Introduction

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell characterized U.S.-China relations moving toward the end of 2003 as the best since they have been since President Richard Nixon’s first visit in 1972. Was Powell’s statement merely diplomatic nicety due to the George W. Bush administration’s need of China’s support for the U.S.-led war on global terrorism and China’s willingness to actively involve itself in preventing North Korea from becoming a nuclear state? Or have the United States and China established sufficient common ground to pursue bilateral ties on a more predictable path?

Relations between China and the United States are structurally based on three joint communiqués that were signed in the Cold War era and addressed the pressing issues of the day. The key issue repeatedly addressed in all the three bilateral documents is Taiwan. For the executive wing of the United States government, at the same time it has to observe stipulations in the Taiwan Relations Act, a domestic U.S. law. Therefore, U.S.-China relations are structurally loose and more prone to shifting identifications of priorities originating in domestic and international spheres of politics. What meaning can be made of the fact that the first Bush administration seems to have managed to move away from its initial inclination to define China as a “strategic competitor” and pursue policies of active containment?

In this paper, I address the state of affairs in bilateral relations between China and the United States since George W. Bush took office as U.S. president by putting them in the larger context of how the two governments reacted to major events in East Asia as part of their pursuit of bilateral ties. My main argument is that although Bush and Bill Clinton differ in style in conducting American policies toward China, they share the same tendency, i.e., conducting the relationship on a crisis-driven basis. My proposal, then, is that the United States and China should find ways to put the bilateral relationship on a more structured basis, for the common good of the entire region.

The Legacy Bush Inherited from Clinton

When the Bush administration took office in 2001, the prospect of bilateral security ties was anything but assuring. The May 1999 bombing by the United States Air Force of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, was an event that propelled China to ponder its future.
policy implications. For the United States the choice was among “engagement,” “containment,” and a mixture of both. For China, the embassy bombing brought home a very different kind of choice. One choice was to continue along the path as suggested by the antihegemony stream of thinking in Chinese debates about policies toward the United States. Prior to the embassy bombing, in line with an inclination of countering American unilateralism, the Chinese leadership conducted a diplomacy of sympathizing with Slobodan Milosovic and his cohorts and championing the primacy of state sovereignty over the utility of the emerging practice of protecting human security in collective security practices, with or without authorization by the United Nations. The other choice was to accommodate American supremacy in global security affairs by joining the bandwagon of the United States in the pursuit of global security as defined according to U.S. interests. Neither choice was easy. To continue venting displeasure with U.S. supremacy in global affairs and riding on nationalistic waves so inspired would mean low costs in domestic politics, but there was no guarantee that the United States would not find excuse in another outdated map of a Chinese property, even within China. Should that be the case, nationalistic sentiments in China would almost certainly get out of control and make the Chinese government itself a target. Indeed, the modern as well as contemporary histories of China are full of such precedents. To demonstrate accommodation of U.S. agendas, particularly military ones, would demand a complete turnaround in at least the public rhetoric about the strategic environment China was in.

Second, in spite of the second Clinton administration’s avowed policy choice of engagement with China, including Clinton’s verbal pledge of no support for Taiwan independence on his trip to China in 1998, the United States and Japan had consolidated and redefined their security alliance relationship to prepare for another outbreak of military crisis in the Taiwan Strait, similar to the one in 1995–96. The institutionalization of a strengthened U.S.-Japan security alliance adds pressure on China over the Taiwan issue in the sense that it keeps open the door for Japan to join the United States in the event of China seeking a military solution to reunite Taiwan with the mainland. At the very least, the U.S.-Japan alliance as redefined in the mid-1990s provides an unspoken yet powerful assurance for the political forces in Taiwan that work to perpetuate the status quo of no unification. In short, the Taiwan issue has now been structurally internationalized, in spite of the fact that Taiwan is not a formal participant in the security arrangement between the United States and Japan.

The Taiwan issue became more challenging for Mainland China after the end of the Cold War for yet another reason. The political system in Taiwan transformed into the kind of democracy that is recognizable in the West. In contrast, Mainland China has stayed out of the “third wave of democratization.” This contrast, on top of the evaporation of the so-called “great triangle” of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington that came with the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972, implies that ideology is once again a major factor in China’s effort to secure an external environment conducive to its goal of building a strong nation.

Indeed, when in 1999 Lee Teng-hui characterized Taiwan and China as in a “special state-to-state relationship,” the Mainland Chinese media lost no time in reporting that Beijing had secured Washington’s reconfirmation of no change in the latter’s policy positions over Taiwan’s political status in international politics. The important role the Chinese leadership and academia in general assign to the United States over the continuing political impasse between Beijing and Taipei explains the harsh rhetoric the reform-minded Premier Zhu Rongji delivered shortly before the presidential elections in Taiwan in early 2000. In other words, viewed from Beijing, without support of the United States, Taiwan would not dare to venture further on the path of pursuing de jure independence. Failure to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence would amount to undoing the hard work done between 1972 and 1979 to make the Taiwan island free of the presence of American forces.
In short, the Taiwan issue embodies all the dimensions of Sino-American relations, from strategic (the U.S.-Japan alliance and its implications for dynamics across the Taiwan Strait), to military (U.S. military sales to Taiwan), to ideological (Taiwan’s democratization adding pressure for Mainland China to change its political system). Bush’s campaign rhetoric to undo the Clinton administration’s China policy orientation served as a good reminder of the threats on the horizon.

Third, Japan since the end of the Cold War has played a more active role in participating in the management of military and political affairs outside Japan proper. As part of the reconfirmation of the Japan-U.S. security alliance, the various administrations of Japan, though incrementally, pushed through domestic legislation to accommodate an enhanced military relationship with the United States. Japan also moved to participate in the U.S.-led Theater Missile Defense (TMD) project. The TMD has a pointed impact on the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, and a more powerfully armed Japan is not in China’s interest, either.

Although Sino-Japanese relationships have their own dynamics, U.S. support of Japan’s campaign to be more actively involved in regional and global security affairs certainly contributed to a heightened sense of insecurity for China. In addition to the Taiwan issue, China and Japan have outstanding territorial disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. U.S. support of Japan seeking a greater international military role amounts to additional pressure on China in the realm of military security.

Toward the end of the Clinton administration, the United States had managed to be even-handed in managing the dynamics of the day in its diplomatic relations with China and Japan respectively. Concerns in Japan about the “Japan passing” effect of Clinton’s trip to China in the summer of 1998, when put in the context of the Clinton administration having worked closely with the Ryutaro Hashimoto administration of Japan to reaffirm the bilateral security alliance relationship, had more to do with prestige than substance. After all, Clinton’s trip to China yielded little on what China wanted to gain most: a firm pledge, better still in the form of a fourth joint communiqué, on the issue of Taiwan. In contrast, Japan had made great strides in taking advantage of concerns in the United States about China’s strategic intent after the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96.

Fourth, China made by far the most significant overtures toward Southeast Asia in the economic realm in the immediate wake of the summer of 1997. Three policy decisions are worth mentioning. One, through making a monetary contribution to the International Monetary Fund’s currency stability loans to Thailand and Indonesia, China arguably demonstrated that its reputation as “a self-serving Group of One both within and outside the multilateral economic institutions” was now unwarranted. Two, China managed its crisis-related diplomacy with a balancing act. It refrained from partaking in either of the extremes in the debate about a proper IMF way of handling the crisis. On the one hand, through participating in the IMF-sponsored macroeconomic policy packages, China demonstrated its acquiescence to the fund’s role and philosophy. On the other hand, it did not endorse the IMF’s demands for policy reforms by affected Southeast Asian governments or calls for rejecting the fund as a lender of last resort. Instead, the Chinese leadership concentrated on taking a lesson from the crisis and pushing through further structural reform in its own economy. Three, after the outbreak of the crisis, whether or not the Chinese government would choose to devalue its currency, the renminbi (RMB), to protect its own trade interests became a subject of daily scrutiny in the media in the region and beyond. Throughout the regional monetary crisis, China kept its pledge not to devalue the RMB, thus removing an important external variable that might have caused another round of competitive devaluation of Southeast Asian currencies due to the overlap in Chinese and Southeast Asian exports in major international markets. These policies paid great dividends for China in fostering
goodwill among Southeast Asian countries.

A change in U.S. policy orientation toward China could potentially undo the diplomatic
gains China had made in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provides a
regular mechanism for military consultation among the members of the Association of
Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and the United States. Continuation of sovereignty
disputes means that it is not in China’s interest for the ARF to strengthen on the premise of
having a common platform for the purpose of confronting China. Indeed, increased maritime
piracy incidents against Japanese commercial shipping fleets in the Southeast Asian waters in
the wake of the Asian financial crisis provide Japan with legitimate reasons for concern and
the potential to enhance its military ties with ASEAN member nations.4

In short, Bush’s campaign promise of changes in U.S. foreign policy orientation to China
presented China with security challenges over the Taiwan issue, regime security in the
mainland, and China’s maritime neighborhood. China’s relations with the United States
looked heading toward another era of crisis.

From Hainan to Crawford, Texas: U.S.-China Relations Under Bush

The Bush administration inherited from the Clinton administration changes the United States
government had made to the structural frameworks for managing security relations with
China. In other words, U.S. policy toward East Asia continues to be “alliance-based.”5 For the
United States and its security allies in East Asia, the contrast between a continuously rising
Chinese economy and a stagnant Japan and Southeast Asian nations struggling to recover
from the wounds inflicted by the Asian financial crisis serves as a strong incentive to
maintain the alliance setup. In other words, even in the event of pledged continuity of U.S.
policy orientation toward China, the United States’ alliance partners in East Asia have
reasons to keep the alliance active.

China’s avowed foreign policy orientation is not to enter into a military alliance
relationship with any country. Since the end of the Cold War, the Chinese military assumed a
more visible role in being part of China’s foreign diplomacy. Through a series of exchange of
port calls by the Chinese navy and bilateral visits by defense ministry officials, the Chinese
military hopes to establish a mechanism of confidence building.6 In 1998 China began to
respond to international calls for transparency by publishing its white paper on national
defense. Although the publication of such papers is only one element in addressing foreign
concerns about China’s military intentions, it nevertheless signifies an important gesture
about China’s willingness to behave according to international norms.

Against the background sketched above, the collision of the United States Navy
surveillance plane and a Chinese Air Force fighter plane in Hainan, China, in April 2001
immediately darkened the shadow over bilateral security ties and presented fresh challenges
for Southeast Asian nations in terms of dealing with the United States and China over military
issues.7 For China, the spy plane incident, which the United States explained to be another
mistake, was too reminiscent of the 1999 embassy bombing to be comfortable. As one
commentary said, “making mistakes is natural. But always making mistakes detrimental to
other countries’ interests or other people’s lives is hardly responsible international behavior.”8

In the wake of the Hainan spy plane incident, President Bush’s comment, reflecting upon
his first one hundred days in office, threatened to add salt to the wounds. Although Bush’s
strongly worded intent of doing whatever it would take for the United States to militarily
defend Taiwan could be interpreted as being aimed for consumption in domestic politics, his
decision to terminate the annual review process of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and change to
proceed on an as-needed basis serves to encourage adventurous behavior on the part of
Taiwan. In other words, Bush’s simultaneous pledge of supporting a one-China policy as his predecessors had done was far less convincing when situated in the context of structural changes that had been made to U.S. military arrangements in East Asia and now the changes in U.S. policy on arms sales to Taiwan.

It was the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. that rescued the security dimension of U.S.-China relations from spiraling down the path of confrontation. In the immediate wake of the attack the Chinese Foreign Ministry went out of its way to demonstrate a human face by sympathizing with the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York and identifying that Chinese citizens were among the innocent victims of the attack as well. The Foreign Ministry also took the opportunity to demonstrate solidarity between the heads of state of the two countries as shown in a telephone conversation between Jiang Zemin and Bush. It is also significant to note that in a manner that is uncharacteristic of Chinese foreign policy decision-making, China assembled the foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Beijing and issued a joint statement offering moral support for the United States within one week after the attack took place. Convening of the SCO foreign ministers’ meeting paved the way for China to support the United States–led military campaign against Afghanistan. China was also active in partaking in the international project led by Japan for the postwar reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan, amid difficulties in Sino-Japanese relations, and made substantial financial and material contributions.

When the Bush administration shifted its geographical target of offshore antiterrorist campaigns from Afghanistan to Iraq, China played a careful role. On the one hand, when President Bush paid a two-day visit to China in February 2002, the Chinese leadership refrained from publicly taking a supportive stance in reply to Bush’s efforts to build international alliance for a military campaign against Iraq. On the other hand, unlike France, Germany, and Russia, China stayed on the sidelines in the United Nations debates about the utility of continued inspection for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. When the momentum was pointing to an inevitable U.S. invasion of Iraq, Chinese oil companies increased their purchases in the international crude oil market, resulting in a national trade deficit for the months of January and February 2003. The Chinese media were given ample freedom to report and comment on the air war as it was being waged by the United States on Iraq.

Viewed in the context of bilateral ties between the United States and China, China’s handling of the U.S. war on Iraq points to an unambiguous agenda of avoiding a repetition of how it handled the Kosovo war of 1999. The (second) Iraq war was not treated as an opportunity for China to exploit for domestic political purposes. Meanwhile, throughout the global diplomatic wrangling over U.S. plans for Iraq, Beijing also learned to manage the everyday politics of competing for attention in the international arena with Taipei by avoiding to be seen as the side that was distracting the United States from concentrating on its diplomatic priority of the day.

To be sure, there is a common cause between China and the United States in the anti-terrorism campaign. For decades China has been waging its own war on terrorism in Northwestern China. As a matter of fact, one of the key issue areas the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (previously known as the “Shanghai Five” grouping) tried to address was anti-terrorism in the Central Asian region. The Chinese government’s treatment of separatist forces operating in China’s Xinjiang Province in particular and of the ethnic minorities in general had for years drawn criticism from the United States as a violation of basic human rights. In September 2002 China succeeded in enlisting U.S. support to sponsor and pass two United Nations resolutions (No. 1267 and No. 1390), which include listing the East Turkistan movement as a terrorist group. The move in the U.N. makes it possible for China to have full incentives in cooperating with the United States to deal with other terrorist groups by freezing
their financial assets in China and making business transactions between them and a Chinese entity illegal.

If the commentary in the journal *Foreign Affairs* on China’s own antiterror agenda can serve as a reminder, it is that the elasticity of the issue-based cooperation between the United States and China is still limited. For, among other things, the views expressed in the commentary still challenge Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang by revisiting the history of how the land was incorporated into today’s range of territorial governance of China. Nevertheless, the fact that the Bush administration acted positively on an issue that is important to China provides a favorable international political environment for China to deal with its own problems of territorial integrity.

In the year 2002 the Bush administration managed to present a stable bilateral relationship between the United States and China through a series of direct meetings between the leaders of both countries. In February Bush visited Beijing. On his way to Beijing, Bush had reiterated his commitment to protecting Taiwan by including the following declaration in a speech before the Japanese parliament on February 19, 2002: “Together, Japan and the United States will strengthen our ties of security. America will remember our commitments to the people on Taiwan. And to help protect the people of this region, and our friends and allies in every region, we will press on with an effective program of missile defenses.”

Such developments did not prevent the presentation of Bush’s visit as a success, in spite of the fact that Bush did not win public endorsement of his campaign against Iraq, the first on his “axis of evil” list, from Jiang. On the other hand, the visit by Bush was helpful in terms of assisting a smooth transfer of power from one generation of Chinese leadership to another. Then Vice-President Hu Jintao of China visited the United States in late April. Although Hu was extremely low-key in the U.S., the fact that his visit went on schedule was itself significant, because American reception of Hu signaled the Bush administration’s acceptance of China’s arrangement for leadership transfer.

In 2002 diplomatic ties between China and the United States culminated with Jiang’s farewell visit to the United States. The gesture of Bush inviting Jiang to his private ranch in Crawford, Texas, was symbolically important. It symbolizes, among other things, that the Bush administration was in reality shifting course from its policy orientation of confronting China to working with China constructively. Very much like Bush’s trip to Beijing earlier in the year, Jiang’s visit failed to secure concrete concessions from Bush over the Taiwan issue, in particular U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. In other words, toward the end of 2002, when the sixteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was convening in Beijing and Jiang was to formally retire from being the “core” of top party leadership, U.S.-China relations had changed course from one of confrontation to one of tactical cooperation.

Enter North Korea: Real Common Ground, Finally?

Toward the end of 2002 China and the United States found themselves having to cooperate on yet another crisis issue. North Korea, dissatisfied with what it perceived to be a betrayal on the part of the United States and its allies in implementing the 1994 framework agreement, decided to escalate the tension by first expelling International Energy Atomic Agency (IAEA) inspectors from the country and shortly thereafter withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime.

For China, North Korea’s latest behavior amounts to a strategic challenge of a region-wide magnitude. The continuation of the Cold War security structure in Northeast Asia has left China in an envious position of being the only nuclear power accepted by the world community of countries. North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT broke a crucial
international norm. It is one thing for India and Pakistan to have gained nuclear capacity, since they have clearly identified enemies (i.e., each other) and China’s strategy of not responding to calls among quarters of the Indian political establishment to make China an enemy has worked to China’s advantage. But it is quite another if North Korea can proceed to become a nuclear power. This is because, as mentioned before in this paper, Japan since the end of the Cold War has demonstrated a persistent pattern of willingness to become a “normal nation” (i.e., shaking off the quasi-sovereign status imposed on it upon the end of the Second World War). With the U.S.-Japan alliance strengthened, and President Bush inviting Japan to join hands in protecting Taiwan even on his way to Beijing, the possibility for Japan to respond to a nuclear North Korea by going nuclear as well becomes greater. Indeed, if North Korea’s nuclear arms project cannot be put in check, what if anything can prevent Japan from acquiring its own nuclear weapons? The same logic applies in thinking about the possibility for South Korea and even Taiwan to take a page from the North Korean adventure and develop their own nuclear arms capacities as well.

The United States since the early 1990s has urged China to play a more active role in attempting to keep the North Korean nuclear arms project in check. When North Korea was still in the NPT and under IAEA surveillance, it made sense for China not to risk being seen as incapable of persuading North Korea to change course. Worse still, China could be blamed by the United States for having assisted to keep the North Korean regime in place by refusing to participate in international sanctions against Pyongyang. Now that North Korea decided to do away with abiding by the rules of international conventions even in form, China faced an entirely different set of dynamics in international politics.

The Beijing talks about the North Korean nuclear issue, therefore, are more important to China than to the United States. The short interval between the April 2003 talks involving representatives of the United States, North Korea, and China and the August 2003 six-party talks (with Japan, South Korea, and Russia joining) is indicative of the sense of urgency on the part of China. To a certain extent, it is to China’s advantage to have the six-party framework rather than a three-party one or being the sole conduit between Washington and Pyongyang. Indeed, the six-party framework implies sharing the political burden should the talks fail to contain Pyongyang.

As an issue in bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington, the North Korean nuclear problem turned out to be an opportunity for cooperation. China and the United States may differ as to the final purpose of seeing a North Korea free of nuclear weapons and/or nuclear energy facilities altogether. But the process of working on the North Korean nuclear problem ought to be an additional source of confidence building between Beijing and Washington.

Toward a More Structured Bilateral Relationship

My review of events above shows that the Bush administration, like the Clinton administration, has continued to pursue a China security policy that is more crisis-driven than based on a structured mechanism of conflict resolution. Likewise, China has pursued its ties with the United States through coping with the dynamics rather than initiating structural changes to the bilateral relationship. There can be many explanations for such a state of affairs, and it is beyond the scope and purpose here to review them. From an academic point of view, however, one way is to begin thinking about moving toward putting the bilateral political and military relationship between Washington and Beijing on a stable course. That is, the relationship should move away from the kind of strategic thinking that is best summarized by the triangle metaphor.

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The metaphor of a triangle is popular in historical-analytical studies of big-power relations. A triangle sees the evolution of relations among three nation-states as an inseparable whole. It implies that one of the three actors adopts a particular foreign policy decision either as a result of or for the purpose of managing its relationships with the third actor. During the Cold War, relations among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China were considered to form a “great triangle.” Scholars have identified a similar triangle among the United States, Japan, and China. In the wake of the Sino-American rapprochement, the triangle worked well.\textsuperscript{14}

Although globally the Cold War structure of bipolarity has ended, in East Asia the Cold War security setup continues (see more about this in the contribution by Professor G. John Ikenberry to this collection). From a research perspective, the triangle metaphor is useful for capturing the overall strategic landscape. But it may also lead to undue assumptions about state (military and ideational, to be specific) power over market forces. The strategic discordance among the three big powers looks set to continue; so are the market forces of integration. Furthermore, the triangle metaphor leans more heavily on identification of strategic interests of the individual nation-state and a firm belief in the political values needed to pursue them. Through such a prism, clashes are part of the given in interactions among the trio. Can there be a different orientation for researching relations among the United States and China, which almost inevitably involves considerations about Japan from either a Chinese or an American perspective?

One possibility is to identify areas of “common good” not only for the three big powers but also for the smaller powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Doing so requires reexamination of definitions of national interests. Issue areas so related include political ideologies, the U.S. forward troop deployment in the Western Pacific, Japan’s military/political role, the “China threat” thesis (in particular over the Taiwan question), and institutionalization of region-wise security dialogue mechanisms. In addition, “new” security issues, such as development ideologies, financial, regional trade/investment structures, the environment, human/labor migration, etc., should also be high on such an agenda. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 serves as a good reminder of the indispensable value of big-power coordination in addressing challenges that originate outside their own borders.

Identification of “common good” also means recognizing the impact of globalization on the traditional reliance in International Relations research on the “nation-state” as the unit of analysis in studying international relations. This would require us to pay attention to subgovernmental (i.e., those below the national government) as well as nongovernmental actors that are not only becoming more participatory in a nation’s foreign policy but have an increasingly greater stake in the outcome of a country’s international affairs. A case in point is that a significant number of state governors in the United States have joined President Bush in identifying China as a primary cause for job losses in their electoral districts. A good number of state governors are making their trips to China (for the purpose of delivering their messages to the Chinese firsthand) a part of their election campaigns. Among other things, subnational level of governments, especially those along China’s maritime and land borders, do have greater incentives to deviate (by default if not be design) of from central government prerogatives, including foreign policy issues. The purpose of taking the subnational governments into consideration in international relations among the big powers is two-fold. We gain a fuller understanding of the sources of foreign policy making and can come to better appreciate the impacts on domestic governance that a foreign policy decision can entail.

The list of meaningful areas of inquiry for the purpose of identifying “common good” applicable to the three big powers and the rest of the region can be much longer. It is neither possible nor the purpose to be exhaustive here. For such efforts to become fruitful, it is
essential to begin by working toward locating shared intellectual paradigms for IR research among American, Chinese, and Japanese intellectual approaches.

That is no easy task. The dominance of realism in the American school of international relations research often leads to a search for what best benefits America and its efforts to maintain its superpower status. Indeed, U.S. think-tanks almost invariably end a study of changes within Japan and/or China and in Japanese and Chinese relations with other nations with a section on “implications for America/U.S. policy.” That orientation in turn can lead to a narrowed-down scope of inquiry and a disregard for otherwise relevant data and alternative angles of analysis. Japan has promoted American influence in its social science education for over half a century. As more and more Chinese expose to American social science education, American influence is taking root in the Chinese academic world as well.

My point here is not about greater frequency of dialogue among IR specialists and foreign policy makers alike among China, Japan, and the United States. Rather, to arrive at identification of “common good” and respective American, Japanese, and Chinese contributions to them, stronger efforts must be made to move toward shared intellectual paradigms. Another choice is to continue with dialogues of “national perspectives.” Such dialogues are informative for mutual understanding but do not always lead to new ways of thinking on triangular relationships and the effect of triangular relationships on the rest of the Asia-Pacific region. In other words, awareness about the intellectual/philosophical foundations of IR research and the political/policy environments in each of the three countries continues to be an important task.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, the political relationship between China and the United States is stable by default rather than design. Behaviors by external actors, i.e., the terrorist networks that have damaged U.S. as well as Chinese interests and North Korea, which has once again demonstrated its capacity to unsettle the regional and global sense of tranquility, have helped bring Beijing and Washington to temporarily shelve their differences. In a similar vein, election politics in Taiwan toward the end of 2003, particularly Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian’s determination to legislate referendum politics in the island, also caught both Beijing and Washington off guard. It is not clear how much the timing of Chen’s act played a role in Washington working to contain at least Chen’s rhetoric. Both Washington and Beijing needed to present Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Washington in mid-December 2003 as a success so that they can continue dealing with other pressing issues on their respective domestic and foreign policy agendas. However, the structural issues that contribute to the lack of stability in ties between Beijing and Washington continue, and there have been few efforts to address them.

As America enters another year of presidential election politics, there are already signs that China and U.S. China policy again are becoming tangled with the complexities of domestic politics in America. The situation may well be moving into another cycle of a presidential candidate winning points by proposing a drastic departure from current policy practices and then having to find a more centrist policy approach workable in the middle of an administration. In other words, instability is built into bilateral ties between the United States and China.

Moving U.S.-China relations to a more stable course, I argue in this paper, requires a conceptual change in academic discussion. More specifically, there is a need to move away from realist thinking in both academic research and policy making. That is not an easy task. But, given the webs of ties both the United States and China have with other countries in East
Asia, particularly Japan, it ought to pay dividends for academic researchers to begin trying.

Notes

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