
[主题报告]

The Fifteen Years of China's Diplomacy and Strategy toward the United States:

The Process of Evolution, Fundamental Experiences, and Remaining Problems

SHI Yinhong

⟨Renmin University of China⟩

At present, China's relations with the United States are widely regarded in both of these two countries and in the rest of the world as extraordinarily good in comparison with the situation of the past three decades, and in the most recent words of the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that is no exaggeration. However, many "informed people" in China as well as in other nations tend to forget, that this state of affairs results in large part from a long process of emergence of China's grand strategy toward the United States characterized by anguish learning and strategic balancing on the part of the government leaders and other foreign policy makers in China.

This evolution can be summarized in its essence in the following seven closely interconnected processes: (1) from inconsistency to consistency in strategy and operation, it has moved towards a remarkable increase of strategic and operational patience; (2) from a weak sense of priority of vital policy objectives it has evolved towards a very strong one; (3) from a piece-meal approach it has moved to a generally systematic and integrated one; (4) from a relatively weak determination to manage, guide or control disadvantageous public and institutional opinions it has envolved to a stronger resolve to do so; (5) there is now more confidence in the positive political and diplomatic influence of the strong and growing economy; (6) there is now a grand strategy; (7) from frequent passivity and a reactive pattern of behavior. China is now taking the initiative.

The last 15 years 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 has been focused upon President Jiang Zemin's personal learning process in his dealings with the United States, based firstly on Deng Xiaoping's somewhat self-contradictory legacy in that area. Although the decade from 1989 to 1999 was definitely important, but it was less significant than the dramatic events which happened in only a few months. First there was NATO's Kosovo intervention and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia.

And next there was the September 11th terror attack on the U.S., with which began the most dynamic part of the whole evolutionary process. Chronologically, China's redefinition of the world situation can be divided into three stages. The first stage was the six months immediately following 9/11, during which 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 opinions, attitudes and policies toward the multi-front anti-terrorist campaign launched by the United States. The second stage began around March 2002 when Taiwan’s “Secretary of Defense” Tang Yiau-ming made an official visit to the United States and the increase of U.S.-Taiwanese military cooperation since 1997 became apparent. In the context of this and other broader developments, there arose in China both in and outside the government a very great resentment of American hegemony added to this was America’s refusal to declare the 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 the Chinese government or official mass media came criticism of several major U.S. declarations and strategic doctrines. However, in the late summer and early fall of 2002 came a “sea change”, as some Western media called it at that time, of Chinese government attitudes and policies towards the U.S. in the direction of moderation, and there was a very remarkable improvement in Chinese-American relations that has lasted through to the present. It was a kind of realist perception, prudent optimism and improved strategic thinking, together with a positive change in the U.S. attitude toward China, that brought about this remarkable change.

The 16th National Congress of the CCP represented a further major strategic clarification. 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 was characterized by the more determined, more consistent, and more patient pursuance of a moderate, optimistic, and pragmatic approach to dealings with the United States, and which on the other featured a firm determination to accelerate China’s military modernization and to prevent by almost any means the independence of Taiwan. This, the ordering of strategic priorities is definitely an unprovement to be dealt with.

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.

Also important are the 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 the domestic consensus needed to support it. There is still a remarkable “self-contradiction” in the very strong negative views of U.S. general security strategy and the positive or optimist views of currant U.S. China policy. Also 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 present Chinese-American relations and tending to increase (even greatly) China’s difficulties in policy-making, which include the North Korea nuclear crisis, the strength of forces for the independence within Taiwan, and increasing monetary and trade frictions between China and the U.S. The complicated problem of Chinese-Japanese relations is also significant in terms of China’s

position *vis-à-vis* the United States. Moreover, there are domestic factors complicating the picture: the problem of “two-headed leadership”, especially in defense and major foreign policy areas; government intentions on foreign policy *versus* somewhat different public opinion; domestic economic needs (including energy supply and trade expansion) for an assertive foreign policy *versus* international restraint and a generally conservative foreign policy tradition. In a sense, a grand strategy toward the United States and its activities will never be an easy.