

The U.S. and China: Feeling their way forward

Enrique Enrui Yang

·Partners or rivals?·

·World summit and UN reforms·

·Perspective·

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government of China has made the U.S. government the main objective of its foreign relations, constantly keeping in mind what its use of power might mean to the U.S. In contrast, the U.S. has its eye on a whole series of international troubles, among them China, which does worry the U.S. but not as much as other issues that torment it and are costing human lives every day. In one way or another, bilateral relations have followed a more or less normal course but have been frequently peppered with conflicts. Contacts, which are always in progress, have helped to momentarily ease the difficulties but do not profoundly change the situation, characterised by a lack of real understanding.

Not so friendly

Sino-American relations, considered a necessity during the years of the Cold War against the ex Soviet Union, have journeyed along a bumpy road in the last two decades. China first managed to attain Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status in order to trade with the U.S. and then it entered the WTO, which allows it considerable advantages in exports, the main pillar of its current economic growth. For all of this, the consent of the U.S. was vital and in order to obtain it China had to make great sacrifices, spending large amounts of money to make orders and purchases in the U.S. every time that the House of Representatives or the Senate debated subjects related to China, releasing, as the USA demanded, well-known democrats the night before meetings with chiefs of State, and ceding over and over again in negotiations along the road to the WTO.

China anxiously hopes to recover the island of Taiwan and finds itself obliged to define its actions without crossing the line imposed by the U.S. strategy for the

Western Pacific. Thus neither its hard-line statements nor its military intimidation towards the Taiwanese authorities has had much effect. China is much less interested in foreign conflicts that do not affect it directly but it has found itself involved in the crisis in the Balkans because of its undercover support for a long-time enemy of the U.S. and the West, and it was the mute victim of a harsh blow to its interests. In addition, it must endure some very complicated situations with the U.S., with a jumble of advantages and intrigues, in order to advance in regional co-operation in Southeast Asia and Central Asia and also in the mediation surrounding the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. There has been a constant stream of direct conflicts with the U.S. in economic issues related to intellectual property, trade imbalances, tariff obstacles and high-technology embargos, among others.

On both sides of the Pacific highly demonised images of the two governments are taking root among the people, the work of the media of both countries. As a consequence, surveys show that the number of people supporting Chinese-American friendship has decreased in recent years. The unstable relations between the two countries, as neither allies nor enemies, are maintained simply for the material benefit that they generate. Double standards at the governmental level extend to a variety of sectors. U.S. companies that claim to defend democratic liberties actually provide sophisticated equipment to Chinese security services to reinforce the latter's "firewall" and block Internet information. Young demonstrators in Beijing who one day are throwing stones and eggs at the U.S. Embassy do not hesitate to knock on the Embassy door a few days later, applying for visas to study in the U.S.

China is rushing to accelerate development and increase its power and to do so it needs the economic and technological assistance and the export channels that the U.S. can provide. The U.S. is attempting to reinforce its interests in the world by keeping China under check through Taiwan and by controlling North Korea and Japan through China. In this context, bilateral relations are not likely to deteriorate too much. Many high-level officials travel from one country to the other. This year the new Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, had made two visits to China over a period of four months. High-ranking envoys on special missions are constantly flying over the Pacific. Recently some high-level conversations have taken place between the U.S. and China, represented by the Deputy Secretary of State, Robert B. Zoellick and the Vice Foreign Minister, Dai Bingguo, respectively. This is a dialogue that will be repeated on a regular basis and in which the participants do not have the power to take decisions, but do have the authority to listen to one another and debate any subject of common interest, in order to "eliminate misunderstanding and promote mutual trust".* In fact, each of the two parties is more or less informed about the offers made by the other party in the sensitive areas of security and economy. The exchange of presidential visits, that of Hu to Washington, scheduled for September but postponed

* The text appearing within quotation marks was translated directly from the Spanish article, the sources of which are mostly Chinese, because the original documents in English were not available to the translator.

because of Hurricane Katrina, and that of Bush to Beijing in November, will help consolidate the path already undertaken towards a certain degree of mutual trust.

Seeking support

Real strength is what conditions just how far relations can go between two States with differing political values. For today's China, this strength comes from the support of other countries, gained in exchange for market space, trade benefits and also from a good international disposition as regards the rest of the world, which can help China by serving as a counterbalance to its complicated relationship with the U.S.

The UN celebrates its 60th birthday this year. Echoing the appeal of the UN Secretary General to bring about reforms aimed at achieving greater effectiveness for the body he directs, the U.S. and China, as permanent members of the Security Council, have each issued documents. The one by China is on "its position" and the one by the U.S. is on the "work outline" that it proposes. Given the fact that their positions are diametrically opposed, a confrontation between the two governments cannot be avoided in the Assembly debates and at the World Summit which takes place in September.

As for UN effectiveness, in China's opinion, "reforms must benefit multilateralism and increase the authority and efficiency of the United Nations" and "must satisfy the demands and concerns of all United Nations members, especially those of developing countries". The U.S. maintains that the UN needs to adopt "the highest law to safeguard justice and honesty and to increase effectiveness, in order to recover as much as possible the resources that that Member States invest in the UN".

China puts development above all else in the reforms, asking that they be "aimed at reversing the tendency of the United Nations *to give priority to security and not to development*" and that "eliminating poverty" and "facilitating the Millennium Development Goals" be made "the priorities of the United Nations reforms and of the September summit". The U.S. does not elude the issue of development, but it will not consider basing UN reforms on it. The U.S. says that it is "dynamic and active in the leading role it plays in development" and, instead of a general benevolence for all underdeveloped countries, it highlights "support for good governments and sensible economic policies". At the Summit the U.S. will reiterate "our shared commitment to defeating poverty and fomenting sustained economic development".

As for human rights, a subject which has both governments constantly worried, China deems it necessary to "give the same importance to economic, social and cultural rights as is given to civil and political rights, rectifying the phenomenon of granting greater preference to one type of human rights". It believes that the key of reform lies

in changing the current situation of politicising the subject of human rights”. China “does not agree with classifying countries as ‘democratic’ and ‘non-democratic’”. The U.S., however, has no plans to change this criterion. It is a pioneer in the idea of re-structuring the human rights institution and it supports the Secretary General’s plan for the creation of “a Human Rights Council that is small and action-oriented” and which “cannot be accessed by States with records of human rights abuse”. It clearly does not like “the phenomenon of democratic countries being judged by countries with a negative background in human rights”.

The controversy takes its most explicit form in the debate on the enlargement of the Security Council. It would appear that China is in favour of greater representation and that the U.S. is in favour of greater effectiveness, and the two governments are actually engaged in an intense power struggle within the UN. Supported by developing countries, which represent more than two thirds of the UN, China states: “In the enlargement of the Security Council it is necessary that preference, in terms of representation and the right to participate in discussions, be given to developing countries, especially to African countries. Whatever the reform project adopted, small and medium-sized countries must have the opportunity to enter the Council by turn, with equal rights for the various regions and taking into account the representation of the various cultures and civilizations.” In view of the irreconcilable Sino-American antagonism regarding the admission of Japan, Chinese diplomats manifest their “categorical opposition to setting a calendar for the Security Council reforms” and warn that “China will vote decisively against the intention to vote on projects without consensus”. The United States has no predetermined specific project, saying that “it approaches the reform and enlargement of the Security Council with an open attitude”, while emphasizing the need to establish “a certain requisite as the basis for the entry of suitable Member States”. For the U.S., “effectiveness is the first rule for any question related to the reform”.

Despite the spectacularity of the dispute between the two parties in lobbying activities and in the preparations for the Summit, the Summit and the UN Assembly will have to culminate in consensus documents, the symbol of continued unity, and everything causing discrepancy will be shelved. It will then remain for the UN reforms to be implemented, since everyone acknowledges that they cannot be put into effect all at once. During this process, China will earn itself solidarity and sympathy with its position in favour of governments that are marginalized in important UN decisions. With its moral resources growing and its power on the rise, China would attain a level of influence comparable to that of the U.S., which invests so much in the UN.

Destined for a better future

China is going through some rather delicate international situations. It seems unlikely that in the near future either the hegemony of the U.S. or the order it has imposed in Asia will change. It is true that China has a certain space available to it for its development, but the U.S. will not tolerate China going beyond that space. China wants to make the most of this space by speeding up development and by strengthening it, no doubt thinking about a larger space in which to fulfil its great ambition of truly coming out into the world.

As a general rule, China exercises a great deal of caution in its relations with the U.S., and tries to avoid undesired effects. However, the U.S. authorities are not much bothered by the Chinese reaction to the discontent that the U.S. tends to express. Bilateral relations take the form of almost infinite conflicts and agreements. Conflicts with the U.S. are generally resolved by China making concessions. Confrontations with the authorities of Taiwan can be permitted as long as they do not affect the strategic plans of the U.S. China coordinates the solution to the Korean nuclear crisis in tacit exchange for U.S. collaboration in other areas. Peaceful bilateral relations are achieved thanks to retreats by China in the matter of the exchange rate, the protection of intellectual property, the quota of textile exports, the intention to buy foreign companies, etc. Regardless of the commentaries made on the subject, China is making progress and therein lies the *raison d'être* of the current policy of apparent "humiliation."

A strong message in favour of conciliation with the U.S. can be perceived in certain publications that have appeared recently through semi-official Chinese channels. The acknowledged author of some of these articles is the Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou, Deputy Political Commissar of the Chinese Air Force. In his work on China's larger strategy and on its relations with the U.S., he points out that the U.S. would like to see a "soft government" in China, even though it nominally advocates a democratic regime, and that while the U.S. still gives more priority to its strategy in Europe, "China is not considered a principal rival", although China does consider the U.S. as such. In his opinion, U.S. military presence in Asia certainly serves to prevent possible military conflicts in the Taiwan Straits, but it also useful in keeping Japan under check; the U.S. looks with antagonism at the resurgence of China and Russia, but China may become its friend whereas Russia never will. Finally, he states that "the relations with the U.S. constitute the basis of Chinese diplomacy if China does not have other close friendships", that China is unlikely to be able to emerge in the first half of the 21st century, and that it is not good for China to be the enemy of the U.S.", a country capable of providing real economic aid and technological assistance, with which it is advisable to maintain a certain strategic balance but "never to reach a direct confrontation". This is a serious attempt at persuasion that, as widely spread among the Chinese as it is, might serve as a justification or excuse for the policy which may already be in place in China's relations with the U.S.

The line of conciliation that the Chinese government possibly intends to follow is

questioned by “hawks”, who also exist in China, and by radical sectors of society. In some Internet portals a leaked speech has been circulating and causing quite a stir. It is entitled *War is approaching* and is by the former defence minister General Chi Haotian. The speech calls on the Chinese to confront the probability of an imminent war, arguing that foreign powers, with Japan and the U.S. at the top of the list, will not tolerate the modernisation of China. They prevented it with the Japanese imperialist invasion in the middle of the 20th century and they now are determined to interrupt current Chinese expansion, probably under the pretext of the Taiwan conflict. The author states that at this point in the economic development of the country, the policy of “peace and development as the *leitmotiv* of our times” has been exhausted. Such policy is “coming to its end” and “puts people to sleep morally” and China has but one option: to “modernise with sword in hand”, in order to “win the right to war and then the right to development”. He notes that the essence of international relations lies in competence and in conflict and that “development has to culminate in threat”. For this reason it is necessary to “prepare for a decisive war” and “seize hegemony for the nation of China”. China’s reality is such that the appearance of any motive whatsoever may lead to social uprising and, possibly, to foolish acts on the part of the government. It is not hard to imagine the chaotic situation which would arise in China if the “hawks” take power and ultra-nationalism triumphs.

From the point of view of the U.S. government, China is in need of a redefinition of its social orientations; since the U.S. believes it unlikely that the symbiosis of economic liberalism and a Marxist socialist regime with orthodox overtones will last long, an effective orientation becomes necessary, based on the policy, successful up to the present, of “contact and contention”, which will lead China to total economic reform and also to political reform. The U.S. policy with respect to China, that of leading her to “become a part of the international community”, has not changed in the last 30 years, whether it is Democrats or Republicans who are in power and whether the Secretary of State is a dove (General Colin Powell) or a hawk (Dr. Condoleeza Rice). The U.S. is pleased with the entry of China in the WTO and with its joining the U.S. in the fight against terrorism. However it finds the “uncertainties” triggered by the development of China somewhat worrying and reproaches its stubborn resistance to make changes in its political and ideological regime. The U.S. cannot quite weigh up China’s future, although it certainly hopes to have China on its side. Considering the big headache it causes the U.S., American diplomacy will make every effort to transform the Chinese government into a friend, but it is also perfectly willing to assume the possibility of failing in this attempt.

The Chinese government would like to bring about improved relations with the U.S. But it is not sure whether the U.S. is a friend willing to help in China’s development or a rival lurking with bad intentions. It is in a hurry to obtain information *in situ* and calm the contrary voices on the home front, to say nothing of overcoming the obstacles that hinder an ideological turn, before it reaches a conclusion.

The two parties are still feeling their way forward in an attempt to become closer to

each other and foment stability in the development of their relations. To attain a smooth relationship between the two governments, an important contribution is undoubtedly the personal sincerity that the political leaders show in their direct contact, now in the September summit, and later in the reciprocal visits, in an effort to ensure a better future for both parties.

Exaggeration usually does little to help things move in the right direction. Chinese authorities are used to interpreting the difficult and untrusting relations with the U.S. as “relations between strategic partners” and the high-level government talks, a term agreed by both parties, have become a “strategic dialogue” in the Chinese media. According to the U.S. press, the Chinese authorities in Washington, displeased with the treatment by the U.S. government of the Chinese president as an “official visit”, repeatedly insisted that the official name be “State visit” and that it be accompanied by the corresponding protocol, including a banquet in the White House. If only the official name and the protocol, which are perhaps somewhat useful in efforts to flatter or mislead, really had much of an impact on the delicate Chinese-American relations, the solution would be quite easy!

References:

- Chi Haotian: *La Guerra se nos avecina*, www.peacehall.com, February 2005
- Liu Yazhou: *Sobre los Estados Unidos de América*, www.chinaaffairs.org, 18 March 2005
- Liu Yazhou: *Gran Estrategia para los Próximos 20 Años*, Phoenixweekly No. 20 of 2005
- Department of State, USA: *Esquema de trabajo a favor de una eficacia mayor de la ONU*, 17 June 2005
- Ministerio de AA.EE, RPC: *Posición de China acerca de las Reformas de las Naciones Unidas*, 7 June 2005
- Robert B. Zoellick: *Declaración sobre las conversaciones de alto nivel*, 2 August 2005
- Wang Guangya: *Discurso en la Comisión Redactora del Documento Final de la Cumbre de Septiembre*, 21 June 2005