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## **Bush's distraction in Iraq has led to stronger U.S.-China ties**

Roger Cohen

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The best thing that happened to Chinese-American relations was the Iraq war. It distracted the Bush administration's attention from China rising, absorbed the confrontational energy of the neocons, and left ties with Beijing to be handled by pragmatists more interested in deeper links than future conflict.

The result has been a broadening of dialogue to the point that there's very little — from African politics to space travel — that China and the United States don't talk about these days. North Korea tends to grab the headlines, followed by China's undervalued yuan, but the Washington-Beijing relationship is now as deep as any America has.

One illustration of that is the large American delegation, headed by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson Jr., that is in China this week. The Chinese trade surplus hit \$23.37 billion in November, an indication of why congressional pressure to impose tariffs on Chinese goods is increasing in the United States.

Paulson wants the yuan to rise further against the dollar — more than the 5.7 percent it has gone up since July 2005. He may or may not get concessions during his visit. In the end, it will not really matter. China does not seek major confrontation with Washington; it will ultimately do what's necessary to avoid that.

Stability in its region is what enables China to focus on maintaining an annual growth rate of close to 10 percent. With China needing to create an estimated 24 million jobs a year to absorb newcomers to the work force, high growth is a prerequisite for the endurance of the ruling Communist Party, whose attachment to power is one of the few nonnegotiable things in the country.

So China does not want to challenge the United States — not now, and probably not for a very long time — because Beijing benefits economically from Pax Americana. If the American market closes, China wobbles. If the United States were not an Asian power, China's rise would look a lot more menacing to countries including Japan, Singapore and Australia.

"China welcomes the American presence in Asia," He Yafei, an assistant foreign minister, said in an interview. "We welcome the United States to play an important, positive and constructive role in the peace, stability and economic growth of Asia."

There's a school of thought in the United States that scoffs at such talk. John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago has been a forceful proponent of the view that, as the current hegemonic power, America will strive to keep China down and "behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War." China, in turn, will follow an Asian Monroe Doctrine and attempt to push American forces out of Asia.

That view misses the way the world has changed since 1989. A degree of interconnectedness exists between the United States and China that would have been unthinkable between Washington and Moscow. America buys Chinese goods, China buys American debt: that's the oil greasing the global economy.

"Like it or not, the United States has to accept China's peaceful rise," said Jia Qingguo, the associate dean of Peking University. "The utility of force has declined because we live in a world of interconnection. China and the United States are not two separate entities. They are intertwined."

Jia continued: "It's very difficult to adopt a policy that is only harmful to the other side. What U.S. sanctions would not also hurt America's own companies?"

Look at the Chinese today — building bigger and higher in a ramshackle way, constructing bridges, boring tunnels, doing deals, hustling to get richer, perhaps even rich enough to join the golf club, thirsting for brand names, going nuts for new movie and Internet stars, opening giant eateries with TV screens everywhere. They're not Americans, far from it, but they're not alien to the United States either. Casual, brash, money-minded, they look across the Pacific for inspiration.

Which is not to say that China and the United States always see eye to eye or that tensions will not flare. He, the assistant foreign minister, bristled when it was suggested to him that China does business with tyrants in places like Myanmar or Zimbabwe.

"You're right in saying that our assistance to these countries has no political conditions or strings attached and in the future we will continue to do so," He said. "Our assistance to these countries is based on the interests of the peoples in these countries."

Opposition to interference in the internal affairs of other countries was a core principle of Chinese foreign policy, He added, explaining, "We ourselves suffered bitterly from aggression and invasion in the past. We will not do what we ourselves don't like and other peoples don't like either."

Other major powers in history had grown through "colonization and exploitation and invasion and aggression, but these methods go nowhere in the current world," He said

without ever mentioning Iraq by name. The minister urged the United States to be "transparent and reasonable" in its strengthened military cooperation with other Asian countries, including Japan and Australia.

"The security concerns of other countries including China should be taken into consideration," He said.

Those concerns, and the existence of a hard-line Chinese school that sees conflict with the United States as inevitable, explain China's heavy military spending as it tries to make its armed forces more mobile and technologically adept. Aggressive, some would say. A reasonable form of hedging would be a better description.

Chinese-American relations have quietly moved beyond the ability of the yuan's exchange rate or Taiwan tensions or strategic disagreements to bring major confrontation. There are too many links. A possible deal on North Korea before the end of the month may well illustrate the new effectiveness of those ties.

The other face of President George W. Bush's ideological fervor in Iraq has been pragmatism toward China. With the Middle East absorbing the neocons' testosterone, reason has held sway. That's been good for the world.