

FOCUS ON...

Sino-American Relations:

China into Space – And the US Back to Earth?

The Year 2003 will probably be remembered also as the year when finally China hit every newspapers' and broadcasting news' headlines because of this country's dramatic-growth impact on everyday life. These few lines will focus on two important recent events which have profound implications for China-US relations- namely, China's first man into space and Beijing's Prime Minister recent visit to Washington, DC.

On October 15th *Shenzhou 5* took off from the Jiuquan satellite-launch pad in the Gobi desert, spent 21 hours in space, went round the Earth 14 times and left an unmanned module behind in orbit before landing in Inner Mongolia. The spacecraft *Shenzhou 5* (which means "divine vessel" or "divine land") brought into space Colonel Yang Liwei- the first Chinese to go out there amid the stars.

China started to think of a space programme in the 1960s, but then the country did not have the financial resources nor presented the necessary political conditions- the party was in fact in the middle of the devastating agitation of the Cultural Revolution - in order to develop successfully a manned mission into space. It was only in 1992 that Mr Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the Communist party, approved "Project 921", which was

designed to build the *Shenzhou* series of spacecraft and to upgrade the Long March satellite-launching rockets. In just ten years, the Chinese - building on the Russian *Soyuz* projects and achievements - managed to design their own home-grown technology.

The USD 2 billion project - though it is far from clear if this is the cost of the whole programme or just of the spacecraft and the launch vehicle - has also military components. Experts on the Chinese space programme say that previous *Shenzhou* missions had carried photo-reconnaissance equipment and probes that could spy on military-radar transmissions. Of course, the Chinese leadership is well aware that - as the American and Russian experiences have shown - space activities do not necessarily require the presence of man, and probably the next *Shenzhou* missions will adequately consider the possibility to obtain the same results with unmanned technology. In fact, China's leap forward into space has a lot more to do with drawing the world's attention to an emerging status of superpower than with allowing technology spillovers to the civilian field - FDI and trade do that job better these days. Since America has always refused China's bid to take part to the International Space Station programme, Colonel Yang's trip might put some pressures on the US. Moreover, the country is willing to improve satellite communications, broadcasting facilities and Earth observation missions without depending too much on American technology. The move, last September, to join the EU Galileo's efforts to implement by 2008 an alternative global-positioning system (GPS) goes precisely in that direction.

The launch of *Shenzhou 5* was also aimed at impressing the internal

audience. Mr Hu Jintao himself, China's newly chosen President and Party secretary, was present at the countdown. Official and semi-official media praised the "victorious conclusion" of an event which appears to re-enforce the great-power status of a nuclear country. In fact, the Party seems more concerned with domestic instability than with a change in its rather passive attitude in international affairs that has been on stage for the last ten years or so. When faced with such potential breakaway forces such as the huge increase of the wealth gap between the coast and the inner provinces, or such legitimacy threats as the growing dimension of lay-offs in State-owned Enterprises, the Party has always been ready to play with great events in order to inspire national pride in otherwise disillusioned citizens. In fact, China's leaders might be willing to downplay the nationalistic card on the international arena, but the rest of the world could nonetheless face a China which stands higher - as another (quite different) trip recently showed.

On December 9th, Mr Wen Jiabao - China's Prime Minister - received a warm welcome by President Bush at the White House. In fact, since September 11th, China has been co-operating with the United States in fighting terrorism - at least because international terrorism has been also a readily-available excuse to quash Muslim Uighurs' separatism in the western province of Xinjiang. Admittedly, China opposed America's war against Iraq, but its UN veto was probably treated as an act *de rigueur diplomatique*- "we cannot seriously ask China to say something different", they must have thought in Washington-, and after all it was harmless because it did not prevent any America's move. On the other hand, China's new involvement in six-way talks with North

Korea has been widely appreciated by the United States. The Administration, concerned with the Iraqi military occupation, does not want to face a major crisis in East Asia. This was also probably the reason why Mr Bush, forgetting his electoral promises and pre-September 11th speeches, changed somehow America's attitude - if not policy- *vis-à-vis* the Taiwan issue.

For thirty years "strategic ambiguity" has been the cornerstone of the US policy on the subject. It basically states that America wants a peaceful resolution of the controversy between Beijing and Taipei while failing to clearly indicate which means Washington could use should one of the two parties change unilaterally the status quo - i.e., Taiwan enjoying a *de facto* independence and China considering the island as a mainland's renegade province. Conservative America, and Mr Bush himself, have always been critical of the so-called "One China policy" - i.e. a refusal to give any support to an internationally recognised and independent state of Taiwan - and strongly in favour of military aid against any external aggression. The Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (2000) went precisely in this direction, and Taiwan is all the more defensible now that, being a fully-fledged though Asian-style- democracy, it can be presented as the right ideological partner.

Instead, while formally sticking to the long-standing "One China policy" Mr Bush declared that his administration would oppose any attempts "unilaterally to change the status quo". Beijing had previously criticized Mr Chen Shui-bian's (Taiwan's President) plan to hold a referendum next March calling upon China to dismantle the 500 or so missiles on the Fujian coast

aimed at Taiwan. The Communist leadership considers such a move an unacceptable move towards independence, and for this reason Mr Bush's words were celebrated in the mainland as a tougher stance against Taiwan. Of course, neo-conservatives within the Administration were reportedly furious.

In the same mood were congressmen who stressed how little space the talks devoted to the USD 125 billion bilateral trade deficit; to China's "unfairly low" currency and "unfair" trading system which is currently blamed for the loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States. Although these concerns are widely considered as economic non-sense, they are politically hot issues that Mr Bush in a re-election campaign will be forced to return his attention to, even if big American companies with a stake in China are starting to lobby louder than the group of diffuse small and medium manufacturing firms which are losing jobs.

"We are working together in the war on terror", Mr Bush said without mentioning China's firm "No Support" to neo-con policies in Iraq and elsewhere. Mr President said: "We are partners in diplomacy" and "full members of a world trading system". Mr Wen was obviously delighted. But if China's involvement in European Galileo's alternative GPS threatens US national security, if - as it seems very likely for Taiwan's internal political reasons - Taipei will hold a referendum aimed at contrasting China, and if the economic recovery is found to be temporary and unsustainable in the long run, then Sino-American relations will certainly be deemed to turn worse. China's space projects would certainly continue, but the honeymoon could be over, and Mr Bush would probably be forced to come back to Earth.