

A Bad Week for China and the U.S.

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February 3, 2010

This has been a very interesting week or so for U.S. China relations. During this time, internet censorship, the Dalai Lama, Iran, and arms sales to Taiwan have been at the center of the interaction between the two countries. It seems the relationship has come quite a distance since the fall when President Obama traveled to Asia and outlined the import of China to the U.S.

Viewed individually, all of these issues are complicated and speak to legitimately different views between the U.S. and China. Secretary Clinton's speech following Google's decision to leave China due to internet censorship raised important points about freedom of information and the need for American companies to be able to operate freely in China. President Obama should be able to meet with whomever he wants. Iran is a brutal regime which would be a great threat to whatever regional stability exists in the Middle East if it were to acquire nuclear weapons; and Taiwan is a longtime ally and supporter of the U.S.

Similarly the Chinese view on all these issues should be taken seriously and is not anything new. China has sought to monitor and limit the internet since it was invented. Chinese views on Tibet and Taiwan have been essentially consistent for decades; and China has never shared the concern about Iran and its weapons program that is so acute in Washington.

The events this week are perhaps simply the result of poor timing, or not thinking the timing through at all. Pushing China to support a stronger position on Iran at almost the precise time that newly planned arms sales to Taiwan are announced does not seem like a wise strategy. This was, perhaps deliberately, shown very clearly by the print version of the *New York Times* which showed articles reporting on both of these things [next to each other](#) on the same page of the newspaper.

While the issue of timing is unfortunate, it is probably less significant that the bigger issues of the likelihood of more of these types of issues arising in the near and mid-range future and of the seeming absence of a clear theory guiding China policy by this or any other recent American administration. U.S. policy towards China in the last week or so was simultaneously confrontational, oblivious, principled and beseeching. This is an unlikely recipe for success.

Given the import of the ties between China and the U.S., which is the most critical and complex bilateral relationship for both countries, there is a strong need for a policy that is more cohesive and consistent. This will not be easy as the U.S. and China will continue to have strong disagreements on matters relating to freedom and human rights, remain economic competitors and still need each other for both global political and economic

success. The U.S. cannot afford to push China too far and make the relationship one of hostility, but on the other hand cannot give in to the demands of the authoritarian regime in Beijing.

Striking a balance of this sort is never easy, and will become more difficult as China becomes more powerful and begins to more aggressively seek global political power commiserate with its economic power. It is possible, if quite unlikely, that bringing all these issues to the fore together was part of a clever and still unexplained strategy for seeking balance. However, if this was not part of a strategic effort, the need for thinking this through remains acute, because there will only be more weeks like this past one in the future.