

U.S. Ambassador to China Assesses Situation in Wake of Trade Vote

by William Jones

At a June 2 ambassador's briefing at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the Asia Society, Adm. Joseph Prueher (ret.), the U.S. Ambassador to China, had an opportunity to give his analysis of the situation in Beijing.

Speaking shortly after the House of Representatives passed Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China, on May 24, Prueher was generally upbeat in his comments. Comparing his present post as Ambassador to his former job of landing fighters on an aircraft carrier, Prueher made note of the precision and coolness needed to land an airplane on a carrier deck even with fair weather and a calm sea.

"A discrepancy of a few feet one way or the other becomes decisive," he observed. "Now, factor in darkness, waves that pitch the carrier up and down, and other disturbances. The possibility of landing in that situation is then much more difficult." All of this was to imply that the "stridency" that often arises in the debate over China, propelled by the machinations of the notoriously anti-China "Blue Team" lobby, financed by billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife, makes it much more difficult to keep the important U.S.-China relationship on track.

When one young major asked Ambassador Prueher about the volatile rhetoric that often appears in People's Liberation Army publications, Prueher replied, "China is not a monolith. And besides, when you read some of our own press, you would also tend to think that their statements on China are pretty 'hard-line.'"

Recent "surprises" haven't made things easier for the new Ambassador. China's publication of its White Paper on Taiwan, indicated heightened concern in Beijing over the renewed impulse toward independence by Taiwan, and the rumblings around that—as well as the surprise election of



U.S. Ambassador to China Adm. Joseph Prueher (ret.).

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shui-bian as President—all combined to create some obstacles, he indicated. And then there was the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, on May 7, 1999, which all but put a stop to many of the U.S.-Chinese exchanges. The reverberations of that particular incident are still being felt in Beijing, the Ambassador admitted. The Ambassador was correct as far as he went: U.S. insistence that the bombing of the Chinese Embassy was "accidental," has never been taken seriously by the Chinese authorities, and still serves to feed strong suspicions over U.S. motives.

Nevertheless, Prueher was confident that things were moving in the right direction. "The fundamental goal of our policy is a secure and stable Asia-Pacific region, and this can't be done without the participation of China," he said. He noted the important role that China has played in brokering a dialogue with the opaque government in North Korea, with which China has historically had fairly close ties.

PNTR: A Weathervane

The PNTR vote was considered a weathervane of U.S. intentions. Had that bill been defeated in the House, its failure would have cast a pall over U.S.-China relations. One questioner at the June 2 briefing, an old China hand, expressed his surprise at the May 24 telephone call from President Jiang Zemin to President Clinton on the day of the House vote, in which Jiang thanked Clinton for his role in getting the measure passed. "The call was unprecedented," Prueher agreed. "It came up suddenly in a 24-hour period. Not only that: In a meeting with Prime Minister Zhu [Rongji] before the vote was even taken, he asked me to extend his thanks to President Clinton for the effort he had made in trying to get the PNTR extended to China."

Prueher also noted that, despite initially strident tones in discussing Taiwan and the victory of the independence-minded DPP, the Chinese government now seems prepared to move forward with the cross-Strait dialogue. Beijing has also restarted the important non-proliferation talks and the military-to-military exchanges with the United States, he said; they had been scuttled in the aftermath of the bombing of China's Embassy in Belgrade.

"China has many problems to deal with as they enter the WTO [World Trade Organization]," said Prueher, naming in particular the problem of non-performing loans, environmental concerns, the problem of state-owned enterprises, and corruption. "The adjustment by China to the new WTO membership will take years, if not decades," he continued. "Lectures and threats are, in that situation, not at all constructive." Returning to his aircraft carrier analogy, Prueher added, "It is a 'bad news' situation if we have to deal with conflicts all the time. We have important strategic interests to deal with in our dialogue with China, with arms control, the world financial system, the environment. There are many variables involved. We must therefore keep any necessary 'corrections' small."