Dialogues and Their Implications in Sino-American Relations*

ROBERT G. SUTTER

This article briefly reviews the role exchanges and dialogues have played in U.S.-China relations since President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, and examines in more detail the process, significance and outlook of recent dialogues. The overall record of dialogues shows that they are important instruments in the policy “tool kit” of each side to deal with salient areas of common interests and disagreement that have broadened in scope as a result of China’s rising international importance and the increasing salience of an ever wider range of issues in U.S.-Chinese relations in the 21st century. Both sides view these policy instruments positively: they serve as shock absorbers in periods of difficulty, provide the basis for actual or potential channels of informal communication in times of crisis, and promote efforts to broaden common ground in U.S.-Chinese relations. The checkered record of military exchanges is among the array of evidence showing the reality that dialogues are subservient to the respective interests of the leaders on either side. Dialogues are instruments of improved relations but they do not compel improvement, which

ROBERT G. SUTTER is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. His earlier full-time position was Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University (2001-2011). He was the Senior Specialist and Director of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service. He also served as the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the U.S. Government’s National Intelligence Council, and as the China Division Director at the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research. He can be reached at <sutter@gwu.edu>.

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at bottom is decided by policy elites in Beijing and Washington. After forty years of efforts to normalize U.S.-China relations, those elites cooperate closely on a wide range of issues but also reflect wariness toward one another that underlines important diverging interests and differences dividing the two powers.

KEYWORDS: United States; China; dialogues; motives; process.

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Dialogue has been a central feature of Sino-American relations since the United States and China opened relations beginning under President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong (毛澤東) in the early 1970s. Often broad ranging interchanges between elites in the two administrations have been complemented by legislative exchanges and interactions between other influential government and non-governmental groups. After the United States cut back a variety of government exchanges with China following the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, the two governments eventually saw the wisdom in using a few and over time more bilateral dialogues in order to reaffirm common ground and deal constructively with differences. Dialogues developed in an ad hoc way and came to be more formally structured. The two sides focused at first on such sensitive issues as human rights, but broadened the scope to entail over 60 dialogues by the first decade of the twenty-first century, capped by the annual wide-ranging leadership exchanges seen in the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue initiated in 2009.¹