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Overview

The four questions posed by the Commission about U.S. interaction with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) imply that by adjusting its diplomatic tactics the United States can enhance the degree to which Beijing provides what Washington wants. The statement that follows arises from alternate premises. It encourages the Commission to:

- recalibrate expectations of both the U.S and the PRC;
- reconsider the efficacy of publicly scolding the PRC; and
- reassert the power of American leadership by example.

It concludes by suggesting that the Commission consider a means to acculturate new members of Congress and their staffs to the U.S.-China relationship.

If these walls could speak

The prodigious work of this Commission and its cousin—the Congressional-Executive Commission on China—may constitute the most probing and wide-ranging public discussions of the relationship between the United States and the PRC since the initiatives of the American Friends Service Committee in 1964 and the hearings—conducted in this very building—by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 1966 (Madsen 1995). Accordingly, I greatly value the privilege of contributing to these deliberations. I am especially pleased that the Commission is seeking thoughts about ways to enhance the productivity of the Sino-U.S. relationship, charging this panel to address “Prospects for U.S.-China Political Cooperation and Diplomacy.”

The Commission has invited comment about how the U.S. can attain its diplomatic objectives while encouraging international behavior and domestic transformations by Beijing that are compatible with American visions and values. Implicitly, the Commission asks: What posture ought the United States adopt in dealings with the PRC to ensure the maximization of America’s interests?

During seven days in March, 1966, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by J. William Fulbright, addressed the same fundamental question. Against the backdrop of war in Vietnam, Senator Fulbright was anxious about what was perceived, then, to be a “fatal expectancy” in Beijing as well as in Washington that armed conflict would soon erupt between the U.S. and the PRC (*The New York Times* 1966). His aim was to avert calamity by illuminating for

Americans the reasons for China's behavior—the sources of its conduct, if you will (X [Kennan] 1947).

Then, as today, China was regarded by many Americans as an abstraction and often exoticized or objectified. Then, as today, some Americans willfully surrendered to the intoxicating mystique of the PRC's "Chineseness," unwittingly perpetuating the self-affirming narrative offered by PRC elites that the Chinese state is exceptional. The capabilities and intentions ascribed to the PRC were, and are, frequently distorted in the minds of Americans by unexamined beliefs and pervasive ignorance of China. Today, as in 1966, it is essential that American policy-makers resist the impulse either to exaggerate or minimize the threats the PRC poses to objectives this nation prizes. Likewise, it is vital to suppress both excessive hope and unwarranted fear as one considers how much cooperation with Beijing can be reasonably expected or induced.

The Committee Senator Fulbright chaired took testimony from the nation's most prominent scholars of China and international politics during hearings that were televised. The stated intent of the enterprise was to educate Congress and the public (United States 1966). Although the concerns of that day—chiefly, the war in Southeast Asia—permeates the record, the dialogue between Senators and witnesses is instructive, offering still ample insight to persistent patterns in the Sino-U.S. relationship. Naturally, the passage of years finds us now in utterly different circumstances, rendering some elements of those hearings quaint, at best. Yet, the elemental wisdom emerging from the transcript about the essential comparability of Chinese and American objectives, the competitive nature of relations between these two hegemonic polities, and the limits of American power, endures.

Beyond Senator Fulbright's impulse to edify was a determination to prompt review of what had been a U.S. policy of containment and isolation of the PRC. Witnesses were, broadly speaking, polarized. Most advocated the moderation of U.S. policies, some adamantly opposed it.

Then, as today, China was a polarizing subject. Since 1949, one's regard for the welfare and security of the United States—indeed, one's loyalty as a citizen of this republic—has often been presumed to flow from the posture one adopts toward the PRC. Attitudes toward China have been, and may still be, viewed as an acid test of one's patriotic bona fides, rather than seen as reflecting one's preexisting intellectual disposition revealed in one's tolerance of or aversion to uncertainty, propensity for optimism or pessimism, inclination to equanimity or alarmism, predisposition to complexity or simplification, and proclivity to accept moral ambiguity or cling to moral clarity.

Indeed, it may be that those of us who study about China more frequently contend about matters of interpretation than about the facts, themselves. Our differing interpretations lead to contrasting assertions about the PRC and what constitutes a coherent U.S. policy toward it. In the end, though, this may say

more about our competing visions of the proper role for the U.S. abroad—visions that emphasize different facets of American national identity—than about China.

What, then, is the relevance of hearings now four decades past to the problems confronting the U.S. today and the questions posed by this Commission? A central theme of the 1966 hearings was whether war with China might be averted by drawing the PRC into the international community, extending to it diplomatic recognition, and admitting it to the United Nations. The hearings were a pivotal step in adjusting public attitudes toward the PRC. Some few years afterward, the PRC was admitted to the UN and a framework for normalizing Sino-U.S. relations was forged. Thereafter, the PRC became more fully integrated into the international community, prompting some observers to herald the moderating effects of interdependence and globalization on Beijing's international behavior.

This Commission was born in the welter of sentiment associated with whether to support the admission of the PRC to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and grant it Permanent Normal Trading Relations, steps that advocates suggested would push “China in the direction we want it go—toward a more open society, expanded rule of law, and further integration into the community of nations (Larson 2000; The Nixon Center 2000).” It was argued that “the more China is integrated into international organizations and agreements—whether the WTO or the UN—the more likely the U.S. and China will be able to work together constructively, and the less likely we will find ourselves confronting one another across a hostile divide (Shirk 2000).” Yet, we find ourselves today vexed by the consequences of the very engagement of China that was once proclaimed to be the path toward greater cooperation and comity. In that regard, we are still disconcerted by the specter of confrontation with the PRC, albeit differently than Senator Fulbright was in 1966.

The most urgent concerns of the United States still pertain to the possibility that the PRC may threaten American national security or interests seen as affecting a sense of security. There are abiding worries, too, that inequitable trade and financial practices give the PRC undeserved advantages over the U.S. Understandably, the PRC has exploited every opportunity to enrich itself and has devoted an increasing share of the wealth it generated to make itself feel more secure, buying and building military capabilities that many in the U.S. now find menacing. If the policy of containment that operated in the cold war was seen as leading the U.S. and the PRC to the brink of war and the policy of bounded engagement that has operated since arouses comparable anxieties about China as a threat, then where have we gone wrong? Is it the case that the U.S. and the PRC are destined to conflict regardless what posture Washington adopts toward Beijing?

This, it seems, is the engine of disquiet. Of late, ominous signals prompt some observers to conclude that the two states are on a course for collision. Now, as in 1966, there is a need to stand back and question fundamental attitudes and habits that have led to this juncture. As two hegemonic polities, the U.S. and the

PRC may be destined to compete. This is not simply the outgrowth of the PRC's rapid economic development. It is more deeply embedded in the identity of the two states and the role each has played and seeks to play in the international domain, originating in factors that predate the PRC's double-digit economic expansion. That the two states may be clinched in competition, though, need not result in violence nor does it demand that one of the two prevails absolutely over the other. Managed sensibly, competition can be the impetus for industry, improvement, and differentiation.

Great Expectations

If we are to regard ourselves as a grown-up nation . . . we must, as the Biblical phrase goes, put away childish things; and among these childish things the first to go . . . should be self-idealization and the search for absolutes in world affairs: for absolute security, absolute amity, absolute harmony.

George F. Kennan (1961)

Beyond all else, one must measure and manage one's expectations. If the United States seeks in its dealings with the PRC "absolute security, absolute amity, absolute harmony," it shall be perpetually disappointed. For the most part, advocates of engaging the PRC have been correct that efforts to integrate China more deeply into the international community—as opposed to isolating it—has been accompanied by reform and change in the PRC of the sort most critics of Beijing would seek. One only need juxtapose present conditions to those that inhered four decades ago to see how great are the changes. From that vantage, the PRC may be on the "right" course, although its progress may be both more protracted and less direct than one would wish.

However, integration has not resulted in a comprehensive transformation of the PRC. It is not, nor does it manifest any wish to become, a liberal democracy that abides all the precepts that Americans are wont to see as international norms. More importantly, the principal drivers of what Americans may view as salutary reforms in China stem from within the PRC and were not imposed from without. On balance, then, the United States and the PRC enjoy today far greater security, amity, and harmony in their relationship than they customarily have.

In the context of the past several decades, U.S.-China diplomacy—the myriad interactions and relations between representatives of the two governments— is better now than it has ever been and appears to be steadily improving in ways our political forebears could only have imagined. Certainly, the United States and the PRC have now more intense and more widespread connections than they did when Senator Fulbright held hearings on U.S. policy toward "mainland China." Surely, American institutions, enterprises, and individuals have greater opportunity for encounters with, greater access to information about, and more

incentive to interact with the PRC than ever in the past. The same might be said of their counterparts in China.

Indeed, as compared with the state of diplomatic interaction in 1976 (when the Cultural Revolution was petering out, Mao Zedong dying, and progress toward normalizing diplomatic relations apparently stalled), or in 1986 (when the PRC first applied to join the WTO), or in 1996 (when the PRC's missile exercises impelled President Clinton to dispatch two aircraft-carrier battle groups to the area around Taiwan), diplomatic interaction in 2006 was far more robust and productive. There are competing interpretations of why this may be the case, which for the sake of brevity are not elaborated in this statement. It is worth adding, though, that the perception of improved relations is one that PRC elites seem to share, their abiding misgivings about the U.S. notwithstanding (Yang 2006).

That is not to say, though, that the answer to the Commission's first question ("What is the state of U.S.-China diplomacy?") is: entirely satisfactory. Indeed, the second part of that question ("What specific recommendations can be made to improve U.S. diplomacy and political dialogue with China in the next five years?") suggests that the Commission is not content. More was expected.

It is worth observing that diplomacy is a means, not an end. The United States is graced with many superbly skilled, well-informed, and energetic diplomats. However, without a sound policy and reasonable expectations of them, there is little they can do to "deliver." Concerned, as it is, about the implications of the PRC's development for American economic and security interests, the Commission might find merit in considering its unspecified premises by asking: What are U.S. expectations where the PRC is concerned, how sensible are they, and what are the best methods for realizing those ambitions?

The point is, diplomacy should serve tangible policy objectives that flow from sober considerations of one's expectations, issue by issue. Moreover, it may not be reasonable to expect that the deficiencies in diplomatic interaction can be overcome in the absence of mutual trust. Confidence can be cultivated—as can transitory and instrumental cooperation—but is unlikely to endure in a relationship where one party is perceived as lacking esteem for the legitimacy of the other.

Since diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing were normalized in 1979, the character of the Sino-U.S. relationship has rarely been entirely "normal." One reason for this—there are many—is that the U.S. has engaged in a none-too-subtle crusade to change China. Indeed, the determination to upgrade the PRC's regard for and protection of human rights, to prompt economic and political liberalization, to encourage the embrace of civic virtues akin to those we value at home, and to press Beijing to conform to international practices that support a system from which the U.S. derives benefits is a mission that Americans took to uncritically. How awkward, though, to adopt as the basis of a

bilateral relationship the determination to change the other fellow, while resisting with utmost vigor the notion that one's opposite may have reason to seek moderation of one's own nature.

To be sure, the reflexive will to denounce China for failing to change has been quieted of late, but by no means silenced. It appears a fundamental outgrowth of the American character. It is deeply embedded in the history of U.S. relations with China, predating the establishment of the PRC. However, if this impulse to change China remains an animating feature of the U.S. posture toward the PRC, it may be unreasonable to expect, in addition, that political dialogue will improve. Seeking the transformation of the PRC so that it behaves in a way that is consistent with American interests and encouraging the adoption of American civic values may be incompatible with the sort of wholesale improvement of diplomatic dialogue that the Commission apparently wishes to see.

To improve dialogue—by which, one assumes, the Commission means the attainment of U.S. objectives through dialogue—one must listen, acknowledge, and be prepared to compromise. If the U.S. is unwilling or unable to do those things, it is unlikely to see the improvements toward which it strives. Where reforms in China are at issue, the dialogue must also take account of the fact that while Americans have sought to change China, so have the Chinese—even if their notion of what constitute desirable outcomes differs from our own.

Perhaps the avenue for greater diplomatic success is encouraging the leadership of the PRC to see value in the transformations that the U.S. seeks—to persuade them that our aims are in their own interest. To change behavior, the persuasive power of enticement may outweigh the benefits of a fastidious accounts of deficiency delivered in a reprimanding tone. As Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, wrote about President Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union, to encourage change of the sort that Washington wanted it helped greatly to give the Soviets "ownership" over the process. After all, Matlock writes, "The fundamental aim of diplomacy is to convince the other fellow that what you want him to do is what he needs to do." (Matlock 1995, 2004).

An insuperable belief in the correctness of American ambitions for China may blind one to the collective perception in the PRC of the United States as an international scold. Perceptions matter and frame the attitude and demeanor of Chinese interlocutors in their daily dealings with U.S. public servants embarked on missions of dialogue, just as perceptions of the PRC reinforced by press and prattle in the U.S. may insinuate itself on the minds and temperaments of U.S. diplomats doing Washington's bidding.

Unvarnished candor demands that one consider whether this Commission is a reflection of the very problem it now wishes to solve. In the public dimension of the Commission's inquiries and in its published findings, the Commission has emphasized a particular view of the PRC that one cannot expect to go unnoticed in Beijing. Indeed, when one considers the several reports that flow from

Congressional authorizations of 2000—the annual report of this Commission, that of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, that of the Department of Defense on the Military Power of the PRC, as well as the annual report of the Department of State on Human Rights—Washington’s defensive and accusatory tone could not be more clear.

If the Commission owes its existence to a Congressional mandate that principally serves domestic political and electoral objectives, so be it. The symbolic value of shaming the PRC in hearings and publications for what Washington views as defects in Beijing’s policies or practices—even when doing so conflicts with the ambition of enhancing the fulfillment of diplomatic objectives—may be the cost of operating in a democracy. If, however, the Commission’s declared purpose—to remain cognizant of evolving threats to the economy and security of the U.S.—can be served in a less provocative fashion, perhaps it is time to reconsider how to fulfill that mandate. Surely, Congress can be informed of issues about which it ought to be concerned without undercutting progress in the diplomatic arena.

Responsible Stakeholder: Regrettably Imprecise, Self-imposed Trap

Among the terms one might wish to recall and retire from the public domain to improve the quality of diplomacy and public dialogue is “responsible stakeholder.” To be sure, when Deputy Secretary Zoellick mouthed the phrase in a speech that was, otherwise, largely unobjectionable it was probably envisaged as a masterful effort to dun without damage—the rhetorical equivalent of beating Beijing with a rubber hose (Zoellick 2005). Regrettably, this infelicitous expression—now indelibly imprinted on the public imagination and endlessly rehearsed in discussion of the PRC—conveys a discernible odor of American self-righteousness, but no clear standard. It invites each person who invokes it to project onto the term what that person may imagine to constitute sufficient responsibility, but it is also a goalpost susceptible to perpetual repositioning. How will we know that China has become a “responsible stakeholder”? Invoking the Justice Stewart formula that “I know it when I see it” will, with some justification, be dismissed as arbitrary and self-serving (United States 1964).

The Commission defines “responsible stakeholder” in its 2006 Annual Report as “a state that not only observes international norms but works to strengthen those norms.” Paraphrasing Justice Stewart, “I imply no criticism of the Commission, which . . . was faced with the task of trying to define what may be indefinable.”

But, this is a self-imposed trap.

Who defines norms and what does one do in situations where norms are yet to be established, or in which there are competing norms, or where there is a rapid transition afoot reflecting a shift in power? Beyond that, who determines what constitutes sufficient observation of these norms that a polity may be deemed a

“responsible” actor. No roster exists of states that are responsible stakeholders and, even if there were such a list, who is to specify what precisely must be done to be included on it? Reasonable international entities—states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations—may differ about the degree of responsibility that a candidate state must demonstrate. Moreover, invoking this phrase reinforces a view of the U.S. as indulging in selective criticism, tolerating double standards, and masking—with limited success—underlying parochial interests.

Even more troubling is the question: Who wants to be the first American political leader to stand and say “Congratulations, Beijing: you made it! You are now a responsible stakeholder.”? Lastly, how does one deflect criticism that the U.S. itself could do more to shore up its status as a responsible stakeholder? In Beijing there are plenty who might concur in the view that “the U.S. has failed to provide moral or political leadership in tackling the big challenges facing humankind, whether they concern global warming or the peaceful use of space. Crucially, the U.S. has been reluctant to subsume its national interests into multinational efforts to benefit the wider world (Mallet 2007).” Even in this city, one would find people who agree that “We can and should condemn China for not respecting the international rules governing these issues or negatively affecting other countries’ well-being, but we must be prepared to play by the same rules (Economy 2007).”

Deputy Secretary Zoellick’s speech is, for the most part, a commendable effort to invite the PRC to do precisely what one would want: see merit in aligning its long-term interests with those the U.S. and its allies hold dear, rather than to unsettle the system from which we all derive benefit. That said, one must acknowledge that that system is one the PRC had little hand in constructing. Mr. Zoellick stated “Responsible stakeholders . . . recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system.” The system, though, is not static. International systems are constantly in flux, responding to shifts of power among international actors. Hence, one should not be surprised that as its influence and power grow, the PRC will want to adjust the existing system to ensure that its interests are more fully represented.

Holding Beijing up to the “responsible stakeholder” yardstick was a rhetorical lapse that should not be compounded by repetition.

Issues: Fundamentally Non-fungible

The Commission asks, “How can U.S.-China cooperation on issues such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction be used to create other opportunities for cooperation in other transnational issues, such as energy security, HIV/AIDS, and counterterrorism?” This appears to presuppose that issues—the discreet policy arenas in which the state develops interests—are fungible. They are not.

States may find commonality on certain issues, not but others. The salience of

certain issues may vary over time, seeming more important at one moment than at another. Seeking satisfaction in a bilateral negotiation over issues in which each party sees value, one may use diplomacy for horse trading (I'll give you "A" if you give me "B") or hostage taking (Give me what I want on issue "A" because I have the capacity to inflict costs to you on issue "B"), or trust building (Look, in the interest of our relationship I will compromise on "A" if you will compromise on "B"). Naturally, one can aspire to trust-building, but it may more often be horse trading or hostage taking that impels states to give what they must to get what they want.

For several years, it has been said that Beijing was holding out the prospect of exercising greater leverage over Pyongyang in accordance with Washington's wishes to induce Washington to exercise greater leverage over Taipei in accordance with Beijing's wishes. As the end-game has yet to be reached with either the issue of North Korea's nuclear capabilities or resolution of the cross-Taiwan Strait controversy, it remains to be seen how successful Beijing will be with that tactic.

Piety v. Practicality

"I can think of no place where we have had much success in trying to bring a good government to people with an alien background, culturally and economically, racially, linguistically. It seems to me a very difficult undertaking."

J. William Fulbright (1966)

Finally, the Commission asks, "How might U.S. diplomacy toward China be designed to encourage greater political freedom, media independence, and respect for human rights in China?" Here, one detects the perennial clash between piety and practicality. Of course, Americans care about the promotion of human rights and democracy in China—but only as much as is strictly necessary. Those of us who care most about human rights and liberties and would have diplomacy serve these ends tend to be outgunned by others of us who care more about other things. Thus far, few of us has sacrificed much to further the values we proclaim. We flock to the aisles of our neighborhood low-budget emporium to buy imported goods at low prices regardless how heavy a price was paid by the poor souls who made them. We preach, but when our ideals and other interests collide, it seems often that those other interests prevail.

This raises the troubling question: Is the state an effective agent for the promotion of values abroad? Much as we might wish it were, the state may not be as well-suited as are foundations, private advocacy groups, religious institutions, and other non-governmental organizations to promote values. Those agencies can devote themselves with greater single-mindedness and less hypocrisy or selectivity than can a state to the advancement of significant ideals.

However, there is a potentially productive role for the state, especially the United States. To contribute to the promotion of human rights and liberties in China the U.S. should work to restore itself as beacon. There were moments in the past when America was as much a source of hope and opportunity as it was a font of shrill sermons and stern paternalistic pronouncements. We must redouble efforts to get our own house in order. To promote those values we claim are both self-evident and universal, we would do well to say less and do more.

Returning to the notion of establishing sound expectations, one must understand the limits of outside influence on internal transformations. One must accept that to endure, such transformations may require more time than most of us have patience. One must accept that although the PRC government can lift restrictions it alone cannot elevate respect for human rights. The dirty little secret is that societies tolerate different levels of violence against the person and the human rights problems of China are partly a matter of communal values. This is not to imply that one ought to blame the victim, but to acknowledge that the protection of human rights depends, in part, on communal expectations and habits, not just the behavior of the government.

Spreading the Word

Although diplomacy is entrusted primarily to the Executive branch, Congress plays a pivotal role in setting the tone of the U.S. relationship to the PRC. If advancing U.S. interests by diplomatic means is one aim of this Commission, it might consider devising a forum in which to provide incoming members of Congress and their new staffs a “crash course” about the PRC and the Sino-U.S. relationship. Considering the array and complexity of issues in which the PRC may affect the security and welfare of the United States, a modest investment in Congressional education would mitigate against the possibility that lawmakers and their staffs would otherwise learn only what lobbyists and agents of foreign governments want them to know.

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