



The Promise of Sino-American Relations
Annual Lecture in Honor of A. Doak Barnett & Michel Oksenberg
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This lecture series honors the memory of Doak Barnett and Michel Oksenberg, two of America's most eminent China scholars. I encountered both men first through their writings, then came to admire them as human beings, and finally to cherish them as friends. I feel privileged to speak at this gathering and particularly fortunate to do so in the presence of both Jeanne Barnett and Lois Oksenberg. In honoring their husbands, we honor Jeanne and Lois too.

I read my first book about the People's Republic of China in 1960, while a student at Yale University. The author was Doak Barnett. The politically correct image of China in the United States at the time was of a desperately poor and cruelly regimented country governed by a madman. Professor Barnett provided the factual corrective to this political parody.

When I later joined the U.S. Foreign Service, I discovered how important Doak had been in sustaining the integrity of China-watchers in Washington. They had been traumatized by McCarthyism and conditioned to provide "positive loyalty" to ideologically insistent politicians. His inveterate realism, tempered with optimism, helped lay the basis for replacing national pessimism about the possibility of Sino-American rapprochement with the will to attempt it. One of Doak's books was among those I loaned to President Nixon before he set out for China thirty-six years ago. The president must have liked the book because he never returned it to me despite repeated requests that he do so!

I first encountered Mike Oksenberg in 1974, through a brilliant article he wrote for "Problems of Communism" in which he proposed a novel and very persuasive taxonomy of Chinese politics that applied to both sides of the Taiwan Strait. I was so impressed with his ideas that I made a point of seeking out the author. That began a lifelong acquaintance that blossomed into friendship. Mike brought imagination and optimism about China to the Carter White House. When we commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Sino-American relations at year's end, we will celebrate a major event in world politics to which Mike was central.

The spirit of both men was indomitable, their optimism was unquenchable, and their eyes were always on the future. That brings me to the continuing promise of Sino-American relations and reminds me of how this phase of our relations began.

On a chill, gray Monday morning, exactly thirty-six years ago today, I stood on the steps of the old Hongqiao Airport terminal. I had arrived in Shanghai twenty minutes in advance of President Nixon. I had studied Chinese in Taiwan, but this was, of course, my first encounter with the Chinese mainland. My eye was drawn to a billboard that defiantly proclaimed, much as those at the airport in Taipei did at the time (with seven of the same eight ideograms), "we have friends all over the world." As Air Force One pulled up and cut its engines to refuel and take on a Chinese navigator before flying onward to Beijing, I heard a bird sing. Judging from the presence of birds but the absence of aircraft at Hongqiao, I deduced, all those foreign friends of China couldn't be conducting their comradely visits by air.

As our president and his wife deplaned for an off-camera cup of tea, I struck up a conversation with a Chinese foreign ministry official, the first I had ever met. I was, it turned out, also the first American official with whom he had ever spoken. That day, February 21, 1972, culminated in President Nixon's meeting with Chairman Mao and dinner with much of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in Beijing. It was a day of mutual discovery



for many Chinese and Americans. Not just for me and others who took part in some or all of its events, but for all whose stereotypes were blown away by the images on television.

In the past thirty-six years, China has changed so much and become so much part of the world and Sino-American relations have become so tangled in multiple intimacies that the international solitude China then enjoyed can no longer be imagined. There is no birdsong now at the Hongqiao or Pudong airports. Instead, there are hundreds of jet aircraft arriving and departing for every corner of China and the globe. Last year, China overtook the United States as the world's third-largest destination for foreign visitors. And the human ties between almost every sector of our two formerly estranged societies are now rich, ubiquitous, intricate, and warm.

Yet China and the United States began our contemporary relationship not with affection but with cold strategic calculation. The American intention was to alter the world's strategic geometry, not to change China by opening it to outside influence. Ours was a marriage between hostile parties arranged by geopolitics. It took place despite bitter disagreement on many matters and highly negative images of each other.

Today, when people think of the Shanghai Communiqué, they remember the way in which it finessed differences over the question of Taiwan's relationship to the rest of China and pointed to the need for Chinese on the two sides of the Strait to craft their own peaceful resolution of it. That language was, of course, a major achievement for both sides. But, in diplomatic history, the most innovative element of the Shanghai Communiqué was not the creative ambiguity of its language about Taiwan. It was the unprecedented candor with which the text recorded sharp differences between the United States and China on many regional and global issues.

And, in terms of the broad national security and foreign policies of our two countries, the essential paragraph was not that about Taiwan. It was our mutual acknowledgment that, while "there are essential differences between China and the United States in their social systems and foreign policies," we could and should set aside these differences in the interest of sustaining a mutually advantageous international security order and pursuing common purposes in accordance with international law and comity. I do not paraphrase by much.

Such realism and mutual respect, tempered by deference to the rules of international conduct, was a wise basis on which to open a relationship between two great nations with the capacity greatly to help or hurt each other. It also delivered the strategic results both sides intended. The essence of this approach was 求大同存小异 – preventing differences on relatively minor matters from obstructing the search for agreement on others of greater importance. Tonight I wish to focus on the implications of common interests, not areas of discord.

It would, however, be inappropriate not to acknowledge the continuing challenges posed by the two longstanding barriers to the realization of the full potential of Sino-America relations. These barriers to greater cooperation are well known. They are: first, the possibility that decisions or events in Taiwan that neither Beijing nor Washington can control could ignite a conflict in the Taiwan Strait and trigger a widening war between us that neither desires; and, second, the effects of ideological stereotypes in the domestic politics of both countries. But there is no need for me to dwell on these problems. Too much ink has already been spilled over improbable contingencies and the sometimes willful mischaracterization by each side of the other's intentions. Today there is growing reason to be optimistic about even these impediments to improved relations.

After all, to speak first of Taiwan, despite occasional moments of reckless political gamesmanship, the general trend has been toward cross-Strait integration. The net effect of Chen Shuibian's drive to reverse this trend has been to push Washington and Beijing into parallel action to preserve the prospects for peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences. To this end, each has reaffirmed the one-China principle and opposed moves from Taipei to abandon it.



A growing majority on Taiwan is coming to grips with the reality that their future depends on friendship and collaboration with the Chinese mainland and that the world will neither welcome nor endorse efforts to determine their island's status unilaterally. On this side of the Strait too, the clear working assumption is now that progress in cross-Strait relations is best achieved by mutual agreement and that this requires deference to public opinion in Taiwan as well as the mainland. And, while the limited use of force for deterrent purposes has not been ruled out, there is widespread recognition that attempting to impose reunification coercively or by conquest would be both fruitless and counterproductive.

The Shanghai Communiqué's premise that the question of Taiwan can and should be resolved peacefully by the Chinese parties to it has therefore never been more apposite. The conceptual differences between the two sides of the Strait once again appear to be narrowing. Both sides have begun anew to think creatively about how to assure peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait so that, with wisdom and patience, people on both sides of it can craft a mutually agreeable accommodation. All these factors have made the Taiwan issue less contentious between Washington and Beijing than it has been for some time. We may now be in a brief period of heightened risk, but there is growing reason for optimism.

The other major obstacle to the development of our relations, ideology, has waxed and waned over the years. At various times, anticapitalist dogma, anticommunism, the radical ideology of the Gang of Four, zeal for democracy and human rights, and other passionately held beliefs on one side or the other have stood in the way of forward progress. And yet our relations have moved forward. With time and experience, we seem to be rediscovering the pragmatic spirit of the Nixon opening of thirty-six years ago. There are many disputes between the two countries but, with few exceptions, they are to do with the specific policies of one side or the other, not insurmountable differences of principle.

Of course, our relationship is not built on shared values. This leads polemicists, both here and in the United States, to posit ideologically driven contention between us. And a few indignant ideologues are moved to diatribe. But these apostles of strife are the exception and have, so far, been utterly wrong in their predictions. What is, in fact, most surprising to someone like me, who can remember the very sharp ideological arguments of the past, is how many similarities there now are between American and Chinese views of the world and its problems.

One reason for the decline of ideology as an impediment to better relations is greatly increased contact between Americans and Chinese. On both sides of the Pacific a new generation of scholars and businesspeople has sprung up. They owe much to their elders but face no barrier to living, studying, and working in the countries they are trying to understand, travel frequently in them, have easy access to their officials, and are at home in them. Ignorant a priori reasoning about each other of the sort Doak Barnett and Mike Oksenberg combated in the United States has not vanished from either country, but it is in retreat. That is important, for both nations have changed greatly since we reencountered each other decades ago. China, in particular, has changed and continues to change with unprecedented speed. One cannot visit the same China twice. What even knowledgeable Americans think they know about China must therefore constantly be checked against the latest realities here.

The course of Sino-American relations since their normalization also gives grounds for optimism. In the perspective of decades, despite some twists and turns, it is a remarkable record of success.

Immediately after normalization in 1979, the United States had two broad objectives for our bilateral relations. We wanted to bring US-China relations to the level of mutual engagement and confidence they would have attained if we had not spent three decades in a state of mutual isolation. And we wanted to draw China into the world order



from which we had systematically excluded it during that period of non-intercourse. As it happened, these objectives coincided almost perfectly with those of China's greatest 20th Century leader, Deng Xiaoping. Vice Premier Deng sought to enlist America in his bold effort to change China. He succeeded. He believed that China could benefit from becoming what World Bank President Zoellick has called a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing world order, rather than railing against that order or trying to overthrow it. Results prove Mr. Deng to have been very much right about this too.

By the last years of the 1980s, our bilateral relations had essentially matured. With the notable exception of military cooperation and exchanges, they were able to survive and eventually recover from the setbacks of 1989. That year, the events of June 4th in Tiananmen squeezed the warmth from our ties. The collapse of the Soviet empire robbed them of their strategic rationale. And the democratization of Taiwan began to give identity politics a loud voice there.

Nonetheless, by the mid-'90s, we were able to resume addressing the second objective, the admission of China to the status of full participant in global governance. The 20th Century concluded with Sino-American agreement on Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization. China's successful adaptation of its economy to the global norms of the WTO has contributed importantly to its remarkable economic progress since then. As this century began, China's actual accession to the WTO marked a major milestone in its integration into the governing councils of the world, a process that now lacks little to complete it. Since then, China's skill in addressing security issues on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere has won global respect for its diplomacy and leadership.

Along with China's emergence as a great economic and diplomatic power has come a diversification of its international relations beyond the predominant reliance on the United States that marked the early stages of reform and opening. For China, America is no longer the measure of all things; nor is it central to all issues. This is a natural result of the maturation of Mr. Deng's reform process. In part, however, it also reflects the gradual emergence of a new world order. Today, while military capability to operate throughout the globe remains an American monopoly, other elements of power – political, economic, cultural and informational – are increasingly widely dispersed. The European Union, not the United States, is now China's largest trading partner and Chinese increasingly look to it, not the United States, for both education and political inspiration. Korean, Japanese, and other cultural influences now vie with American-inspired trends among Chinese youth. And China is forging its own vigorous pattern of cooperation with Africa, India, Latin America, the Middle East, and Russia, without reference to the United States. But, amidst all this diversification of Chinese connections to the world beyond it, relations between Chinese and Americans too continue to ramify and grow in scale and depth.

The fractal complexity of contemporary China's foreign relationships now makes it impossible to describe Sino-American relations in simple terms. They cannot be reduced to a straightforward hierarchy of a few national interests or interactions. Along with this complexity has come a fog of detail no single mind can embrace. It is very difficult to see beyond what is immediately in front of us and both sides have become accustomed to muddling along with no clear idea of where we want to go. There is nothing exceptional about this approach to managing bilateral relations. Proceeding ad hoc has enabled us to avoid conflict. Not all relationships require an agreed strategic concept. But the absence of such a concept guarantees that we miss opportunities to seize opportunities and that our interaction continues to fall well short of its potential to benefit each of us. Perhaps it is time to blow away the fog, look again at what's in this relationship for each side, and to develop a common agenda on which to move forward together.



The inauguration of a new president in the United States next year will offer an opportunity for such a mutual review. There are a growing range of issues that cannot be addressed and opportunities that cannot be seized without joint or parallel action by China and the United States. On these issues, neither country can hope to lead a successful international response without the support of the other. Such issues now embrace every element of national interest and every facet of national power. Each country can benefit from seizing the opportunity to address them in concert with the other. Both risk suffering if we lack the will to do so.

The most obvious of such issues, of course, is the linked challenges of environmental degradation and climate change. Environmental degradation is an issue that greatly worries Chinese; global warming is of rising concern to Americans. These are trends that negatively affect all humanity and the future of life on this planet. The situation calls out for leadership from both China and the United States. But neither country has been prepared to take the lead and each has described itself as unable to move unless the other moves first. This has disappointed the world. The immobility on both sides persists despite the fact that there are obvious complementarities and opportunities for trade-offs implicit in our respective conditions. This is a bilateral impasse that wise leaders in both countries can and must resolve. If our two countries move together, the world will follow.

As two of the main engines driving global growth, the prosperity of our respective economies is of interest not just to Americans and Chinese but to everyone else in the world. The squabbles we have been having about exchange rates are part of an emerging global pattern of monetary difficulties. With about one-fourth of the global economy and a much higher proportion of its debt, the United States' currency can no longer bear the burden of providing three-fifths of the world's reserves. Nor, if the United States succeeds in halting its economic hemorrhaging by restoring balance between imports and exports, will it continue to export enough of its currency to provide other countries with dollars to hold in reserve. Europe can take up some but not all of this slack; neither China nor Japan is in a position to help do so.

There is an increasingly obvious need for a new international monetary order in which all nations share burdens and benefits to global advantage. A reform proposal from China and the United States would, I am confident, be welcomed by Europe, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the other monetary great powers. The semi-annual strategic economic dialogue between cabinet-level officials in both governments, begun a year and a half ago in Beijing, provides a forum and mechanism within which we could begin to craft such a proposal.

There are other economic issues, like the revitalization of the Doha round of talks on trade liberalization, where leadership from both our countries is also essential and potentially advantageous to both. But the need for Sino-American initiative is not limited to the economic sphere.

The United States and China have serious differences about how intrusive the international community's response to domestic disorder and unrest in sovereign nations should be. Rather than engaging in mutual recrimination, we need to discuss these differences honestly and, to the extent we can, narrow them. But the fact that we differ on some matters should not prevent us from making common cause on others. Nor should it preclude our assisting in the formation of ad hoc multilateral groupings to accomplish mutually advantageous purposes. As currently constituted, the United Nations and other institutions we inherited from the last century often can no longer serve this purpose.

Some of the problems and opportunities before us are regional in nature. For example, sudden transitions on the Korean Peninsula cannot be ruled out. They have the potential to destabilize northeast Asia to the detriment of American as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Russian interests, not to mention the safety and wellbeing of Koreans themselves. Similarly, I believe, we have acquired a common interest with others in helping Central Asians enjoy



peace and development without being drawn into great power rivalry in that region. And we have repeatedly shown that we share a concern about the nuclear stand-off in South Asia. These and other regional issues have implications for China and the United States as well as those directly implicated in them. We may hope for the best but must prepare for the worst. It is none too soon to begin to create the regional security consultative and contingency planning arrangements we need to help manage possible crises at the regional level.

There is also, of course, a global dimension to some of the problems I have just cited. For instance, neither China nor the United States wants to see the further spread of nuclear weapons, whether on the periphery of China or farther afield. Yet the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty no longer provides a basis for dealing with declared and undeclared nuclear weapons states, nuclear arsenals are no longer being downsized, and the inhibitions on proliferation are steadily weakening as more and more nations seek sovereign control of every aspect of the nuclear fuel cycle. Our two nations have been cooperating with others in the effort to secure a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula but this begs the question of the larger global context. If we do not expand our cooperation to create a new and more credible nonproliferation regime with universal applicability, further proliferation is a certainty.

I could cite many additional instances of the potential for joint or parallel action by China and the United States, but – in the interest of releasing you to enjoy this night of the Lantern Festival – I will not. Let me instead conclude.

As the 21st Century nears its second decade, China and the United States have the capacity to help the world collectively to address many pressing issues, if our leaders can muster the imagination and will to do so. We both want to preserve a peaceful international environment. But we must ask ourselves: is it enough to sustain peace by coping with problems as they arise or should we seek a more harmonious world order that can actively use that peace to create a better life for ourselves and our descendants? I know how the men we honor here tonight would have answered that question. I hope that our leaders will answer it by rising to the challenge of guiding change to the advantage of both our peoples and those of other nations, great and small.

From the outset, the promise of Sino-American relations has transcended the bilateral benefits they could bring to both of us. Our interactions move the world. When linked to a broader vision they have the capacity to move it for the better. We owe it to our posterity to work together to that end.

Thank you for your polite attention.