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ADVISORY BOARD CONFERENCE ON AMERICA'S
ROLE IN THE WORLD: CHARTING NEW WATERS

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2002

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The Advisory Board met in the Atrium Ballroom of the Ronald Reagan Building,
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., at 9:35 a.m.

PANELISTS:

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI
Trustee, Counselor and
Advisory Board Co-Chair, Chairman

ANTHONY CORDESMAN
Senior Fellow and Burke Chair
in Strategy

BATES GILL
Freeman Chair in China Studies

TERESITA SCHAFFER
Director, South Asia Program

SIMON SERFATY
Director, Europe Program

CELESTE WALLANDER
Director and Senior Fellow
Russia/Eurasia Program

DR. GILL: Thank you very much, Dr. Brzezinski, and thank you very much to the organizers to speak with you today. I'm finding myself in a very peculiar and odd position as a China watcher. Had this been a year ago, this meeting, I think perhaps I would have been in the position of being as pessimistic and troubled by our relationship with China, as we've heard from some of these other important bilateral relationships which the United States has with the region.

Oddly, since last September 11th, it seems as if, in comparison at least to what we've just heard, our relations with China have nearly fallen off the radar screen and even appear to be rather good. So, it's been a strange reversal of fortunes in some ways, for our relationship with China, but I don't want to leave you with the impression that I think that this is a long-standing for the future set of events. In fact, I think we have very many serious difficulties at a geostrategic level, through which we will have to work over the coming five, ten, or twenty years, but my basic thesis is that the events of September 11th, last year, in reversing, as it were, the fortunes of U.S.-China relations at least temporarily, provide us a welcome window, a welcome opportunity to reassess our relationship with China, to think more carefully and wisely about the geostrategic differences we do have with China, and hopefully manage them in a way that not only avoids controversy and conflict, but hopefully, as we've attempted to do for so many decades, continue the effort of drawing China into the international community as a constructive actor.

Let me just try to wrap that up in three basic points. Point one. As I just noted, we have a number of very important what I call "contrasting visions" between the

United States and China, which need to be very carefully managed over the longer-term.

Let me just tie off several of them.

Strategic nuclear relations. As we are placing a greater and greater emphasis on strategic defense, China is placing a greater and greater emphasis on strategic offense, as it considers its overall security posture. We are going to have troubles working through this dynamic, as we see a missile buildup and a nuclear weapons modernization in China and we continue to pursue our strategic defenses. I don't think it's going to be a classic offense-defense race, but it's one that we will have to carefully watch and manage.

Second, our approach to alliances and regional security mechanisms is quite different than that of China. China continues to bridle, I think, overall, at the role of our bilateral security alliance system in East Asia, and has made efforts -- most recently, in the last several years -- to develop new regional security approaches which are in contrast with the traditional American approach of bilateral alliances.

We also have quite large differences over issues of sovereignty, intervention, and the use of force, and even most recently the telephone call from President Bush to President Jiang Zemin to discuss the issue of Iraq, this issue was at its core. I don't think we can expect a great deal of Chinese enthusiasm for our efforts vis-a-vis Iraq, or any other effort unilaterally or outside of the United Nations to attempt intervention and the use of force against sovereign countries, and there will be differences over this over time between our two countries.

And, of course, nonproliferation continues to be a problem between the United States and China, and I think all the more so since September 11, in that we have

wisely focused on the link between proliferation of sensitive technologies on the one hand, and their possible use by substate or terrorist actors on the other. In this light, our perennial nonproliferation problems with China become all the more problematic. Of course, in several of these issues that I've just noted, the Taiwan question is imbedded. Certainly, on the questions of the missile buildup, on the question of our alliances, and on the question of sovereignty intervention and the use of force, Taiwan remains central to all of these issues.

And as you may have already sensed from my comments, even in the post-September 11th environment, while I say that there has been some breathing space created for the U.S.-China relationship, I would also argue that this environment has not necessarily eased these geostrategic differences. Indeed, in some cases, they may be exacerbated. For example, the increased role of our alliances, the increased American presence throughout Asia I think can only be a matter of some longer-term concern for China, as we prosecute the war on terror.

My second point would be this. In spite of these contrasting visions and the difficult menu that they certainly present for the United States and China to work through over the next ten to 20 years, I still believe that there is a near- to medium-term window of opportunity that we can continue to work through in order to manage these issues more carefully and, at the very least, postpone a more serious confrontation with China over the longer-term. Why?

First and foremost, I think, because China is looking inward. China's key concerns are those on its domestic agenda. It's overall desire to see its domestic environment at peace -- and that's going to require an international environment at peace --

and I think that solely is going to be one of the most important reasons why we should expect China to be relatively non-provocative, in spite of its many concerns with the United States and our presence within its orbit. And we can see China's remarkable recent diplomatic efforts to improve relations with virtually all of its neighbors as evidence of its attempts to assure that its international environment is at peace so it can focus on its extremely challenging domestic set of problems -- going through an important political transition to the so-called "new generation" of Chinese leaders, moving forward in an economic integration -- and can it really succeed in a post-WTO environment in competing in the international business and trade environment?

I have my doubts on some issues, maybe most importantly, domestically, China's unprecedented and sweeping social economic transformation unfolding in ways that we simply cannot predict their outcome; widening gap in income between the rich and poor in China, environmental degradation on the rise, rise in crime and corruption in China, HIV/AIDS a major and growing problem in China, which they have not stepped up to face.

China is becoming an increasingly old society, in part due to the long-standing one-child policy. Overall, we see in China today, while we often call it a "rising power", in fact, China is, to use the political science jargon, a "weak state". China is an increasingly weak state internally in its ability to implement state capacity to deal with the enormous socioeconomic problems it has. It is increasingly weak.

Point three: Because our agenda with China has become so much more complex, variegated and complicated, it only makes sense that our policy approach to China

should be exactly that. But, unfortunately, I think, I find we continue to treat China in extremely naive and black-and-white terms.

If we are going to successfully manage this important transition over the next ten or 20 years in our relationship with China, we need to take several important steps. First, we need to be far more cognizant of the increasing plurality of Chinese society, this mix of transformation that's ongoing inside China, and put aside what I think needs to be put aside, the simplistic monolithic assessment of the Chinese body politic.

Secondly, we need to recognize that the principal concerns of Chinese leaders today are these internal problems. Now, they may want to include Taiwan as one of those internal problems, but I would even set that aside as a primary concern of the Chinese leadership at the moment. The strategic problems for Chinese leadership today are managing the socioeconomic transformation in a way that keeps the Chinese Communist Party in power.

What do I think keeps Jiang Zemin awake at night? I don't think it's missile defense. I don't even think it's Chen Shui-Bian and his comments about Taiwan independence. I don't think it's the War on Terror. What keeps Jiang Zemin awake at night is wondering, can he lead this country through its domestic transformation in a way that the Party remains on top? In that sense, these are what China thinks are strategic in nature.

Therefore, because of this transformation going on in China, because of the focus which the Chinese, I think, will have largely on these internal challenges, our policy towards China then needs to widen and refocus our strategic lens, as we try to craft our China policy. We risk looking in the wrong direction.

If we define our policy towards China on the basis of Taiwan and proliferation or something as narrow as that, I think we risk looking in the wrong direction and missing some enormous opportunities we have in the United States to bring about the kinds of changes in China which would be favorable to U.S. interests. At a minimum, we need to integrate in our policy towards China, the implications of China's successful political economic regional diplomacy towards its neighbors and as it rises regionally as a successful economic engine and, on the other hand, bring greater focus in our policy to understanding what's going on inside China.

I'll just end with one comment. I think the future of U.S.-China relations will be defined most by what happens inside China in the next ten to 15 years, rather than the other sorts of external strategic issues which often consume our attention here in Washington. Thanks very much.

(Applause.)