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China and the US - Partners in the Making?

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China is the most potent driver of change of our era. Yet, amazingly, the US still has no idea of how best to develop this critical relationship over the next 20 years. Washington should strive to inject far more vision into the relationship this year, and not wait until a new American president takes office - but that is unlikely to happen.

Failing to take the offensive in defining a future-leaning China strategy, the current administration has appeared bewildered by how quickly that nation has advanced in its rearview mirror: it has surged forward at surprising speed. Chinese are understandably proud of their nation's progress, and their leaders must feel elated at their own success. Instinctively, however, they must also sense that the US will not sit idly by while China takes every record in the future.

Many groups in the US are suspicious of China's fast-rising power, and their concern is a serious force that no US president or presidential candidate can ignore. If you talk with average Americans about China, however, you discover a simple hope - that both countries can simply continue to get along in the future. The reality is likely to be more complex, given the inevitable frictions between such large forces.

China's gains are easily characterised as America's losses, even though this tends to be more exaggeration than fact. After all, the beneficiary of affordable Chinese products is the American consumer, and the beneficiary of Chinese ownership of US Treasury bills is the American style of life: credit-rich and carefree. Without China as a stakeholder, inflation would be stronger and economic options more limited in the US.

During the Bush administration, the relationship has ebbed and flowed. After 9/11, China received a "bye", in sporting terms: the US, distracted by terrorism and Iraq, was absent from Asia most of the time, allowing Beijing to set its own course without excessive debate.

For China, this relatively independent adolescence was a boon. Sound economic development policy combined with huge inflows of foreign capital have made it a success story like no other. For the US, the consequences of this lapse, this missed opportunity to more thoroughly work with a rising star, are still unknown. But they are likely to portend less influence over the next phase of China's emergence than is desirable to most of the Washington establishment.

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The realisation now emerging is that a new vision for US-China relations will arrive only with a new American president. The Bush administration is in the home stretch, so it is too late to expect bold strides. Having demonstrated little imagination thus far, the administration is unlikely to chart a substantially new course, given its other pressing problems. Moreover, the administration is still plagued with a dated and falsely secure notion that Beijing's policies can continue to be influenced by the US - even though the evidence suggests otherwise. In fact, the US has a declining number of bargaining chips.

It is clearly time to turn for hope to our presidential candidates, who increasingly stand the best chance of initiating a new effort with Beijing to build a bold, future vision of the world ahead. Soon, through their campaigns, they will have the opportunity to shape a new debate, one that is more properly centred on America's future role in a China-modified world - not as policeman but as visionary, and not as regulator but as enabler.

To be credible, China-savvy presidential candidates should consider three strategic points. First, Americans must recognise that they are no longer alone as a superpower - a reality that might hurt but must be accepted. Second, they must commit the US to co-operation with China rather than obstruction. And third, they must overcome their pride, and even sense of loss, and work with China to craft a more robust means for leading the world into this new millennium.

The two countries should come together to shape a view of the next several decades. Such planning will lead to a comprehensive contract between the nations that will replace the antiquated Shanghai Communiqué of 1972 and herald a new, joint commitment to peace, prosperity and - most exciting of all - possibility.

Two giants working together for the future of the world: that is a vision to which the US and every worthy presidential candidate should aspire.

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