

China-America

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Lessons from a Sino-US Dialogue

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A day-long Sino-U.S. meeting served more to flag issues worthy of further deliberation—by all concerned with U.S.–China relations—than to settle them. Among the most salient issues discussed during [a recent meeting organized by The China Energy Fund and George Washington University](#) is how far tension-reduction measures can take both nations to the promised land of peaceful co-existence. The same is true of exploring whether the two powers can strike a grand bargain or progress will be at best gradual.

While the meeting, which included a considerable number of Chinese and American scholars and former (and a few present) public officials, was very congenial, the presentations were accompanied by a surprisingly high level of pessimism. This mood was reflected in the discussion of the “Thucydides Trap,” which is understood to show that when a new power rises and the old power does not yield fast enough—or simply yield enough power—war is likely to follow. Many (for example [John Mearsheimer](#)) hold that war between the U.S. and China is a strong possibility and that China simply “cannot rise peacefully.” The optimists—led by [Graham Allison](#)—point out four exceptions to the “rule” out of 16 such developments since 1500; that is, the probability of peaceful resolution is assessed as a low 25%. Other speakers, who suggested various ways to avoid such an escalation, prefaced their comments by stating that they were pessimistic that such measures would be adopted. Statements by American presidential candidates during the current election campaign hardly add to one’s optimism. The Republicans compete over who can be the most anti-China, and the currently leading Democrat, Hillary Clinton, used a rather harsh turn of phrase when she referred to a recent speech by President Xi as “shameful.” The fact that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), launched by the U.S. and recently concluded, excludes China is a further reason for concern. Charles Glaser pointed out that most of the suggestions for accommodation presented during the meeting came from American participants. A Chinese participant suggested during the coffee break that Chinese representatives might be more forthcoming if in the future, such meetings were closed to the public.

Another Chinese participant, who asked not to be named, cited several historical documents that “proved” that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were part of China. He expressed some surprise mixed with dismay that other nations did not concede this point. His comments suggest that China may not yet recognize that whatever gains it makes on this front will be vastly offset by the [mobilization effects](#) these gains have on Japan and the U.S.

Assuming that there is a willingness to avoid the Thucydides Trap, how far can tension–reduction or confidence–building measures take us? There is one major historical precedent that speaks directly to this question. At the height of the Cold War, President Kennedy gave the famous “strategy of peace” speech. It was followed by limited gestures by the U.S. (e.g., withdrawing its objection to granting full membership status to the Hungarian delegation, calling for reduced trade barriers between the East and West, and approving the sale of \$250 million in wheat to the USSR), which were reciprocated by the U.S.S.R. (e.g., withdrawing its objection to Western–backed proposals to send UN observers to Yemen and halting its production of strategic bombers). Several rounds of such gestures resulted in significant tension reduction, widely referred to as the *détente*. Note that these gestures were made unilaterally, rather than through bilateral negotiations, which are often very difficult to achieve and slow to bring about, but no additional efforts were made after each single unilateral gesture until the other side reciprocated. The same approach is now suggested for [U.S.–China relations](#).

During Kennedy’s time, some believed that such tit–for–tat tension–reduction measures could bring about all the changes needed to move from the Cold War to a period of peace and stability. Others argued that these measures could reduce tensions and open the way for bilateral negotiations but could not resolve major issues by themselves. Discussions during the U.S.–Sino meeting suggested that this issue is still unresolved, though in the case of the U.S. and U.S.S.R., the major breakthrough came many years later when Reagan and Gorbachev engaged in bilateral negotiations to achieve major reductions in nuclear arms. Thus there is one important example that points in favor of unilateral–reciprocated tension reduction followed by bi– or multilateral negotiations.

Finally, there was considerable give and take regarding the thesis that the U.S. and China could have a grand bargain. For instance, [Charles Glaser](#) argued that the U.S. should offer to end its commitment to Taiwan in exchange for China resolving its disputes in the East and South China Seas, and accepting U.S. military presence in the region. In contrast, [Michael Swaine](#) held that given the scope and depth of the two countries’ differences, progress will have to be gradual.

As I see it, in either case, more room must be given to what might be called cross–silo negotiations and deals. There is a strong tendency to negotiate deals in one area or another: trade (e.g. the TPP); cyber security (e.g., “[norms of behavior](#)” for cyberspace); or “mil to mil” by the armed forces. However, some of the most promising deals might require concessions in one area in exchange for concessions in a rather different area.

To illustrate: The U.S. and China agreed in effect that the use of cyber tools for spying cannot be curbed; governments spying on other governments has occurred for as long as governments have existed and is very likely to continue. Both nations are also concerned about the use of cyber tools as kinetic arms that could damage the other nation’s infrastructure, financial and communication systems. These are fairly symmetrical concerns; hence, a limited silo deal might be possible. However, in a third area, the U.S. is seeking respect for private intellectual property and for China to stop the use of cyber tools to hack private

corporations. But such a limited silo deal would benefit only the U.S. The U.S. has very little interest in the intellectual property of China, whereas China has, at least in the past, benefitted greatly from violating American intellectual property rights. A potential cross-silo deal would entail the U.S. stopping the almost daily patrols of planes and trawlers up and down the Chinese coast in exchange for China curbing the hacking of corporations as best as it can. (An idealist may well argue that China need not be offered anything in order to get it to observe what is after all an established law and norm in international relations. However, obviously such fair sentiments are not doing the trick and hence incentives seem to be needed.)

One may well disagree about the merits of the suggested deal but still conclude that future China-U.S. meetings should move from identifying issues on rather high levels of generality to examining specific measures that could be taken in short order in a unilateral-reciprocal way to reduce tensions. These might then be followed by bilateral negotiations drawing on cross-silo deals.

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