

# 11 September and the Future of Sino-American Relations

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Since 11 September, many observers – statesmen, scholars and pundits alike – have voiced hope that the terrible events of that day would ultimately have a positive impact on the conduct of international relations. The threat posed by terrorism is now so great and so clearly evident, in this view, that it will compel governments everywhere to put aside their differences and unite against an enemy that threatens them all. Acts of unprecedented barbarism must surely give rise to new and equally unprecedented levels of cooperation among the civilised nations of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Specialists on Asian affairs have expressed a somewhat more limited version of this optimism. Whatever the effects on world politics writ large, there is a chance that 11 September and its aftermath will produce a marked improvement in relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Perhaps, after a decade marked by periodic crises and mounting mistrust, the two Pacific powers will now find themselves confronted by an enemy against whom they can make common cause, and an issue on which they can build a more stable and consistently cooperative relationship. In the words of former US ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke: 'We should not ignore the unique opportunity offered by the fact that China and the United States once again share a common strategic concern – terrorism – on which a revitalized relationship can be based'.<sup>2</sup>

While there is certainly reason to hope that recent events will lead to an improvement in Sino-American relations, there are at least three substantial reasons to doubt that, in the end, it will emerge. On closer inspection, the war on terrorism provides at best a very limited basis for US-PRC cooperation. Moreover, despite some superficial improvements in the diplomatic climate, none of the persistent, underlying sources of contention between the two powers has been significantly altered or alleviated by the current crisis. Finally, and most importantly, in ways that could not initially have been foreseen, the events of recent months may actually end up intensifying the ongoing Sino-American

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strategic rivalry. The forces impelling the United States and the PRC toward continuing suspicion and competition are powerful and deeply rooted in their very different domestic political regimes and in their positions in the international system. These competitive tendencies will not be easily offset or overcome, even by acts that all Americans and most Chinese acknowledge as crimes against humanity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Limited cooperation**

An analogy is sometimes drawn between today's situation and the latter stages of the Cold War. At that time the United States and the PRC were able to suppress their ideological and geopolitical differences and join together in opposition to the Soviet Union. But present circumstances are very different. In the 1970s and 1980s there was one unified and unmistakable threat, it posed a serious challenge to the fundamental interests, and potentially the survival, of both the US and the PRC, and it was evident that significant cooperation would be necessary to cope with it.

Today none of these conditions apply. There is not one clearly identifiable menace but many disparate threats, some of which are obviously more worrisome to the US than to China, and vice versa. As serious as it undoubtedly is, the magnitude of the danger posed by various terrorist groups is not, at this point, nearly so grave as that posed by the Soviet Union. As a result, there is not the kind of galvanising energy that existed two or three decades ago, nothing of sufficient strength to sweep away outstanding differences and to cause a fundamental reordering of strategic priorities. In part for these reasons, there is likely to be very little lasting agreement between the US and China over how best to deal with the larger problem of terrorism. American and Chinese interests and policies may converge to some degree, in certain situations and on some specific issues, but they will not do so completely or for very long.

The unfolding events since 11 September illustrates these points. After some initial hesitation, Beijing eventually chose to acquiesce in American military action against Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan. But this decision appears to have been the result of several unusual circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated in the future.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on Washington and New York City, Chinese strategists seem to have hoped that they could link their support for an American war on terror to the question of the nature and extent of US backing for Taiwan. Thus, as a Foreign Ministry spokesman explained on 18 September:

The United States has asked China to provide assistance in the fight against terrorism. China, by the same token has reasons to ask the United States to give its support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatists. We should not have double standards.

The reference to separatists was widely interpreted as being aimed at those advocating independence for Taiwan, as well as Tibet and the western Chinese province of Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup> When PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan met with US

Secretary of State Colin Powell several days later, there were reports that he hoped to prod the Bush administration into repeating Bill Clinton's 1998 endorsement of the 'three noes' policy on Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> No such statement was forthcoming and, on the contrary, the American Secretary of State went out of his way to make clear that there would be no *quid pro quo* for Chinese support.

Having failed to extract any concessions on the Taiwan issue, Beijing apparently decided that it nevertheless had little choice but to support, or at least not to oppose, an American military campaign in Afghanistan. Instead of protesting vociferously against US 'interventionism', as it had done, for example, during the 1999 war in Kosovo, the Chinese government offered only mild admonitions that American military measures should be consistent with the UN Charter and 'targeted at specific objectives, so as to avoid hurting innocent civilians'.<sup>6</sup> The PRC's decision not to openly criticise US action may have been made easier by the unique situation prevailing in Afghanistan. Because China, along with most of the rest of the world, did not formally recognise the Taliban regime as a legitimate government, American strikes against it could be construed as not constituting a technical violation of national sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Questions of principle aside, China's leaders no doubt realised that, given the enormity of the attack it had suffered, the United States was determined to proceed, with or without their backing. To openly oppose the US in its righteous anger would have been extremely dangerous. On the other hand, by voicing its support, albeit cautiously, Beijing stood to win points with Washington and perhaps improve the overall diplomatic climate after a period of rocky relations.

While Chinese strategists would certainly have preferred that US forces not be engaged so close to their own frontiers, they must also have concluded that, precisely because of Afghanistan's proximity, there were potential benefits to be derived from an American success there. Just before the onset of the crisis, Beijing had taken steps to improve relations with the regime in Kabul, apparently in hopes of inducing the Taliban to reduce whatever support they might be offering to Uighur separatist groups in western China.<sup>8</sup> The overthrow of the Taliban, and their replacement with a more moderate government presented another, and perhaps a more reliable way of achieving the same basic objective. In this case, of course, it was the United States that would be paying the costs and running the risks.

With their eyes firmly fixed on their own internal concerns, China's leaders proceeded to tighten security along their western borders, thereby reducing the chances of terrorists or ordinary refugees fleeing the war zone onto its territory.<sup>9</sup> Beijing endorsed the decision of its ally Pakistan to provide base access and overflight rights to US military forces headed into Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The PRC also promised to supply the United States with intelligence information that would support its war on terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Most important, with US forces engaged in Afghanistan, China stepped up its own efforts to crack down on domestic opposition groups, intensifying an ongoing 'Strike Hard' campaign against alleged Uighur terrorists.<sup>12</sup>

Sino-American cooperation in the first stages of the war against terrorism was therefore real, but it was also tightly constrained in scope and depth. It was not the result of a convergence of basic strategic visions or fundamental values, but rather the product of special circumstances that permitted what will likely prove to have been a partial and fleeting confluence of interests. China's leaders were willing to endorse American action in Afghanistan primarily because they believed that it could provide indirect support, and a measure of moral and political cover, for their own efforts to solidify domestic control. To the extent that counter-terrorist intelligence sharing or bilateral cooperation in restricting illicit financial flows promise to assist the PRC in achieving this fundamental objective, these measures may continue. Enthusiastic Chinese backing for a broad, sustained global war against terror is, however, extremely unlikely.

None of the most plausible sequels to the war in Afghanistan is likely to meet with Beijing's approval. Future attacks on those the United States brands as being state sponsors of terrorism would probably be taken as a direct affront to China's strong preference for preserving sovereign inviolability. Among the states that are most likely to be the targets of US attention, moreover, are several that have significant commercial or strategic relationships with China. American action against Iraq, Iran, or North Korea, for example, would clearly run counter, not only to the PRC's oft-stated principles, but to its more concrete interests.

Even less dramatic initiatives will probably produce tensions. US assistance for other governments in Asia that feel themselves threatened by terrorists and violent separatist movements could easily be construed as dangerous meddling or thinly disguised expansionism. A revitalised American security relationship with the Philippines, new ties to Indonesia, or a quasi-permanent US military presence in Central Asia would all feed Chinese fears of encirclement, even if these measures were cast as elements in a global struggle between the forces of civilisation and terrorism.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, US support for a stepped-up Indian campaign against Pakistani-backed terrorists in Kashmir, still less in Pakistan itself, would arouse deep anxiety in China. On the other hand, Beijing's efforts to stamp out those that it accuses of terrorism have already begun to provoke criticism and disapproval from Washington.

In sum: while the American war on terrorism is certain to continue beyond Afghanistan, Sino-American cooperation in that war has probably already passed its peak.

### **Persistent problems**

If the Afghan campaign had proven to be more protracted and difficult, and if the PRC had been able and willing to provide more substantial assistance in its conduct, then the United States might have felt compelled in time to offer significant concessions in return for Chinese help. The surprising speed of the American military victory against the Taliban obviated the need for any painful trade-offs. Success boosted the Bush administration's confidence and, in a general way, may have stiffened its resolve in the conduct of international

affairs. No matter how the war that followed in their wake unfolded, however, the terror attacks on the United States would themselves probably have contributed to a hardening of the administration's position on a number of issues that have long divided Washington and Beijing. In any case, as dramatic and important as they undoubtedly were, the events of 11 September did little to alleviate any of the persistent sources of tension in Sino-American relations.

### **Human rights**

Even as they pressed Beijing for assistance, US officials made clear that they would not stop criticising what they regarded as continuing Chinese violations of basic civil liberties and political freedoms. At their October 2001 summit meeting in Shanghai, George W. Bush warned President Jiang Zemin that the war on terrorism 'must never be an excuse to persecute minorities'.<sup>14</sup> This was a thinly veiled reference to China's stepped-up campaign against alleged Uighur and Tibetan separatists. Bush also reportedly expressed his views on the importance of religious freedom and talked about 'how much he, as a practising Christian, values religious freedom and the right of personal faith'.<sup>15</sup> In subsequent discussions with American Congressional leaders, Secretary of State Colin Powell was at pains to point out that the United States had no intention of muting its long-standing criticism of the PRC's domestic policies. 'They don't meet any standards that we have with respect to individual freedom or human rights', declared Powell. For as long as this continued to be true, human rights would remain 'an important part of our agenda with China'.<sup>16</sup>

Such remarks were no doubt aimed as much at the US domestic audience as at the PRC. But this did not make them any less sincere as an expression of prevailing American political sentiment nor, presumably, any less of an affront to China's rulers. In making these statements, US officials may also have been signalling their intention to avoid what they believed to have been the errors and excesses of past periods of cooperation with the PRC. During the latter stages of the Cold War, in this view, Americans had been encouraged by their leaders to soften, downplay or overlook the fundamental differences dividing their country from China. Now, despite the urgent need to combat terrorism, US spokesmen would go out of their way to make plain that deep divergences continued to exist. Collaboration against a common enemy might be possible under such circumstances, but, until China changed, real closeness and genuine warmth were not.

### **Proliferation**

Since the late 1980s, proliferation has been a major bone of contention between the US and the PRC. American officials have repeatedly accused China of selling arms and other strategically significant technologies, including ballistic missiles and some of the machinery and knowledge needed to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, to irresponsible and dangerous third parties. As recently as 1 September 2001, Washington had imposed sanctions on Beijing for its alleged violation of a November 2000 understanding in which China had promised to suspend further transfers of missile technology to Iran and Pakistan, and to provide a list of all missile parts and equipment that it would henceforth bar

from export. The purpose of this agreement was to eliminate what the Americans considered to be China's continuing obfuscation and deliberate evasion of previous non-proliferation accords. In return for Beijing's compliance with its demands, the United States would allow American companies to resume launching their commercial satellites on Chinese booster rockets, a lucrative practice suspended since February 2000 because of previous disputes over proliferation and US concerns about espionage.<sup>17</sup>

As the US manoeuvred into position for war in Afghanistan, some Chinese officials apparently hoped that it would soften its stance on proliferation and, as it had done with Pakistan, waive outstanding sanctions on the PRC. This did not happen. Reports that the US would resume sales of spare parts for China's American-made *Black Hawk* helicopters, suspended since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, were quickly denied.<sup>18</sup> Despite last-minute negotiations prior to the October Shanghai summit, the more recent dispute over missile proliferation was also left unresolved. The stumbling block, according to some accounts, was the US refusal to offer any substantial new concessions in return for the long-promised Chinese list of export prohibitions.<sup>19</sup>

The Bush administration's refusal to give ground may have reflected a general desire to avoid perceptions of weakness at a time of crisis, but it was also directly related to the issue at hand. After 11 September, the administration was, if anything, more concerned than it had been before about the spread of highly destructive weaponry. The danger that missiles and even nuclear weapons might eventually find their way into the hands of states or terrorist groups that would actually use them seemed all the more real after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. American officials hoped that the Chinese would share their heightened sense of danger and act aggressively to forestall future catastrophes. In the words of one US diplomat, Beijing needed to 'see the new kind of world we're all in' and to respond accordingly by living up to its prior agreements to restrict transfers of deadly technology.<sup>20</sup> As viewed from Washington, China's approach to the problem of proliferation appeared lax and irresponsible, especially in light of recent events.

### **National missile defence and theatre missile defence**

In the wake of the September attacks, some Chinese observers (and others in the US and Europe as well) expressed the view that the use of commercial airliners as weapons of mass destruction demonstrated the futility of building expensive, high-tech defences against ballistic missiles.<sup>21</sup> As one Chinese scholar put it, the ability of a small group of fanatics to kill thousands of innocent civilians by flying planes into buildings illustrated that 'the real enemy is international terrorism and not any particular country'. It also made clear 'that missile defence is probably the least cost-effective way to attain security for the US'. Once these lessons were absorbed, the United States government would have little choice but to conclude that 'it has neither the time nor the resources to invest in a very expensive programme that only deals with one of the least likely security challenges to the US'. A reduction in the priority assigned to missile defence

would have 'a positive impact on US-China relations'. With the potential threat that an American national missile defence system could pose to the efficacy of their 'very limited deterrent capability' removed, 'China would have greater incentives to cooperate with Washington'.<sup>22</sup>

If Chinese strategists truly entertained the hope that fighting terror would deflect the Bush administration from its pursuit of missile defences, or render it more willing to compromise on that issue in order to win international support for its new counter-terror campaign, they were soon to be disappointed. Far from diminishing its commitment, the demonstration of American vulnerability seems only to have reinforced Washington's determination to develop some kind of workable anti-missile capability. The lesson that the administration appeared to draw from events was that the threats to the United States in the post-Cold War world were direct, pressing and in urgent need of a forceful response.<sup>23</sup> In any event, the course of American policy was not altered in any substantial way by the terrorist attacks. In December 2001, the United States announced that it would withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and proceed with the testing, and presumably the eventual deployment, of a national missile defence system.<sup>24</sup> The official Chinese reaction to these developments was muted, perhaps because they had been anticipated for some time. According to Yan Xuetong, director of Tsinghua University's Institute for International Affairs, Beijing's response reflected a realisation that it was 'beyond [China's] capacity to prevent the United States from withdrawing from the treaty'. All that the PRC could do was to 'focus on its own business and modernise its military capabilities'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Arms sales to Taiwan**

US arms sales to Taiwan are another long-standing source of Sino-American contention that appears to have been unaffected by the events of 11 September. Following the collision between an American EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet in the spring of 2001, and the subsequent detention of the US crew by Chinese authorities, the United States government approved a significant new arms package for Taiwan. Included in the list of items to be sold were 4 *Kidd*-class destroyers, 12 P-3 *Orion* anti-submarine warfare aircraft and eight diesel submarines. Six months later, as the war in Afghanistan approached its climactic stage, the Defense Department announced that the transfer of military equipment to Taiwan would proceed as planned. American officials were quick to point out that the timing of this announcement had no special significance but was merely a result of what Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly described as 'the long, convoluted ... US bureaucratic process'.<sup>26</sup>

The United States was clearly eager to avoid unnecessarily antagonising China, but it was also unwilling to deviate from its long-standing policy of seeking to maintain a military balance between Taiwan and the mainland. American resolve on this issue was demonstrated by the unusual lengths to which Washington appeared willing to go in order to ensure the eventual

delivery of diesel submarines to Taipei. No such vessels have been built in American shipyards for many years and most of the countries with firms capable of constructing them (including Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Australia) initially expressed reluctance to become involved in the project for fear of antagonising Beijing. Even before the fall crisis, there had been questions about whether this part of the proposed arms-transfer package could be completed; once the crisis began, there was speculation that the submarine sale might be sacrificed to the larger goal of ensuring Chinese cooperation in the war against terrorism.<sup>27</sup> Instead, in November 2001, the Defense Department reportedly redoubled its efforts to find a way to make the deal work, perhaps by contracting an American firm to build submarines based on European or Australian designs in Taiwanese shipyards, possibly with the assistance of Russian technicians. As to the willingness of other countries to risk China's wrath, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that 'the assertiveness of the Bush administration, particularly since it launched its war on terrorism' seemed to be reshaping attitudes among key US allies. According to an unnamed senior Australian naval officer, the evident determination of the United States to see the project through changed 'the whole equation', increasing the odds one way or another that Taiwan would eventually get its submarines.<sup>28</sup>

### **Long-term tensions**

The eleventh of September produced few notable advances in Sino-American cooperation, and no visible softening in either the American or the Chinese stance on a range of issues about which the two sides have long openly disagreed. Beneath the surface of day-to-day diplomacy and decision-making, meanwhile, the unfolding of events may actually have contributed to a hardening of adversarial perceptions, certainly in Beijing, if not necessarily in Washington.

### **Geopolitical encirclement**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the PRC has worked assiduously to attain warmer relations, and enhanced influence, with all the countries along its interior, continental frontiers, including a diminished Russia, the newly created republics of what had once been Soviet Central Asia, and the nations of the South Asian subcontinent. This effort may have been aimed in part at securing China's 'rear areas', thereby permitting it to focus its strategic energies and military efforts to the east, towards Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea and the United States. Particularly since the mid-1990s, following the first round of NATO expansion, and the US-led war in Kosovo, some Chinese strategists have also expressed concern that the United States might be attempting to encircle the PRC, building positions of strength along its land frontiers as well as off its coasts.<sup>29</sup>

As the twenty-first century opened, China's Eurasian diplomacy seemed to be bearing significant fruit. In July 2001, China and Russia initialled a treaty that was widely interpreted as elevating their bilateral relationship to its highest

level in a decade, and perhaps since the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s.<sup>30</sup> One month earlier, the Chinese government had hosted the signing of a multi-party agreement aimed at promoting economic and, above all, security cooperation among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia and the PRC.<sup>31</sup> Although the formal manifestations were less dramatic, in the late 1990s Beijing also took steps to improve relations with India, while at the same time preserving its long-standing ties to Pakistan.<sup>32</sup>

All of these accomplishments were threatened by the rapid, dramatic and unanticipated developments that followed in the wake of the terrorist strikes on the United States. In contrast to the situation prevailing between Washington and Beijing, Russo-American relations warmed markedly after 11 September. Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to call President Bush to express his condolences following the attacks and he proceeded to provide significant practical, as well as rhetorical support. Among other measures, Putin authorised intelligence-sharing with the United States, American access to Russian airspace and direct military assistance to anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces. Instead of merely urging caution and restraint, Putin publicly endorsed the legitimacy of the US campaign in Afghanistan and encouraged the Central Asian republics to accede to US requests for overflight rights and base access that were to prove essential to its successful conduct. In all, Putin appears to have decided to use the opportunity presented by the crisis, not only to attain tactical advantage, but also to forge a fundamentally new and more cooperative relationship with the West and, in particular, with the United States. Although serious differences remained over missile defences, the future of NATO, and Russian technology transfer policies, Washington and Moscow were far closer at the beginning of 2002 than they had been only six months before.<sup>33</sup>

American inroads in Central Asia were even more readily apparent. In the course of unseating the Taliban regime the United States gained access to bases and facilities in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, was granted permission to overfly the territory of Kazakhstan (as well as Azerbaijan and Georgia), placed a significant military force on the ground in Afghanistan, and assumed a critical role in determining that country's political future.<sup>34</sup> These increases in America's presence and influence in Central Asia were no less significant for having been unsought. Nevertheless, they aroused considerable anxiety in Beijing, where President Jiang himself was reported to have expressed concern that the United States was attempting to 'establish a foothold in China's southwest backyard'.<sup>35</sup>

In South Asia, the prosecution of the war against terrorism produced a stunning reversal in America's decade-long estrangement from Pakistan. President Pervez Musharraf opened his territory and airspace to US military forces, cracked down on domestic Islamist groups and ordered his intelligence services into a mutually wary alliance with their American counterparts. The United States, for its part, waived the sanctions it had imposed after Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests and promised significant new economic assistance in return

for Islamabad's continuing cooperation in the war against terrorism. While Chinese strategists may have welcomed the new US commitment to prop up their most important South Asian ally (and, not coincidentally, the primary regional counterweight to Indian power), they must also have worried about the possible long-term implications of a greatly increased and more balanced American role on the subcontinent. If the US is somehow able to use its newfound influence in both capitals to broker a lasting reduction in tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi, Beijing may find itself less able to use Pakistan to constrain India.<sup>36</sup>

As viewed from Beijing, the United States probably appears to have strengthened its geopolitical position as a result of the present crisis while China itself must look, in the short-term at least, like a net loser. All along the PRC's Eurasian frontiers, from Russia through Central Asia to Afghanistan and the subcontinent, America's bilateral relationships have been bolstered and its influence expanded. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that some Chinese analysts have recently expressed anxiety that the United States is making progress in what they describe as an ongoing effort to contain and encircle China.<sup>37</sup>

### **Japanese assertiveness**

In addition to their general fears of encirclement, Chinese strategists have long had more narrowly focused concerns about a possible resurgence of Japanese military power. Many Chinese observers believe that Japan is working ceaselessly to wriggle free from post-war constraints on its national military capabilities in the hopes of some day reclaiming its role as Asia's preponderant power. Moves toward increased military cooperation between Washington and Tokyo are viewed with suspicion in Beijing, both as further manifestations of an alleged American strategy of encirclement, and because they may mask increases in Japan's eventual capacity for autonomous military action. Discussion of possible revisions to Japan's 'peace constitution' also receive careful, sceptical scrutiny.<sup>38</sup>

During the fall and winter of 2001, the government of Japan took a series of actions that aroused considerable anxiety in China. First, after vigorous public discussion, the Diet passed an anti-terrorism bill that permitted the Japanese Self Defense Forces to take part in the American war in Afghanistan, albeit in a supporting role. Although quite narrow in its provisions, this legislation was generally acknowledged to be a significant step in the ongoing reinterpretation of Japan's constitutional prohibition against 'collective self-defence'. Under the new law, Japanese armed forces could take part in joint military action occurring well outside the nation's airspace and territorial waters. Within weeks, the navy had dispatched a small flotilla of ships to the Indian Ocean, where they assisted in providing supplies, repair, communication, and medical services to American warships. This marked the first occasion since 1945 that Japanese forces had been deployed overseas as part of an ongoing military operation. In a seemingly unrelated development, at the end of December, Japanese coast guard vessels sank what was presumed to have been a North Korean spy ship after first

chasing it out of Japan's 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone and into China's. This was the first sinking of a foreign vessel by the Japanese navy in almost half a century.<sup>39</sup>

While the official, public reaction to these events was guarded, some well-placed Chinese analysts clearly saw them as part of a disturbing pattern. According to Jin Xide, director of research on Japanese foreign policy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the new anti-terrorism laws and the subsequent overseas deployment of naval vessels were 'precedent-breaking' events. Japan's unseemly 'rush to dispatch its troops overseas and to set up a kind of comprehensive military intervention system for overseas' would ultimately have 'a great impact on regional stability' and would 'force Japan's neighbouring countries to react'.<sup>40</sup> The ship sinking incident, meanwhile, was described in an article in the newspaper of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army as having been 'manufactured' in order to help Japan 'realize the dream of being the military superpower in the region and ... to provide the Self-Defense Force with more space in its overseas operations.' Japan could be expected to exploit similar events in the future to rid itself 'of the shackles of the constitution and relevant laws.'<sup>41</sup> The sinking of the North Korean vessel, the overseas naval deployments, and the subtle reinterpretation of the Constitution were, in this view, all part of an ongoing trend towards greater Japanese aggressiveness.

### **American military preponderance**

The Chinese have long been close students of developments in American military strategy, tactics, and technology. Over the course of the last decade, Chinese writers have often expressed anxiety that their country might be left behind in a new 'revolution in military affairs'. These concerns were given great impetus by the demonstration of American capabilities in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In that conflict the United States made widespread and decisive use for the first time of an assortment of advanced sensors, communications and information processing systems, electronic countermeasures, stealth aircraft, and precision-guided munitions. The conduct of the 1999 war in Kosovo gave further evidence of American progress in each of these areas.<sup>42</sup>

In Afghanistan the United States has not faced an opponent as numerous, well-armed or apparently well-organized as it did in either Iraq or Kosovo. The performance of the American armed forces must nevertheless appear deeply impressive, and no doubt profoundly worrisome, to a Chinese military observer. As it had done ten years before, the US made extensive use of new military systems that had previously been employed in very limited fashion, if at all. Included among these were large numbers of all-weather, satellite guided precision munitions and several varieties of armed and unarmed remotely piloted drones. The proportion of high-tech weapons employed in the conflict was far higher than in 1991. According to press reports, nearly 60% of all the bombs and missiles used in Afghanistan were precision-guided, as compared to less than 10% in the Gulf War.<sup>43</sup>

In certain respects, what the US was able to accomplish in Afghanistan was even more dramatic than what it did in either of the major campaigns of the 1990s. From a virtual standing start, with a very brief period of buildup, few allies and limited use of forward bases, the United States was able to project power at vast distances from its homeland, coordinating the actions of small, highly mobile ground units, unmanned aerial vehicles, and manned aircraft to strike at targets of all kinds, quickly, far inland, and with great precision and destructive effect. As in its previous wars, the US was able to accomplish all this with minimal losses to its own forces. No other military in the world could hope to come close to such a performance, a fact of which Chinese observers are no doubt painfully aware. Given their suspicions about the United States, this demonstration of American power cannot help but make the Beijing regime feel nervous and insecure.

## **Conclusions**

The war on terror has thus far produced only a very limited convergence of interests between the United States and China, and a correspondingly small increase in direct cooperation between them. As the focus of the war shifts from Afghanistan to East Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, South or Southeast Asia, the perceptions and policies of the two powers are likely once again to diverge, and even the modest degree of joint effort against terrorism that has been achieved in recent months may prove difficult to sustain.

Meanwhile, on a range of other persistent problems, the differences between the United States and the PRC are as wide as they were before 11 September and, in some respects, even wider. The Bush administration has shown no inclination to soften its positions on human rights, proliferation, missile defences or arms sales to Taiwan in order to obtain Chinese assistance in combating terror. Nor, for its part, has the present regime in Beijing adopted a more accommodating stance on any of these issues in the hopes of achieving a significant improvement in bilateral relations with the United States. While the postures and attitudes of one side or the other or both could change in the future, they are unlikely to do so sharply, or any time soon. Although the degree of intensity may vary, contention on these questions will continue, as it has for over a decade, under different leadership in both Washington and Beijing. If and when it occurs, moreover, a genuine resolution of any of these outstanding issues will probably be the result, not of a shared fear of terrorism, but of some more profound shift in the basis of Sino-American relations.

In the end, continuing disputes over old problems, and the inability to achieve closer cooperation in dealing with new ones, are manifestations of deeper difficulties, rather than themselves being fundamental causes. The taproot of tensions between the United States and China is a profound distrust, fed both by ideological differences and by shifting power relations. The United States is a liberal democracy and, for the moment, the world's preponderant power. China remains an authoritarian, one-party state whose economic and military potential have grown rapidly in recent decades. Albeit to varying

degrees, Americans are inclined to dislike and mistrust the current Chinese regime and to fear that it may seek to use its increasing capabilities and influence to challenge the US position in Asia. China's leaders, meanwhile, suspect that the United States is trying to constrain and counterbalance their country's growing power and, through various means, to promote a change in the character of its domestic political regime. Nor are these mere misperceptions; in certain respects both sides are right. In short, Sino-American tensions have 'real' causes that cannot somehow be erased through dialogue, papered over with communiqués and elaborate verbal formulations, or eliminated simply by narrowing differences on specific policy issues.

The most important and lasting effects of 11 September on the United States and China will come at the deeper levels of their relationship; they will not be immediately visible, but they are also unlikely to be positive. The unplanned demonstration of American military prowess and the unexpected expansion in American influence across Eurasia (combined with the apparent increase in Japanese assertiveness) have fuelled the fears of Chinese strategists. They can now be expected to redouble their efforts to find ways of countering US capabilities, and of offsetting or undoing what they regard as unfavourable developments along their periphery. In the short-run, Sino-American relations are unlikely to deteriorate and may even improve. In the longer term, however, the rivalry between the two powers will probably intensify, fed by the unforeseen consequences of recent, tragic events.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For one expression of such sentiments see the speech by US ambassador to Japan Howard Baker, 'Tragedy Is Chance to Unite, Baker Says', *The Japan Times Online*, 19 October 2001, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp>.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Holbrooke, 'A Defining Moment With China', *Washington Post*, 2 January 2002, p. A13. Similar views are expressed in, Catharin Dalpino and Minxin Pei, 'Beijing's Chance to Forge True Alliance', *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2001, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/dalpino/20010918.htm>; David Shambaugh and Robert S. Litwak, 'Common Interests In a Hazardous World', *New York Times*, 17 October 2001, p. A31; Jia Qingguo, 'US-China Relations after 11 September: Time for a Change', *Pacific Forum CSIS*, PacNet 50, 14 December 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> For another analysis that reaches a basically pessimistic conclusion, albeit for somewhat different reasons than those stressed here see David M. Lampton, 'Small Mercies: China and America after 9/11', *The National Interest*, no. 66 (Winter 2001/02), <http://www.nationalinterest.org/issues/66/Lampton.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Snyder, 'Powell Assures Taipei There's No Deal With China', *Taipei Times*, 23 September 2001, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/news/2001/09/23>.
- <sup>5</sup> The 'three noes' are: no independence, no 'one China, one Taiwan', no Taiwanese membership in international bodies requiring statehood as a condition for participation. See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 'Smoke Clears Over China's US Strategy', 26 September 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/09/25/willy.column>.
- <sup>6</sup> Erik Eckholm, 'China Offers Wary Support for Attacks', *New York Times*, 8 October 2001, p. B10.
- <sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Bates Gill of the Brookings Institution for this insight. Remarks at the Second Symposium on National Security and Military Strategy, Taipei, Taiwan, 11 December 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> Calum McLeod, 'China-Taliban Deal Signed on Attack Day', *Washington Times*, 14 September 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> China closed its short border with Afghanistan, tightened controls at its frontiers with Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and sent additional troops to its western regions. Craig S. Smith, 'Fearing Unrest, China Presses Muslim Group', *New York Times*, 4 October 2001, p. A3.
- <sup>10</sup> See Charles Hutzler, 'China's Economic, Diplomatic Aid to Pakistan Has Played Key Role in US's War on Terror', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 December 2001, A1.
- <sup>11</sup> The extent and significance of intelligence cooperation against terrorism is unclear, but there have been a number of expressions of scepticism about its value. Philip P. Pan and Mike Allen, 'US, China Agree on Little Beyond Fighting Terrorism', *Washington Post*, 20 October 2001, p. A1; David E. Sanger, 'Russia, China and the US; In Terror, At Last a Common Enemy for the Big Three', *New York Times*, 28 October 2001, Section 4, p.1; Ralph Cossa, 'China: Odd Man Out in the Evolving New World Order?', *Pacific Forum CSIS*, PacNet 44, 2 November 2001. For a more generous assessment see Michael Vatikiotis, Ben Dolven and David Murphy, 'China-US Relations: Terror Throws Us Together, For Now', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 November 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/News/2001/FEER-110101.htm>.
- <sup>12</sup> See Craig S. Smith, 'China, In Harsh

- Crackdown, Executes Muslim Separatists', *New York Times*, 16 December 2001, p. A1. For the background of this effort see 'Chinese Cleanup Targets Uighurs', *Stratfor.com*, 16 May 2001, <http://stratfor.com/asia/commentary/0105162140.htm>. According to one report, several members of the Politburo wanted 'to take advantage of the global anti-terrorist campaign to exterminate opposition and secessionist forces once and for all'. Among the measures reportedly contemplated was an official declaration that the Falun Gong religious group was, in fact, a terrorist movement. See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 'Terrorism Fight Used to Target China Secessionists', 23 October 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/10/23/willy.china.split>.
- <sup>13</sup> Chinese concerns about encirclement are discussed more fully in pp. 8–10.
- <sup>14</sup> David E. Sanger, 'Bush Meets China's Leader and Emphasizes Need to Fight Terrorism Together', *New York Times*, 19 October 2001, p. B4.
- <sup>15</sup> This characterisation is from a post-summit briefing by US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. David Rennie, 'China is 'Side by Side With US' On Terror, Says Bush', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 2001, <http://news.telegraph.co.uk>.
- <sup>16</sup> 'No War Dividend for China: Powell', *Agence France Presse*, 26 October 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2001/AFP-102601.htm>.
- <sup>17</sup> See Craig S. Smith, 'Frustrating US, China Balks At Pact to Stem Missile Sales', *New York Times*, 19 October 2001, p. B4.
- <sup>18</sup> See Steven Mufson and Philip P. Pan, 'US May Waive China Sanctions; White House Seeks to Trade Anti-Terrorist Intelligence', *Washington Post*, 17 October 2001, A1. 'US Denies Reports It Plans to Ease China Sanctions', *Reuters*, 18 October 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2001/Reuters-101801.htm>.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, 'Frustrating US, China Balks At Pact to Stem Missile Sales'.
- <sup>20</sup> Jeremy Page, 'US, China to Lock Horns on Missile Proliferation', *Reuters*, 23 November 2001, <http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/0111/NOV26.html>.
- <sup>21</sup> For an expression of American opinion to this effect see, for example, Thomas L. Friedman, 'Pay Attention', *New York Times*, 30 November 2001, p. A27.
- <sup>22</sup> Jia Qingguo, 'US–China Relations after 11 September'.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, the comments of State Department official John Bolton in William J. Broad, Stephen Engelberg and James Glanz, 'The Threats; Assessing Risks, Chemical, Biological, Even Nuclear', *New York Times*, 1 November 2001, p. A1. See also 'ABM Treaty Fact Sheet: Statement by the White House Press Secretary; Announcement of Withdrawal from the ABM Treaty', Office of the Press Secretary, 13 December 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011213-2.html>.
- <sup>24</sup> At the same time as it was withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, the US also gave clear indications of its intention, in conjunction with Japan, to proceed with development of some kind of theatre ballistic-missile defence system. Gopal Ratnam and Jason Sherman, 'Japan, US Reaffirm Intent to Jointly Develop Sea-Based Missile Defenses', *Defense News*, 17–23 December 2001, p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, 'China Voices Muted Distress at US Blow to ABM Pact', *New York Times*, 14 December 2001, p. A15.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Snyder, 'US Says Arms Sales

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- <sup>27</sup> Philip Yang, 'US Foreign Policy Sure to Shift in Alignment', *Taipei Times*, 15 September 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/TT/2001/TT-091501.htm>.
- <sup>28</sup> David Lague, 'Coming About: Those who said Taiwan would not get a fleet of submarines from the US may be proven wrong', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 December 2001, <http://www.feer.com>. See also 'Firms Present Plans for Taiwan Subs', *Agence France Presse*, 19 November 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2001/AFP-111901.htm>. 'China Protests Against US Submarine Sales to Taiwan', *Reuters*, 21 November 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2001/Reuters-112101.htm>.
- <sup>29</sup> For helpful overviews of Chinese strategic thinking see Yong Deng, 'Hegemon on the Offensive: Chinese Perspectives on US Global Strategy', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 116, no. 3 (2001), pp. 343–365; Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2000).
- <sup>30</sup> See Patrick E. Tyler, 'Russia and China Sign 'Friendship' Pact', *New York Times*, 17 July 2001, p. A1. For a useful overview and initial assessment see Ariel Cohen, 'The Russia–China Friendship and Cooperation Treaty: A Strategic Shift in Eurasia?', Heritage Foundation Backgrounder no. 1459, 18 July 2001.
- <sup>31</sup> This new grouping, the so-called Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, added Uzbekistan to what had previously been referred to as the 'Shanghai Five'.
- <sup>32</sup> China's evolving policies in South Asia are carefully analysed in John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001). Regarding recent improvements in Sino-Indian relations see especially pp. 216–242.
- <sup>33</sup> For an overview of these developments see Oksana Antonenko, 'Putin's Gamble', *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Winter 2001), pp. 49–60.
- <sup>34</sup> The precise details of the American presence in Central Asia have been closely guarded. See Eric Schmitt and James Dao, 'US Building Up Its Military Bases in Afghan Region', *New York Times*, 9 January 2002, p. A1.
- <sup>35</sup> For an account of the discussion at a Politburo meeting held as the US was about to begin military operations in Afghanistan see Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 'Jiang Fears US Foothold in Central Asia', 10 October 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/10/08/willy.column>. For a discussion of the 'thoughtful concerns' raised by unnamed persons about, among things, the question of 'how well ... the rising influence of the US [in] Central Asia after the end of the imminent war [will] be handled', see Dingli Shen, 'International Relations in the Aftermath of 11 September', *Nautilus Special Forum* (#SF-23), 9 October 2001, [http://www.nautilus.org/fora/Special-Policy-Forum/23\\_Shen.html](http://www.nautilus.org/fora/Special-Policy-Forum/23_Shen.html). The author is a well-connected analyst of Chinese and American policies and Deputy Director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University.
- <sup>36</sup> I am indebted to John Garver for his suggestion that Beijing's concern for Pakistan's survival may have caused it to view with favour an expanded relationship between Islamabad and Washington.
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- <sup>38</sup> Regarding Chinese perceptions of Japan see Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp.84–93; Thomas J. Christensen, 'China, the US–Japan Alliance and the Security Dilemma in East Asia', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 52–64.
- <sup>39</sup> On these events see Kathryn Tolbert and Doug Struck, 'Japan Expands Military Role to Support US', *Washington Post*, October 19, 2001, p.1; 'Japanese War Effort Sets Sail', CNN, 25 November 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/News/2001/CNN-112501.htm>; 'China Concerned at Japanese "Force"', BBC online, 24 December 2001, <http://taiwansecurity.org/News/2001/BBC-122401.htm>; Doug Struck, 'Sinking Renews Debate on Japan's Military', *Washington Post*, 28 December 2001, p. A15.
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- <sup>41</sup> 'PRC: Japan's Sinking of Ship not "Justifiable Defense"', FBIS translation of an article by Sheng Xin in *Beijing Jiefangjun Bao* (online), 31 December 2001, Number CPP20011231000070.
- <sup>42</sup> Regarding Chinese interpretations of the lessons of the Gulf War see Michael J. Pillsbury, 'Chinese Views on Future Warfare', in James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh (eds), *China's Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 64–84; Nan Li, 'The PLA's Evolving Warfighting Doctrine, Strategy and Tactics, 1985–95: A Chinese Perspective', *The China Quarterly*, no. 146 (June 1996), pp. 443–463.
- <sup>43</sup> Eric Schmitt and James Dao, 'Use of Pinpoint Air Power Comes of Age in New War', *New York Times*, 24 December 2001, p. A1.

