

## THE BUSH PRESIDENCY: PROSPECTS FOR SINO-US ARMS CONTROL<sup>1</sup>

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In assessing the prospects for Sino-US arms control, there is some bad news and some good news: the bad news is that George W. Bush has just been inaugurated America's 43<sup>rd</sup> president; the good news is that George W. Bush has just been inaugurated America's 43<sup>rd</sup> president.

The advent of the Bush presidency provides some cause for pessimism when it comes to this key arms control relationship, given candidate Bush's frequent references to China as a "strategic competitor" and his commitment to a "robust" national missile defense program; the latter being an effort that Beijing seems convinced is directed toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). On the other hand, there is reason for cautious optimism as well. During his confirmation hearings, new US Secretary of State Colin Powell seemed to be holding out several olive branches in China's direction. While Powell reminded the Senators that President Bush is "committed to deploying an effective missile defense using the best technology at the earliest possible date," he also pointed out that he would be "looking at the diplomatic ramifications." He not only stressed the need to consult with America's friends and allies, but pledged also to discuss this issue with the Russians and the Chinese, "as we continue to operate on the arms control front as well."

In short, Powell acknowledged Chinese (and Russian) concerns about national and theater missile defense (NMD/TMD) and expressed a willingness to discuss Beijing's apprehensions as part of an overall arms control agenda. Should the Bush administration reach any arms control agreements with China, it will be considerably more difficult (although admittedly not impossible) for Republican hardliners in Congress to attack a pact endorsed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld than one supported by any likely Defense Secretary in a Gore administration.

Obviously, the prospects for cooperation in the area of arms control are directly linked to the overall nature of Sino-US relations. When these are strained, arms control discussions are among the first issues to suffer (along with cooperation in other sensitive areas such as human rights). This is due, in part, to what I perceive to be a belief (or at least a negotiating tactic) on the part of Beijing that arms control is "an American issue;" i.e., that it is one that Washington is more interested in, and potentially benefits more from, than Beijing. Why then, the argument goes, should

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China do the United States a “favor” by discussing arms control issues when relations are strained or Washington is not being forthcoming in other areas?

One of the challenges facing the Bush administration – and arms control advocates in general – is to convince Beijing that progress in arms control is a mutually-beneficial outcome that potentially increases in value when relations are otherwise strained. It was, of course, this awareness of mutual benefits that permitted significant arms control agreements to be negotiated between Washington and Moscow during the height of the Cold War. A similar “win-win” attitude does not appear to have permeated Sino-US arms control dialogue. One might note here that it is also important to convince the Bush administration that arms control is a priority issue, since the topic has not figured prominently in discussions by incoming Bush security officials. However, there is at least a ray of hope here as well, since Secretary Powell did mention arms control several times during his confirmation hearings.

In addition, it is useful to remind ourselves that almost all past major arms control agreements were negotiated or enacted by Republican Presidents. These included the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (negotiated by Lyndon Johnson but signed by Nixon), the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, SALT I, START I & II, INF, MTCR, and the list goes on. Bush’s father also took the initiative in 1991 to unilaterally withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from overseas bases and deployed ships and aircraft and also ordered unilateral strategic de-alerting. Therefore, one cannot dismiss the advent of new arms control initiatives, with China or elsewhere, based on Republicans assuming control of the White House. In some respects, the disposition of the Senate may be more important in this regard. Most of the above-cited arms control initiatives were signed by Republican presidents but approved by a Democrat-controlled Congress. As a result, the outcome of the 2002 mid-term elections – where the opposition party has traditionally done well – may prove crucial.

Looking at overall Sino-US relations, the Chinese have been openly nervous about what a Bush administration will mean for continued cooperation. Mr. Bush made it clear during the campaign that the Clinton administration’s Sino-US “constructive strategic partnership” buzzword would not be perpetuated, regardless of Beijing’s desire to continue to pay lip service to this lofty, but admittedly far off, goal. But, regardless of the Bush administration’s chosen new catchphrase – and here it is encouraging to note that Secretary Powell did not use the phrase “strategic competitor” at his hearing – some form of “cooperative engagement and managed competition” is likely to guide relations between Beijing and Washington during the next four years (as it has over the past eight).

During his confirmation testimony, Colin Powell noted that “a strategic partner China is not. But neither is China our inevitable and implacable foe. China is a competitor and a potential regional rival, but also a trading partner willing to cooperate in the areas - such as Korea - where our strategic interests overlap.” The challenge, of course, will be to convince China (and both the Bush administration and the Congress) that arms control is indeed one of those areas of overlapping strategic interest.

Powell’s testimony indicated that efforts would be made to foster better Sino-US ties. “China is not an enemy,” Powell asserted, “and our challenge is to keep it that way.” While Powell acknowledged that the US will “stand by” Taiwan and will provide for its defense needs in accordance with our Taiwan Relations Act,” he also uttered the

words Beijing was eager to hear: “the US has long acknowledged the view that there is only one China. In that respect, Taiwan is part of China.”

As a result, Sino-US relations appear to be starting out on the right foot with the new US administration. If the two can avoid unnecessary confrontation – i.e., new Chinese ultimatums regarding Taiwan or efforts by Bush to reactivate the currently-dormant Taiwan Security Enhancement Act legislation – prospects for cooperation seem good. This is, however, a very large “if.” In the US, there are many Bush supporters who will be urging a harder line against the PRC. And, in China, there has been a tendency in the past to take a confrontational approach with new interlocutors to test their reaction. Fortunately, despite eight years of ups and downs, the Clinton administration ended with relations between the two sides on an upswing. Neither President Bush nor Chinese President Jiang Zemin seems eager for confrontation and both have reasons to continue to move the relationship in a positive direction.

Nonetheless, one area where a counterproductive test of wills could emerge is over the recurring problem of Chinese missile exports. China, after much prodding from the Clinton administration, announced in late November 2000 a missile export policy consistent with the Missile Technology Control Regime; i.e., no export of missiles capable of carrying a payload in excess of 500 kg or travelling in excess of 300 km. Mr. Bush will likely be compelled early on to deal with allegations – real or imagined – of Chinese non-compliance. He must be careful not to overreact to unsubstantiated accusations. But Beijing must understand that a failure to vigorously enforce its new missile export policy would result in an unwelcome but unavoidable test of US resolve that could sour the prospects for near-term cooperation on arms control issues.

There are two arms control issues that are likely to cause the most tension between China and the new administration, as they did between Beijing and Washington under Clinton. One relates to ballistic missile defense, the other to arms sales to Taiwan. In the latter case, American negotiators have tried to divorce the arms sales issue from arms control talks but, in China’s mind, the two are inextricably linked.

While missile defense difficulties between Washington and Moscow center primarily on NMD, theater missile defense is an equally contentious issue between Washington and Beijing, especially since China spells TMD T-A-I-W-A-N. Mr. Bush can be expected to proceed with TMD research and development in continued close cooperation with Japan. As the Gulf War demonstrated, there are legitimate military and political-psychological reasons why some form of defense is needed against battlefield weapons such as SCUD missiles. The fact that parts of Japan are already in range of currently operational North Korean *No-dong* surface-to-surface missiles provides Tokyo with incentive to cooperate at least in the R&D phase. As a result, Chinese complaints about TMD development in general or about US-Japan cooperation in this area are likely to fall on deaf ears.

Chinese arms control specialists are willing to acknowledge, at least privately, that Beijing can accept TMD as long as Washington does not place Taiwan under its protective umbrella. While it would be politically impossible (and strategically unwise) for Washington to provide assurances in advance that it would not provide Taiwan with TMD or other forms of defense in the event of hostilities, Taiwan will likely neither be ruled in nor out of any regional TMD effort for the time being, unless Beijing forces the issue with renewed missile “tests” in close proximity to Taiwan, *a la* 1996. If the Chinese leadership was foolish enough to choose this method to test

American resolve, public opinion (and the US Congress) will make it impossible for Bush to do anything other than enhance Taiwan's protection. An accelerated, visible build-up of Chinese missiles opposite Taiwan could be equally troubling. In reality, the best way for Beijing to ensure that US TMD is not provided to Taiwan is to take steps to visibly improve cross-Strait relations.

Meanwhile, a strategic dialogue with China is needed on NMD so that each side at least understands the other's legitimate concerns. Beijing's suspicions to the contrary, hard-core proponents of NMD were not initially motivated by a desire to contain or neutralize the Chinese ballistic missile threat, even though it is equally clear that they encouraged rather than deterred by Chinese complaints. Even among those concerned about the diplomatic implications of NMD, dealing with Russian concerns and with the concerns of NATO allies takes higher precedent. China's totally unyielding stance, complete with accusations of American "hegemonism," further reduce the incentive to enter into a dialogue with Beijing on this issue.

Beijing has used common concerns about NMD as one of the foundations to build a deeper Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" in recent years. Virtually every high-level meeting between Russian and Chinese senior officials includes a joint condemnation of American unilateralism, replete with warnings about the destabilizing nature of NMD and the need to preserve the ABM Treaty in its present form. Yet the nature of the Russian and Chinese concerns differ considerably, given China's much smaller and thus more vulnerable deterrent force, and it will be much easier for Washington to address Moscow's concerns than Beijing's.

While Russian President Putin was seemingly unyielding in his discussions regarding NMD with the lame duck Clinton administration, it remains to be seen how he will approach the subject with the Bush administration. Should Mr. Putin decide to cut a deal on modifying the ABM Treaty in a way that ensures that Russia's strategic interests are still protected, China will have little option other than to go along. Since the prospects of a US-Russia deal are at least an even bet, Beijing would probably be smarter to start showing some flexibility now, but this remains very much to be seen.

Arms sales to Taiwan will be another moment of truth for Sino-US arms control discussions. While rumours that Taiwan will officially request AEGIS-equipped ships seem unfounded, Taipei (and the US Congress) will be looking for some gesture from the Bush administration when the annual review of arms sales to Taiwan occurs this April. Beijing will be sure to protest any gesture, regardless of how destabilizing or how much it is prompted by Chinese actions (including its own vigorous procurement of offensive Russian weapons). It will be important for both Washington and Beijing to distinguish between those weapons systems that may serve unnecessarily to embolden Taiwan or to discourage Taipei from cross-Strait dialogue and those that merely help maintain the current cross-Strait balance. A greater willingness by Beijing to enter into dialogue with Taipei, rather than to continue to dismiss Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's many peace gestures as "lacking sincerity," could help relieve pressure on the Bush administration to use arms sales to Taiwan as a vehicle for expressing America's continued commitment to a peaceful solution acceptable to the people on both sides of the Straits.

In sum, prospects for arms control cooperation between Washington and Beijing during the Bush administration will be determined in large part by the ability of both sides to handle the sensitive Taiwan issue. If Beijing is willing to take steps to

ameliorate rather than increase cross-Strait tensions and the Bush administration can keep hardline elements in Congress at bay and demonstrate its commitment to ensuring a peaceful solution to cross-Strait difficulties in a non-confrontational manner, then both sides will have a vested interest in using cooperation on arms control issues to build a more stable Sino-US relationship.

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