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Wary of the dragon?

by Frank Ching
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Last week saw two events in Washington that illustrate the complexity of the Sino-US relationship. The first involved 15 ministers from China, led by Vice-Premier Wu Yi, who took part in a high-level economic dialogue. Some progress was made, including an agreement to double daily passenger flights from the US to China by 2012, worth an estimated US\$5 billion to American airlines.

However, the US Congress, an increasingly important player, was dissatisfied. Congressional leaders, after meeting with the formidable Ms Wu, announced that they intended to proceed with legislation to impose tariffs on Chinese imports unless Beijing agreed to substantially revalue the yuan. The Chinese are now waiting with bated breath for the other shoe to drop.

The second event occurred the day that the Chinese delegation left. The Pentagon, in its latest report on China, repeated the view that it has "the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional US military advantages". Predictably, the People's Daily said the report "deliberately exaggerates the so-called Chinese military threat", adding that China had to modernise its military to avoid falling even further behind the US.

These two events underline the seemingly intractable problems that beset the bilateral relationship, which is widely viewed as the most important in the world today.

However, one event, in New York, was much more encouraging, suggesting that problems can be managed and a confrontation is not inevitable. On May 16, an Oxford-style debate, organised by Intelligence Squared, was held at the Asia Society on the topic "Beware the dragon: A booming China spells trouble for America." Those for the motion - that China was a threat - were Bill Gertz, defence and national security reporter for The Washington Times; John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago; and Michael Pillsbury, a former Pentagon official. Those opposed were Stapleton Roy, former ambassador to China and now managing director of Kissinger Associates; Daniel Rosen, principal of China Strategic Advisory and adjunct associate

professor at Columbia University; and James McGregor, former chief executive of Dow Jones in China.

Before the debate began, 41 per cent of the audience voted for the motion, 37 per cent against, with 22 per cent undecided. That is to say, more people supported the idea that China was a threat to the US than opposed it.

During the debate, those for the motion focused on China's military build-up and asserted the need for the US to remain an unrivalled superpower. Those opposed emphasised that, while there would be troublesome aspects to a rising China - just as there are problems in US relations with Canada and Mexico - these can be managed. "The situation calls for vigilance," said Mr Roy, "not for alarm." Similarly, Professor Rosen said: "Our fortunes depend on what we do, on how we compete with China, not on what China does." Mr McGregor added: "If you say that we can't handle the rise of China, then you're voting against America {hellip} America can handle the rise of China."

However, Professor Mearsheimer argued that "you have to assume [the] worst case about [China's] intentions, to protect yourself in case there is trouble". Mr Roy responded that "successful foreign policies are based on finding common interests with other countries, not in trying to keep them down".

At the end of the debate, the audience's opinion had reversed. Only 35 per cent supported the motion, while a clear majority - 59 per cent - opposed it. Six per cent were undecided. The proposition that a booming China spells trouble for America was resoundingly defeated.

This outcome is encouraging, because it shows that while many Americans may be concerned about China's rise, after being exposed to arguments on both sides, they are intelligent enough to realise that it would be best for Washington, as well as Beijing, if China were successful.

Such debates are healthy and should be encouraged. And it would be helpful if more members of the US Congress, as well as defence department officials, could be exposed to them.

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