“America and China”

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, let me say how very pleased I am to be here under the sponsorship of the organizers of this event, who deserve salutations for their consistent and persistent effort to widen and to deepen the scope of the American-Chinese relationship. So it’s a genuine source of satisfaction for me to be part of this event. And secondly, at the risk of somewhat anticipating what’s going to follow my remarks, I want simply to express my congratulations to the three honorees whom we will be saluting later on. Each of them has made a signal contribution not only to the American-Chinese relationship, but to a variety of other engagements which pertain to America’s involvement in the world, and of course to China’s involvement in the world, as a whole. But tonight, I would like to share with you some thoughts about the American-Chinese relationship as such. I think I can say, quite confidently, that we are all here tonight because we believe that American-Chinese friendship is good for the world. And in fact, that the relationship itself is good. But it could certainly be better, and, to be frank, we also cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that it could get worse.

These days some in fact argue that the emerging American-Chinese duopoly in the world must inherently generate eventual hostility, and hence they conclude that conflict between America and China is inevitable. And admittedly, it is a historical
fact that during the last 200 years - since the onset of what we might call global politics - four long wars were fought for domination over Europe. Starting first of all from 1812 to 1815 because of Napoleonic global ambitions, then from 1914 to 1918 because of Germanic imperial frustrations, from 1939 to 1945 because of Nazi madness, and from the late 1940's to the early 1990's because of Soviet worldwide ideological ambitions. And indeed, every one of these conflicts could have resulted in global hegemony by a sole power.

However, I personally do not believe that wars for global domination are still a serious prospect in what is now clearly the post-hegemonic age. First of all, nuclear weapons make hegemonic wars too destructive and thus victory meaningless. One-sided national economic triumphs cannot be achieved in the increasingly interwoven global economy without precipitating calamitous consequences for everyone. The populations of the world are now politically awakened, activist, and hence not easily subdued, even by much more powerful nations. Last but not least, neither America nor China are driven by hostile ideologies, and neither one of them is suicidal.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that both of our societies are open – both societies are open - even though our political systems are very different. That too offsets pressures from within each respective society towards animus and hostility. More than 100,000 young Chinese are students in our universities, and it is fashionable for the offspring of the top Chinese leaders to study in our leading universities. Thousands of young Americans study in China or participate in special study and travel programs. Several of our top universities now have their own campuses in China, with their own professors as well as Chinese professors as the faculty. In addition, so unlike the former Soviet Union, literally millions of Chinese regularly travel abroad as tourists, as traders, and some also temporarily work abroad. And finally, millions of younger urban Chinese are in daily touch with the world through the internet.
Just contrast that interconnected global reality, and particularly the interconnection between America and China, with the societal semi-isolation of the 19th and 20th century contestants for global power to which I alluded earlier. Their mutual isolation intensified grievances, escalated hostility, and made it easier to demonize each other. Even as recently as a few decades ago the people of the Soviet Union, for example, or, in fact, a few decades ago even in China, had very limited exposure to the prevailing realities in the outside world.

That having been said, it is true nonetheless that we cannot entirely ignore the fact that the hopeful expectations in recent years of a totally amicable American-Chinese relationship have lately been tested by somewhat more antagonistic polemics – especially in our respective mass medias - fueled in part by speculation about America’s allegedly inevitable decline and about China’s relentless rapid rise. In the mass media, economically anxious American pessimists and nationally exuberant Chinese optimists have been prolific and outspoken, but also a little simplistic.

Pessimism about America’s future tends to underestimate this country’s capacity for self-renewal. Exuberant optimism about China’s inevitable preeminence underestimates the gap that still separates China from America - whether in GDP for the next several decades (and linear projections rarely are sustained by history), or in GDP per capita in the very long run, or in respective technological capabilities. Simplistic agitation regarding the potential Chinese military threat to America, for example, ignores the benefits that the U.S. also derives from its very favorable geostrategic location on the open shores of two great oceans, as well as from its many trans-oceanic allies.

In contrast, China is geographically encircled by not always friendly states and has very few - if any - allies. At the same time, domestically and somewhat paradoxically, China’s truly admirable economic success is now intensifying internally the systemic need for complex social and political adjustments in how – and to what extent - a
ruling bureaucracy that defines itself as communist directs a system of state capitalism.

Concurrently, in recent times, both countries have also been preoccupied with approaching political leadership changes. That preoccupation may have also contributed – unintentionally - to intensified trans-oceanic polemics.

In America’s competitive electoral political system, sloganeering found China to be a tempting political target (just recall a presidential candidate’s reckless pledge not long ago regarding China’s alleged currency manipulation) while fear-mongers fueled anxiety about China’s alleged quest for military supremacy, including even hypothetical futuristic scenarios of high-tech warfare between America and China. I have in mind some publications dealing with that.

In China, the prolonged and veiled process of selecting a new team also created a pause in authoritative foreign policy guidance, with Chinese mass media commentators freer to air nationalist grievances regarding alleged American designs to contain and to isolate China.

At the same time, of course, some of China’s neighbors occasionally seemed tempted to draw America into support of their specific claims or conflicts of interest directed at China, while China’s official party newspaper warned for example, and I quote, that “the Chinese government will launch a series of strong counter-measures and will never be softhearted.” End of quote, from China’s leading newspaper.

Matters may also not have been helped by some of the American mass media interpretations and maybe also by official backgrounders regarding the somewhat abruptly unveiled U.S. “rebalancing” or “pivoting” of America’s strategic engagements in Europe and Asia respectively. Formally announced in November of last year through a major speech by the U.S. President while visiting Australia, the effort was in fact intended to be a constructive reaffirmation of the unchanged reality that the U.S. is both a Pacific Ocean power and an Atlantic Ocean power. To
strengthen this message the President’s statement was preceded by an important speech by the Secretary of State and followed by an op-ed by the National Security Advisor, both of whom deserve a lot of credit for initiating the timely policy review.

Unfortunately, however, some of the backgrounding - seizing much more on the more dramatic word “pivot” or “pivoting” (a word not actually used by the President in his speech) - concentrated on the prospective U.S. military realignment towards Asia, thus causing, not surprisingly, some Asian (including Chinese) commentators to interpret the “rebalancing,” not to mention “pivoting,” as perhaps foreshadowing some sort of an American inspired new Asian alignment, which certainly was not America’s basic intent.

In addition, matters were made worse by the almost coincidental rise of some potentially inflammatory jurisdictional issues regarding the South China Sea as well as some other offshore islands. Fortunately, now there are some signs that consensus is surfacing that such disputes should be solved by negotiation and not by threats, not to mention unilateral acts.

In any case, and that is my central point, the real threat to a stable U.S.-China relationship arises neither from America’s or from China’s hostile intentions, but from the disturbing possibility that the revitalized Asia may slide into nationalistic fervor which then precipitates conflicts in Asia reminiscent of 20th century Europe over natural resources, or territory, or national power. Just consider the cumulative effects of the potential regional dynamics of North Korea vs. South Korea (with an erratic regime in the North, armed with a nuclear bomb), or of tensions between South Korea and Japan (based on bitter historical memories and current disagreements over islands); between China and Japan (given the long-standing rivalry between the two, and painful World War II memories stemming from the Japanese invasion); China and India (with the 1962 Indian defeat still rankling in Indian memory and the on-going rivalry); India vs. Pakistan (with intense mutual animus ever since their respective inceptions); or in the
nearby seas (numerous territorial, resources, distribution issues); or because of maritime jurisdictional disputes – all of them intensified by nationalistic fervor.

One mere example, quite as an aside, insignificant in itself but symptomatic: Today, China issues visas with little maps in them, claiming parts of territory that the Indians consider theirs, and the Indians are issuing visas on their passports with a map showing territory that China considers to be it as part of India’s territory.

Isn’t all of that somehow reminiscent of 20th century Europe? Nationalisms as domestic safety-valves? Or nationalisms simply out (potentially) of control? Doesn’t it pose a dismal prospect perhaps of intensifying Asian conflicts contributing eventually to global turmoil in the now post-hegemonic era? Not one in which one power is going to emerge dominant, but there will be cumulative global chaos.

In that unpredictable context, and I really do believe what I am about to say, U.S. political and economic involvement in Asia can actually be the crucially needed stabilizing factor in a potentially explosive region. Indeed, I see in America’s current role in Asia a parallel to Great Britain’s role in 19th century Europe: off-shore, constructive, and balancing engagement but no direct entanglements in the region’s rivalries and no attempt to attain domination over the region.

It therefore follows that constructive and strategically sensitive American engagement in Asia – including its existing alliances with democratic Japan and democratic South Korea - is thus in fact also in China’s interest, and especially so if in the meantime American-Chinese cooperation is increasingly institutionalized.

Accordingly, in my view, America and China should very deliberately not let their economic competition, which is an unavoidable reality, turn into political hostility. Mutual American-Chinese engagement bilaterally and multilaterally - and not reciprocal exclusion - is what is needed. For example, what is the point of seeking a Trans-Pacific Partnership without China, or what is the point of seeking a Regional Comprehensive Economic Pact without America?
In brief, with America in Asia acting as a stabilizer but certainly not as a would-be policeman and with China in Asia preeminent but not domineering, it follows that the ambitious Obama-Hu Jintao communiqué of January 2011 – boldly detailing joint undertakings - needs now to be revalidated and periodically upgraded. Presidents Obama and Xi should meet soon, review the progress already made and define new targets, develop further a trans-Pacific code of conduct, and reaffirm the significance of the emerging and historically unprecedented global partnership between America and China. The world certainly needs it.

Thank you.