selling military equipment to Taiwan and included warnings that China would be less cooperative with US officials in dealing with such salient international problems as Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program.²⁰

The Obama government made no secret of the fact that in deference to China and concern over the president's trip to Beijing in November, the US government had postponed the US president's meeting with the Dalai Lama rather than meet with the Tibetan leader during his visit to Washington in October 2009. Thus, when news of the rescheduled Obama-Dalai Lama meeting surfaced in February 2010, Chinese officials

¹⁸ Lampton, David Michael, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power* Berkeley CA: University of California Press: 32-36.

¹⁹ See quarterly reviews of US-China relations in *Comparative Connections* www.csis.org/pacfor

²⁰ Romberg, Alan (2010). "Beijing's Hard Line against US Arms Sales to Taiwan," *PACNET Newsletter* #4 February 3, 2010 www.csis.org/pacfor



and media once again appeared to be trying to intimidate the Americans by warning against the meeting and its consequences for US-China relations.²¹

China's Tougher Posture—Competing Views

Coming after the sometimes acrimonious Sino-American interaction at the international climate change meeting in Copenhagen and following limited US success in eliciting greater Chinese support for key US international objectives regarding climate change, Iran's nuclear program, and international currency and trade issues, the tougher public posture of China prompted a range of speculation by media observers and international affairs specialists in the United States, China, other parts of Asia and the West. While there were often widely varying views and perspectives, the debate focused on two general groups.

The more prominent group warned of a potential or actual turning point in China-US relations.²² The specialists and media commentators in this group tended to see rising China as having reached a point of greater power and influence in world affairs, and this rise was now prompting China to press the United States for concessions on key issues of longstanding dispute like Taiwan and Tibet. China's greater "confidence" and "assertiveness" also were prompting Beijing to take tough stances in disputes with the United States on currency and trade issues, human rights practices, and cyber attacks, and to do less in support of US-backed international efforts regarding Iran, North Korea, and climate change. Some saw China taking the lead and setting the agenda in US-China relations, with the United States placed in a weaker and reactive position.²³ It was common among these commentators for the Americans and others in Asia and the West among them to argue for a tougher US stance against China, a so-called American "push-back" against perceived Chinese assertiveness.²⁴ However, some specialists in this group judged that the Obama government, with its many preoccupations, was not up to the task of managing the newly assertive China; they saw a shift in international power in Asian and world affairs away from US leadership and toward China developing greater momentum.²⁵

The specific points made by these commentators and specialists included the following:

- China emerged from the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 stronger than other major powers, including the United States, which remained stuck in a slow recovery with large unemployment. Commentators in China and abroad commonly saw economics as the prime cause for the power shift away from US leadership and toward China that they perceived was well underway in Asian and world affairs. Indeed, it was judged by some that the international economic system was undergoing a significant change, away from Western-led norms and institutions and

²¹ "China warns against Obama-Dalai Lama meeting," *Reuters* February 3, 2010 www.reuters.com (accessed February 23, 2010).

²² Shambaugh, David (2010). "The Chinese tiger shows its claws," *Financial Times* February 17, 2010 www.ft.com (accessed February 23, 2010).

²³ Hoagland, James (2010). "As Obama bets on Asia, regional players hedge," *Washington Post* February 11, 2010 www.washingtonpost.com (accessed February 23, 2010).

²⁴ Marr, Kendra (2010). "W.H. takes tougher tone with China," *Politico* February 16, 2010 www.politico.com (accessed February 23, 2010).

²⁵ Jacques, Martin (2010). "Crouching dragon, weakened eagle," *International Herald Tribune* February 16, 2010, www.iht.com (accessed February 23, 2010).



toward international regimes where rising China would play an ever greater role seen at odds with the liberal Western order fostered by the United States.

- In his visit to China in November 2009 and other US-China interchange, President Obama and his administration signaled a strong need for US cooperation with China on a wide variety of international as well as bilateral issues. The US policy agenda was seen to underline the necessity of the US government working closely with China. Under these circumstances, Chinese leaders were portrayed by Chinese and foreign experts to have discerned that America needed China more than China needed the United States. In the past, such calculations were seen behind upsurges in Chinese pressure on the US government regarding Taiwan and other issues. In the current case, President Obama was viewed as “weak” and needing to accommodate China, which could afford to make stronger demands and to do less to accommodate its American partner.
- One line of analysis in this group said that the incentive for senior Chinese leaders to adopt tougher and less cooperative policies toward the United States had less to do with their confidence in international affairs and more to do with their concerns about managing domestic Chinese pressures. Chinese elites and popular opinion reportedly were influenced by international and Chinese commentary highlighting China’s rise from the economic crisis while the United States lagged behind. These segments of Chinese opinion joined with those officials in China representing military, domestic economic and other stakeholders in China’s ever growing international profile who were not associated with the more experienced and generally diplomatic approach of the professional Chinese foreign policy establishment. The domestic, military and other officials joined with popular and elite opinion in pushing for greater attention to Chinese interests and greater resistance to US requests or pressures. In order to preserve domestic stability and the continued smooth rule of the communist party in China, President Hu Jintao and other leaders were seen to have little choice but to accommodate domestic forces pushing for a harder position against America.²⁶

The second group of Chinese and international observers was much less prominent than the above noted commentators during early 2010. The specialists and commentators of the second group duly acknowledged China’s more publicly assertive stance on Taiwan and Tibet; limited Chinese cooperation with the United States on issues ranging from currency and trade issues to climate change and Iran’s nuclear program also was noted. These observers often anticipated a difficult year ahead for Sino-American relations, especially as the Obama government was pressed by domestic economic and political forces in the United States to adopt a firmer stance against China on sensitive issues like human rights, trade disputes, and Iran.

However, these specialists and commentators tended to see more continuity than change in Sino-American relations.²⁷ They disagreed with idea that China had now reached a point where it was prepared to confront America on key issues and or where

²⁶ Wong, Edward (2010). “Rift grows as US and China seek differing goals,” *New York Times* February 20, 2010 www.nytimes.com (accessed February 23, 2010)

²⁷ Pei, Minxin (2010), “The Tension is overstated,” *International Herald Tribune* February 16, 2010 www.iht.com (accessed February 23, 2010); Elizabeth Economy, “The US and China Have at it Again; but it’s much ado about nothing,” <http://blogs.cfr.org> February 2, 2010 (accessed February 12, 2010).



it was prepared to risk substantial deterioration in Sino-American relations. Some of these observers tended to see the Chinese pressure on Taiwan and Tibet as “probes” or “tests” of US resolve, not unlike the probes China appeared to carry out in the South China Sea in 2009 and in threatening that year to move away substantially from the US dollar and to move away from focus on the US market for Chinese exports. As noted earlier, China was viewed to have pulled back from those 2009 initiatives once it was clear that their consequences would be adverse to broad Chinese interests.²⁸

Among specific reasons for judging continuation of Chinese efforts to avoid substantial conflict and sustain positive engagement in the United States were:

- China’s dependence on the US economy and its reliance on the international order led by the United States remained enormous. The ability of an aroused United States to complicate and undermine Chinese interests in sustaining the “strategic opportunity” of an advantageous international environment in the first two decades of the twenty first century also remained enormous.
- China was compelled in the previous decade to reverse its strong opposition to US hegemonism in the interests of a policy to reassure the United States and its associates that China’s rise would be peaceful. It did so in major part to avoid US balancing that would impede China’s growth and so complicate China’s rise that it might lead to the end of the CCP regime.²⁹ Reversing such a policy approach would be a very difficult undertaking for a Hu Jintao administration entering its last years with a focus on smooth succession from one leadership generation to the next. Thus, the incentive for the Hu Jintao administration to sustain generally positive Sino-US relations was reinforced by the pending generational leadership succession due to take place at the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2012. Preparations for this decennial event involve widespread behind-the-scenes bargaining over policy, power, and appointment issues that are best carried out in an atmosphere where Chinese leaders are not diverted by serious controversy among the many issues they face at home and abroad, notably Sino-American relations.
- If China were to choose to confront the United States, it would presumably be inclined to follow the past pattern China used in dealing with international initiatives against potential or real adversaries. That pattern involves “united front” tactics whereby China is sensitive to and endeavors to build closer ties with other powers as it prepares to confront the adversary, the “main” target. However, prevailing conditions in Chinese foreign relations did not show particularly good Chinese relations with many important world power centers as China faced the United States in 2010. China’s relations with India, Japan, Western Europe, South Korea, Australia, and arguably Russia were very mixed and often troubled. With the exception of Japan, they were more troubled and less cooperative than they were earlier in the decade.

²⁸ These points and those in the bullets paragraphs below benefited from off-the-record consultations and meetings the author had with two dozen American specialists and five Chinese officials in Washington DC during February 2010.

²⁹ Lampton, *Three Faces of Chinese Power* 32-34; Robert Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (second edition) Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, p. 10.



Subsequent events—sustained positive equilibrium

Events later in 2010 did not resolve the debate between those commentators seeing an assertive China prepared to push the United States on differences, and those commentators seeing Chinese and US leaders seeing their interests well served through policies and practices that avoided conflict and sustained a positive equilibrium in US China relations. However, the zig zags of Chinese behavior challenging US policies and practices appeared to have limits. The top Chinese leaders made clear their concern to preserve and develop the positive equilibrium in US-China relations, notably by beginning preparations to send President Hu to the United States on an official visit in early 2011.³⁰

The Americans were disappointed by China's refusal to condemn North Korea for its sinking of a South Korean warship, the *Choenan*, killing 46 South Korean sailors. South Korea, backed by the United States, sought to punish North Korea short of violence, notably through the United Nations. China insured that North Korea was not officially the target of UN actions. South Korea and the United States announced military exercises in the seas on both sides of the peninsula. For the first time in recent memory, China publicly opposed the exercises in the Yellow Sea as a threat to China. The Chinese complaints became a focal point of sharply worded commentary in official and unofficial Chinese media for weeks. Chinese comment especially objected to the US aircraft carrier based in Japan, the *George Washington*, taking part in the Yellow Sea exercises.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials were privately and publicly expanding and refining their recently avowed concern with supporting their "core interests" to include broad claims to island groups in the South China Sea also claimed by other states. The presumably uncompromising claims involving Chinese "core" interests included Chinese unilateral assertions and attempted regulation of military surveillance, fishing, oil exploration and other rights heretofore used the United States and neighboring Southeast Asian countries, among others.³¹

China was put on the defensive in reacting to interventions, including a notable statement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi on July 23, 2010 regarding recent tensions in the South China Sea. China's foreign ministry interpreted the U.S. intervention as an attack on China. The ARF meeting also saw a new U.S. presidential commitment, backed by ASEAN, to participate actively in the East Asian Summit, raising the profile of that regional body over China's preference for Asian only regional groups. Further complicating China's regional calculus were prominent advances in U.S. military and other relations with Vietnam shown during celebrations of a US-Vietnam anniversary in August that involved exercises with a U.S. aircraft carrier deployed near disputed regions of the South China Sea. The aircraft carrier, the *George Washington*, was the same ship Chinese commentary had harshly objected to participating in announced South Korean-US exercises in the Yellow Sea. The US contingent of ships included an advanced destroyer that entered Vietnam's Danang harbor. The ship had the symbolically important name, *The John McCain*.

³⁰ Glaser, Bonnie (2010), "U.S.-Chinese Relations," *Comparative Connections* 12:3 (October 2010), www.csis.org/pacfor

³¹ "China-Southeast Asia Relations," *Comparative Connections* 12:3 (October 2010) www.csis.org/pacfor



China long had relied on a regional approach based on growing trade and other economic contacts and bilateral and multilateral diplomacy designed to reassure Southeast Asian neighbors and their regional grouping, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As disputes in the South China Sea with regional claimants and the United States gained prominence in recent years, China became more assertive in defending its claims. It notably reconfigured military ships for use in enforcing unilateral fishing bans, deployed strong forces from all three Chinese naval fleets in shows of force in area, and asserted that China's claims to the islands, waters and resources of South China Sea represented a "core interest" of China that presumably brooks no compromise.

Chinese officials and commentary in Chinese media at first countered the U.S. intervention at the ARF meeting and other American policy initiatives in Southeast Asia with charges directed at the United States for its alleged self-serving and destabilizing intentions. Those attacks meshed with public Chinese attacks against concurrent U.S. military exercises with South Korean forces in reaction to North Korea's sinking of a South Korean warship, the *Cheonan*.

Later, some Chinese commentary dissented from the harsh public approach to the United States. The criticism of the United States and others over the South China Sea disputes and other issues subsided. For the time being at least, it appeared that China would remain focused on publicly stressing trade and reassuring diplomacy in Southeast Asia, while defending its territorial claims and continuing to build military capabilities.

In sum, China seemed unprepared to allow the disputes with the United States over the South China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and related matters to escalate in ways that would seriously undermine US-China relations. President Hu Jintao and other senior Chinese leaders went out of their way to greet visiting US envoys not of their rank and conveyed a strong public message of reassurance that China would sustain positive engagement with the United States. Indications of limits of Chinese assertive against the interests of the United States, senior Chinese military leaders reversed recent criticism and told American officials and the world that China sought resumed military exchanges with the United States. More importantly, President Hu began preparations for a major visit to Washington in early 2011.

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