

The Yellow Peril Revisited

By Jim Lobe and Tom Barry

After September 11, the U.S. welcomed China as an ally in the war against terrorism. China, worried about Muslim dissidents at home, endorsed President Bush's "crusade" against Islamist militancy. While convenient at the time, this alliance and associated easing of U.S.-China tensions will likely be short-lived.

On the right, after almost ten months of biting their collective tongues on the Yellow Peril, the fabled "Blue Team," which favors treating China as Washington's next potential peer rival, is getting restive. Despite President George W. Bush's efforts to embrace Taiwan ever tighter, influential right-wingers close to key policymakers in the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney are complaining that the administration has become too complacent about what they see as a growing threat from China.

Another sign that U.S.-China relations may soon become more confrontational is a new report from the bipartisan congressional commission studying China policy. Their message reflects the early Bush administration position that China is not a strategic partner—the position of previous administrations—but rather a strategic competitor. The U.S.-China Review Commission (www.uscc.gov) calls for the White House to toughen its China policy. The near unanimous report—Clinton's undersecretary of commerce is the lone dissenter—revives concerns about China's economic and military ascendancy. Among other things, the report warns that a growing reliance on Chinese imports might eventually "undermine the U.S. defense base."

It's not so much that the Bush administration has gone soft on China. Rather, it's that the political right, economic nationalists, and military hardliners believe that the U.S. should not let down its guard against this economic and potentially military threat of a resurgent

China—and that new measures, such as sanctions, are needed to contend with this "strategic competitor."

Against the backdrop of the Bush administration's war on terrorism, key administration officials have been quietly strengthening ties to Taiwan and increasing the risk of a confrontation with China. These military and political links include high levels of military aid, unprecedented levels of intelligence cooperation, and recent visits by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian and other senior Taiwanese Cabinet officials. These ties reflect the wishes of a small group of administration officials, whose goal of building an anti-China alliance in the region were temporarily derailed by the September 11th attacks.

However, these closer ties are not enough for some hawks close to key policymakers in the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney, who want the administration to take an even more confrontational stance toward China. Citing what they see as a major military build-up by Beijing, they want the administration to provide more sophisticated weapons to Taiwan, bolster the U.S. military presence in East Asia, and follow through on proposals to create a new security framework that could act as a kind of proto-alliance among the "democratic states" of the region.

The latest proposals were voiced in this week's *Weekly Standard* magazine, an influential right-wing publication, by Gary Schmitt, the executive director for the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) (www.newamericancentury.org) an organization whose founding members included both Cheney and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and whose recent calls for dramatic shifts in Mideast policy and "regime change" in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority

(PA) have been largely followed by the administration.

“The truth is that the United States can put off competition with China only so long,” according to Schmitt, a former Republican congressional staffer. “At the end of the day, China’s ambitions make a contest inevitable. For that reason, the United States should be taking advantage of China’s current preoccupation with its internal affairs to strengthen our hand in the region.”

Schmitt’s article comes just over a year after his colleagues at PNAC and the *Weekly Standard* were fuming over Secretary of State Colin Powell’s deft diplomatic footwork in defusing the crisis over the forced landing and subsequent detention on Hainan Island of a U.S. reconnaissance plane and its crew in April 2001. That was widely seen as a victory for the pro-engagement forces within the administration, and the Bush administration’s rhetoric on China cooled.

The most important boost in ties, of course, came after the September 11th terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon when Beijing pledged to co-operate in Bush’s new “war against terrorism,” chiefly by providing intelligence on al Qaeda and, more important, by muting its own very serious misgivings about Washington’s aggressive and successful pursuit of military basing agreements with China’s Central Asian neighbors.

The spy plane imbroglio, however, spurred Rumsfeld to insist that Washington suspend military-to-military ties with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—ties that have still not been entirely restored, despite the visit late last month of a senior Pentagon official, Peter Rodman, to Beijing, where he met with Defense

Minister Gen. Chi Haotian. After September 11th, Pentagon officials have pursued a more quiet—but no less effective—strategy in their efforts to strengthen ties with Taiwan’s military and are also contemplating selling sophisticated air-to-air missiles to Taiwan. These growing links are coupled with a strong and vocal pro-Taiwan independence lobby in the Congress that advocates a formal visit to Washington for President Chen and joint military exercises between U.S. and Taiwanese forces. These actions risk giving both Taiwan and China the impression that the Bush administration will support independence for Taiwan, which would be seen as entirely unacceptable by China.

China’s official response to these growing ties has been muted to date. “The Chinese have been trying to lie low,” according to John Gershman, Asia/Pacific editor for *Foreign Policy in Focus*. Beijing, he said, has especially avoided strong denunciations of growing U.S. military and political ties with Taiwan, which Chinese leaders consider a renegade province of the mainland, “because they know that that is the issue that could throw a spanner into [their own political] succession,” which is to be sealed at the forthcoming party congress later this summer.

China’s silence, however, should not be understood in any way as support for or even acquiescence to Washington’s recent moves, according to Minxin Pei of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Particularly alarming to Beijing have been Washington’s withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, its incipient construction of a national missile defense (NMD) system, its growing military ties with India, and Bush’s own

promise to do “whatever it took” to help Taiwan defend itself, including selling it top-of-the-line weapons and surveillance systems and increasing military exchanges symbolized by an unprecedented meeting this spring between Taiwan’s defense minister and Deputy Pentagon Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

Long ambivalent about Washington’s post-cold war role as the global hegemon, Chinese attitudes began turning more fearful already in 1999 as a result of the Clinton administration’s air campaign in Kosovo, according to Pei. After September 11, according to Pei, Beijing had hoped that the administration would make a major re-assessment of its relationship with China, only to be disappointed by subsequent events. “China feels desperately that the hegemon’s hands need to be tied, but no [other power] is willing to [work with China] to do so.”

“The degree of fearfulness has intensified enormously since the arrival [in power] of the new conservatives,” he said recently. “Their worldview makes it very difficult to maintain its previous views of U.S. hegemony as harmless or benign.”

Beijing’s fears are focused in particular on the political appointees in the Pentagon, including Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. The Pentagon, for example, reportedly refused to deal directly with the PLA in exchanging intelligence during the anti-terrorism war, leaving that job to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) instead. Rumsfeld also reportedly barred the interpreter provided by the State Department from attending the meeting he held with visiting Chinese Vice President (and heir apparent) Hu Jintao in May at the Pentagon in what was widely seen as both a rebuke to Powell’s far more conciliatory approach toward Beijing and an

intent to keep what in diplomatese is called a “frank exchange of views” as closed as possible. “There is very little doubt these people view China through a very dark lens,” says Pei, speaking of the Pentagon’s civilian leadership.

In many ways, Schmitt speaks for them, and his article can be seen as the opening salvo in a series of new blasts against any further warming of Sino-U.S. ties, according to Gershman. “After a nine-month or so grace period after September 11, and especially after Democrats have begun to raise questions about Bush’s foreign policy, the hawks feel they can begin to criticize the administration, too,” Gershman says.

What is ironic is that the Pentagon, backed by Cheney, has been able to proceed relatively unconstrained in its anti-Beijing moves anyway, despite the superficial and largely rhetorical improvement in bilateral ties. But all of those moves have been framed within the context of the war on terrorism, rather than anything related to China. “They’ve won the battle on closer military ties with Taiwan; they’re pursuing new forward deployments of men and supplies in East Asia, especially in the Philippines; they’re rapidly upgrading military ties with India—all of which have little or nothing to do with fighting al Qaeda and everything to do with China,” says Gershman.

“But, to them, the politics of symbolism is very important, and they want

to hear Bush say China is a competitor, as he did during the presidential campaign,” he adds. “There are still some in the administration who wish China had been named part of the ‘axis of evil’.”

Indeed, Schmitt himself in his article cannot point to a single concrete move taken by the administration that suggests Powell’s more conciliatory approach may be winning the day. His only examples are the administration’s failure to release a Pentagon report (reportedly criticized by the uniformed military) on the threat to regional security posed by the PLA and a recent public statement by Wolfowitz downplaying U.S. eagerness to create new security arrangements with friendly allies.

As with other foreign policy issues, U.S.-China relations are subject to internal administration tensions between the hardliners and the moderates. Rising pressure from the Blue Team—a loose-knit, rightwing network that includes congressional members and staff, think tank analysts, conservative journalists, administration officials, and a handful of academics—aim to ensure that the hardliners and ideologues in the administration gain the upper hand in this policy debate, as they have in others. According to the *Washington Post* (February 22, 2000), the Blue Team has had considerable success in creating public and congressional pressure for the U.S. government to maintain a hard line with Beijing, particularly over such noneconomic

issues as violations of religious freedom, U.S. military support for Taiwan, and the purported military threat from China.

Blue Team members like PNAC’s Schmitt will find many of their views captured in the new congressional committee report. The bipartisan Commission includes Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute, Roger W. Robinson of the Center for Security Policy, and historian Arthur Waldron, all of whom are long-time hawks on China and members of the so-called Blue Team. The ideological roots of the Blue Team date back to the anti-communist hysteria of the cold war and to those who supported the Nationalists and Chiang Kai-Shek over the Chinese Communist Party during China’s civil war. Supporters of closer relations with Taiwan, they opposed normalizing relations with China during the Nixon administration. Always critical of what they perceive as the “realpolitik” inertia that has dominated U.S.-China relations since 1972, the Blue Team is interested in rolling back what they perceive as China’s growing power and influence.

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