



Letter from the President

Robert A. Kapp

PRESIDENT, THE US-CHINA BUSINESS COUNCIL

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The United States and China: A Post-September 11 Perspective

In the aftermath of the September 11 horror, getting on with daily affairs is not easy. How can anyone return to business as usual when thousands lie unfound in the wreckage of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?

In all the punditry that engulfs us, some say "This proves we were right all along: onward with our programs!" Others say, "The world is overturned, permanently; the old road maps are useless. Drop the old priorities; what we face now renders our old preoccupations obsolete."

All in all, at this early point, we can't know just how much of the crockery of our world view has been smashed forever and how much will survive. But already the developments of that September morning are rightly giving us reason to look at our interests from new perspectives.

Let's look, then, at how America viewed China, and how it might now view China, against the background of what exploded upon us on that horrifying September morning.

America the threatened

Franklin D. Roosevelt, confronting the darkening stage of the Great Depression at his first inauguration in 1933, said to the American people:

"So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

To think that the tide of fear that rolled across America after the terrorist attacks is something new to the American nation would be naïve and ahistorical. The United States has known waves of dark foreboding before. A few examples serve to remind:

The Great Depression left its mark on the lives of all who lived through the 1930s, producing a residue of behaviors in our parents and grandparents that youngsters found quaint—

an obsession with turning out unneeded electric lights, a tendency to overstock household necessities, an unwillingness to discard the old and acquire the new.

The generation that lived through World War II put its children to bed at night knowing that brothers and fathers and sisters and mothers were struggling far away, in mortal danger, and dreading the "We regret to inform you" message from the War Department.

At the end of the war, we waded through the terrors of military hardware parades in Red Square and the hunt for foreign agents "boring from within" our national government, our universities, and our local school boards. The kids of that era memorized "nuclear blast radius" diagrams and crouched under their desks with their heads between their knees because their elders told them that this could save their lives (the kids suspected otherwise).

The dangers of the 1990s

Sixty years later, as America waded into the post-Cold War era newly crowned the sole remaining superpower and embarked on a decade of vibrant economic success, new worries gnawed at the country. With the information-technology revolution came computer viruses, maliciously planted and capable of paralyzing normal social functions now wholly reliant on technological links. Epidemic diseases, most spectacularly HIV/AIDS, sliced into the population. Tides of immigration, legal and illegal, left some Americans fearful of an inundation of those not rooted in the language and the familiarities of American life. The moment of perceived victory in the Cold War quickly gave way to the realities of gigantic communal,

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1818 N Street, NW, Suite 200 Washington, DC 20036 USA

Tel: 202/429-0340 Fax: 202/775-2476 e-mail: info@uschina.org www.uschina.org



## The possibility of a more positive rebalancing of *each* country's popular and official view of the other is now at hand.

sectarian, and ethnic conflicts within national borders. The globalization of capital, and increasingly of production, like the rise of Japanese industrial power in the 1970s, left many Americans angrily fearful for their economic futures. Notwithstanding the drop in crime rates, incomprehensible acts of violence—school shootings, the Oklahoma City bombing—left their marks on the national subconscious. Meanwhile, the spread of instantaneous communication provided new avenues for the propagation of allegations, rumors, conspiracy theories, pseudo-military mumbo jumbo, and the “politics of personal destruction.” The 1990s paradox—the simultaneous rise of the *yang* of post-Cold War American confidence and the *yin* of a spreading sense of pervasive danger—was something new, even before the immediacy of terrorist violence exploded in our midst on September 11.

### Enter the China threat

One more new site on the American mental map in the 1990s was the “Rise of China.”

Students of China's past learn that the creation of the American nation at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with the beginning of China's long slide from imperial splendor to the depths of political and social disorganization in the first half of the twentieth century. Before the 1980s, Americans had never known a world in which China was a powerful state, increasingly prepared to advance its interests in the face of others' uneasiness and unwilling to be ignored. China's dramatic performances on the world stage had long been seen as futile exercises in self-deception. As the 1990s dawned and China's economy settled into a stable pattern of rapid growth—and as China gained effective diplomatic, economic, and technical skills, including some of America's own—the Rise of China was added to the growing list of American concerns, especially in certain political and policy quarters.

The American dialogue on China remained contested: Congress and the administration, with help from the American business community, managed to pass the historic permanent Normal Trade Relations legislation in 2001, embracing a broadly positive glass-half-full approach to the PRC on that key trade issue. Since then, though, with China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) close at hand, the American policy debate regarding China has seemed destined to shift its focus from trade and economics to defense and national security.

The array of arguments in this debate was already becoming clear in the spring and summer of 2001, helped along by the EP-3 crisis of the spring. From one side of the spectrum have come the warning alarms of those whose mission is to awaken Americans to the clear and present danger of a militarily robust and aggressive China, willing and ready to strike at US interests and increasingly animated by popular fury over perceived US insults. From the other side of the spectrum have come familiar but powerful calls for economic mobilization against the unimaginable economic threat implicit in China's sheer numbers: lost jobs, lost economic preeminence, a lost future for America's children.

The darkness in Americans' concern with China in recent years, then, has been the outgrowth not only of the visible changes that

have taken place within China since Tiananmen, but of an era in which Americans in many walks of life looked with feelings of growing uncertainty at the intrusion of unfamiliar forces into their lives. Without claiming that those whose fears of China popped so urgently into view over the past decade were simply imagining phantoms, we must see that the currency of the China threat was also a manifestation of a national preoccupation with pervasive, often hidden, dangers—a preoccupation that itself went largely unexamined.

### China in perspective

It is far too soon to determine where the lethal reality of terrorist violence will come to rest in the fabric of American life, and how that peril will change Americans' perceptions of other dangers. But perhaps we can make a couple of post-September 11 observations about how Americans might deal with the reality of our complex engagement with China.

First of all and most broadly, the nation is not well served by wallowing in a muddy pool of undefined fears. This, I think, is what Roosevelt was saying when he called on Americans to overcome the paralyzing trepidation that the early years of the Depression had spread.

Second, while some web enthusiasts may enjoy cruising through the conspiracy/threat sites, where they can find, linked together by plausible pieties, the confirmation of their worst nightmares, the nation and its government must establish a reasoned consensus about what threats are more important, immediate, and dire than others.

Third, if we should not bury our heads in the sand with regard to the threats we face, neither should we fail to recognize and act on the opportunities and positive possibilities before us. In the case of China, we have to remember, for example, that in the very week that saw fuel-laden airliners tearing into America's most prominent buildings in an act of ultimate lawlessness, the world's trading nations finalized their agreements with China on PRC entry into the global rules-based trading system, the WTO. Concerns over China's future behavior must also acknowledge the many ways in which China, as a nation seeking to strengthen its domestic institutions and to participate fully in the institutions of global engagement, offers opportunities to the United States.

With the brutal attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Americans' sense of insecurity is bound to deepen, at least for a while. Economic decompression won't help, either. The China threat may rise in the hierarchy of American worries, or it may drop. No serious analysis of the future of US-China relations, including analysis by the business community, should pretend that there is nothing even to ponder in the realm of security concerns between the United States and the PRC. Bald predictions that the formation of a global antiterrorist alliance will forever bury the many frictions that have rocked US-China relations since 1989 are premature.

But the possibility of a more positive rebalancing of *each* country's popular and official view of the other is now at hand. That rebalancing, so difficult to achieve and maintain, is nevertheless worth working for. 完