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The Sources of US-China Strategic Mistrust

The historical use of ambiguity has been at the foundation of postwar U.S.-China ties.

By J.M. Norton

April 21, 2014

The recent visits of U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to China and the Environmental Protection Agency administrator Gina McCarthy to Taiwan and the Chinese leadership's responses to these visits indicate that U.S.-China relations continue to suffer from what many experts tend to label as "strategic mistrust." Today the long-standing strategic mistrust issue exacerbates tensions between the U.S. and China as they have increased interactions involving vital national interests and legitimate national security concerns in the areas of the Taiwan and Malacca Straits. The increasing frequency of interactions intensify the possibilities of miscommunication, misperception and miscalculation between two powers that possess the capability to exact disastrous damage on each other. These observations lead to some salient questions: What are the sources of U.S.-China strategic mistrust? What factors exacerbate the mistrust? And what formal steps should be taken to address this long-standing problem?

Why U.S.-China Joint Communiqués Are Sources of Mistrust

The 1972, 1979 and 1982 joint communiqués serve as the cornerstone of U.S.-China relations and at the same time paradoxically undermine bilateral ties in two vital areas: Taiwan and Japan.

The importance of the Taiwan question in U.S.-China relations is obvious because it stands at the center of the three communiqués. Yet each communiqué contains language building ambiguity directly into the foundation of U.S.-China ties. The language reveals each side has different interpretations of and conflicting views about the political future of “One China.” The Communist Party of China (CPC) sees itself as the legitimate ruler of “One China” and asserted the position to compel the U.S. leadership to accept its legitimacy and to return Taiwan to China. The U.S. position recognizes the CPC but maintains an ambiguous stance, only “acknowledging one legitimate government” of “One China” without indicating which government.

Washington’s ambiguous position turns less ambiguous when several variables involving U.S.-Taiwan ties are factored into the equation. Take U.S. congressional acts as one example. These acts represent strong cultural, defense, economic and political support for the Taiwan leadership and its people, and occur in a context shaped by powerful antecedents. Historically, the U.S. side supported its World War 2 ally Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) in the Chinese civil war. At the conclusion of the war, the U.S. along with other powers in the Cairo, Potsdam and Yalta agreements returned Taiwan to China. At the time the KMT was the ruling party of “One China.” In the ensuing decades the U.S. side continued to support the KMT and at the same time fought indirect wars with the CPC and took 30 years to recognize the CPC as the legitimate ruling party of mainland China. This context of U.S.-KMT relations adds a distinctive contour to Washington’s ambiguous position.

In the 1982 joint communiqué the American leadership made assurances that it would reduce and terminate arms sales to Taiwan while the Chinese leadership committed to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan question. As for the U.S., for more than 30 years it has sold weapons to the Taiwanese leadership. The Chinese leadership has been and continues to be confused by some sales and discussions of proposed sales of weapons with offensive capabilities, which reach as far back as 1992 when the U.S. sold F-16 A/B fighters to Taiwan. Further, the Chinese side views the discussions about possible arms sales taking place between high-level American and Taiwanese officials as equivalent to formal political and military support for and recognition of Taiwan. As for China, the leadership is committed to peaceful reunification. But the leadership retains the right to use force against Taiwan, and in 1995 it identified the three conditions that would drive it to resort to the use of force. From the U.S. viewpoint, one principal problem is that the Chinese military maintains more than 1,100 short- and medium-range missiles deployed in Jiangxi and Fujian provinces. This formidable missile posture not only threatens Taiwan and Japan, both of which the U.S. is required to defend, but also U.S. military assets located in Japan.

The second source of strategic mistrust is Japan. Despite the significant impact of U.S.-Japan ties on U.S.-China relations, only the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué mentions Japan. The Chinese side states that, “it firmly opposes the revival and outward expansion of Japanese militarism and firmly supports the Japanese people’s desire to build an independent, democratic, peaceful and neutral Japan.” The U.S. side declares it “places the highest value on its friendly relations with Japan; it will continue to develop the existing close bonds.” The other two joint communiqués make no mention of Japan.

In the Chinese perception, Washington is the principal driver of Japan’s transformation. Over time it has helped transform Japan’s self defense force into a national military. And it has

assisted the Japanese side in acquiring and manufacturing through joint cooperation technologically advanced weapon systems, some of which have offensive capabilities. Right now the Chinese leadership sees the U.S. as the main driver of Japan's resurgence and as lacking the political will to restrain an increasingly assertive Japan. Further, the current Japanese leadership's growing assertiveness takes place in the context of growing nationalism with an imperial twist (for instance, the "731" incident). In short, from the Chinese viewpoint, U.S. leaderships have spurred the "revival and outward expansion of Japanese militarism," which represents a violation of Chinese concerns articulated in the 1972 communiqué.

Both the American and Chinese sides in the 1972 and 1978 communiqués agree that neither side should pursue hegemony and spheres of influence. Both communiqués state that, "neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony." The 1972 communiqué also states that, "both sides are of the view that it would be against the interests of the peoples of the world for any major country to collude with another against other countries, or for major countries to divide up the world into spheres of interest." Although both sides agree to avoid hegemony and spheres of influence, each side perceives the other side might violate the 1972 and 1978 joint communiqués.

As for China, the U.S.-Japan security agreements and the military dimension of the U.S. pivot suggest not only is the U.S. leadership pursuing a regional hegemonic position but also is colluding with Japan (and with the Philippines) to carve out a regional sphere of interest. The potentially new regional structure has the American and Japanese leaderships as the center of gravity. And the sphere of interest consists of the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Straits area, and the areas up to the Malacca Straits. Basically the Chinese leadership believes the American leadership has ambitious regional designs that include a major role for Japan. And for obvious reasons this undercuts commitments made in the 1972 and 1978 communiqués.

Conversely, the U.S. side might perceive the Chinese leadership as aiming to displace the U.S. and establish a regional architecture with China at the center. The Chinese leadership for instance has pursued advanced weaponry capabilities including anti-ship missiles and hypersonic vehicles with little to no transparency and no institutional dialogue. From the U.S. side the growing capabilities occurring behind "the great wall of opacity" suggest the Chinese leadership might be an emerging threat. In response the U.S. leadership now tends to play the "Japan Card," the "Philippine Card," and to a lesser extent, the "Korea Card" to create power centers to confront and balance the rise of China. In the past this approach has led to world wars. But for now in large part it has encouraged the Chinese leadership to engage in more and more proactive defensive and offensive measures.

The Clash of Intent and Capabilities

Both the American and Chinese sides assert specific intentions in the three joint communiqués but at the same time pursue other intentions and capabilities contradicting their initial positions. The principal problem emerging out of this conundrum relates to intention and capabilities and how these two variables influence threat perceptions and conflict scenarios. According to Dr. Monte Bullard, a retired U.S. army colonel, the Chinese side constructs "threat perceptions on intent more than on capabilities. However, the American side constructs threat perceptions more

on capabilities than on intent. The different perceptions result in different conflict scenarios in the Taiwan Straits.” Though Bullard applies his observation to interactions between the U.S. and China in the Taiwan Straits, his conclusion also pertains to the areas up to the Malacca Straits. In this context this means as both sides have more and more interactions involving national interests and security concerns, the risk calculation increases because both sides work from different starting positions.

Is It Time for a Fourth Communiqué?

Because the three joint communiqués are principal sources of strategic mistrust in the two vital areas of the Taiwan question and the role of Japan, the American and Chinese leaderships might consider pursuing a series of military and diplomatic initiatives aiming to build the foundation for a fourth communiqué. A fourth communiqué might better reflect the nature and scope of post-Cold War ties and the emerging bilateral relationship. It also might help to reduce misperception, miscommunication and miscalculation. By taking this approach it could facilitate a better understanding of and respect for the other side’s long-standing and emerging legitimate national interests and security concerns. This in turn might help defuse tensions and moderate what appears to be an emerging regional structural crisis.