

The Specious and Substantive in US-China Relations

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China Times, June 9, 2020 Page A12

When I was studying in the United States years ago, a teacher who had served as a senior official in US Government taught us how to write policy memos. He said one must first clearly define the issue at hand, analyze its pros and cons, and finally make policy recommendations. What impressed me most deeply at the time was his observation that decision-makers, when weighing the pros and cons of policy options, care most about "how it affects their personal power." When it is unfavorable, even if the particular option might do more good than harm for the country, it likely will be rejected. Conversely, if it is beneficial to their personal power, it will likely be adopted even if it is harmful to the country. In other words, personal power is paramount, and everything else is secondary. I later took part in Taiwan politics for a bit over a decade, and found this principle invariably pertains to a lesser or greater degree.

The same principle appears to apply at the national level. National power considerations prove to be the most substantive and highest priority, even though policy decisions are oftentimes presented in public in terms of public opinion, ethical principles of democracy, freedom, and human rights, or economic or cultural benefit, when in fact these are merely specious and secondary considerations.

When viewing the relationship between the United States and China, we should also distinguish between what is specious and what is substantive, what is secondary and what is paramount. President Trump's strategy of "competition" with China has found support in both political parties as well as both the executive and legislative branches of the US government, precisely because all worry about China's challenge to US power. Analysts in the U.S. cite an entire spectrum of reasons for this competition: differences in political

systems, values or ideologies, a clash of civilizations, Xi Jinping's strong-arm tactics, or the unfulfilled expectations of China's democratic transformation.

These reasons are all specious. The substantive key remains that the power of the United States is being challenged by China. That is the crux of the relationship, but it cannot be said openly for fear of losing prestige, thus undermining American influence.

The U.S. has twice successfully fended off challengers to its power since the end of World War II. The first was Japan in the 1980s when the Japanese economy leapt to second place in the world, growing to two-thirds the size of the US economy. The United States used the Plaza Accord of 1985 to put an end to Japan's four decades of rapid growth. Later, the Soviet Union caught up and came close to equaling two-thirds of the US economy. Washington used the expensive Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars") to lure the Soviet Union into following suit by engaging in a massive arms race, causing its economy to "bleed white," and eventually leading to national collapse. China's economy has now reached two thirds the size of the US economy, and its momentum appears strong, so it is only natural that the US elites across the party lines are deeply concerned.

To go further in our analysis, we must distinguish between specious and substantive factors defining national power. Trade wars, technology wars, financial wars, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the like are naturally important. Yet they are still specious and insubstantial. For the great powers, the most substantive, practical, paramount, and core considerations are military; all the rest are secondary. Only by commanding military superiority can the advantages of other components of national power such as economy, ideology, and culture, etc. be exploited. Even if there is no other advantage other than military, such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it can still instill fear in its opponent to discourage transgression.

The biggest worry for the U.S. now is that the absolute military superiority of the U.S. is past glory. The United States remains the world's top military power, but China enjoys a local advantage in its peripheral areas. In recent years, the Pentagon has conducted 18 war games involving an engagement in the Taiwan Strait and each time the US side was defeated. This means that if Beijing is determined to attack Taiwan, it will achieve a fait accompli before the US military could arrive.

Summing up US studies released publicly, there are three ways to reverse this situation. The first is to directly attack the Chinese homeland using hypersonic, long-range, stealth weapons to strike at China's air bases, missile bases, and control infrastructure. The second is to cut off China's maritime oil transport lines at such choke points as the Strait of Hormuz or the Strait of Malacca. The third would be a naval blockade and attacking China's naval fleet.

However, there are at least three problems with these remedies: First, they all involve post-facto measures that amount to locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen, and it is a big question whether Beijing would be compelled to spit out Taiwan after having ingested it. Second, the US Pacific bases could also be destroyed by retaliation. Third, the most serious, direct attack on the Chinese homeland would very likely escalate the conflict to the level of nuclear weapons. This is why Mr. Trump's anti-China campaign so far has been more bark than bite. How can the specious, frantic political posturing be a match for the substantive, behind-the-scene jostling?

Going another step further, if military might is the most crucial component of national power, then 5G is the most critical component of military prowess, because it will initiate a new round of industrial revolution that allows those who get there first to immediately leap to a new and higher level. This is the fundamental reason why, despite a lack of support in the US high-tech community for sanctions against Huawei or US-China technological decoupling, Washington still insists upon it, to the point of forcing TSMC to set up manufacturing facilities in the U.S.

The current dilemma for the United States is that it will take several years to achieve 5G and even longer to complete the military transformation from current counter-terrorism operation capabilities to being able to prevail in a showdown. Therefore, in the next few years, the U.S. will do its utmost to build up its military and 5G capabilities, and in addition to honing its fighting capabilities, it will surely make a number of moves of an assisting, testing and distracting nature to slow China's rise. And, of course, China may well throw some counter punches of its own.

Those who enjoy such a ruckus need not fear any lack of it to watch. It's just that Taiwan, sitting at the vortex of where the United States and China are likely to duke it out, must

discern the specious from substantive, and secondary from paramount, if it is to survive in the gap.

(The author, chairman of Taipei Forum, formerly served as secretary-general of the National Security Council from 2008 to 2010.)