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GORE, GINGRICH, AND CHINA: SETTING BENCHMARKS FOR U.S.–CHINA RELATIONS

(Updating *Backgrounder Update* No. 251, “A Scorecard for U.S.–China Relations,” June 12, 1995.)

On March 24, Vice President Albert Gore will arrive in Beijing for high-level meetings with Chinese officials. Shortly thereafter, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) will lead a congressional delegation to Beijing. Vice President Gore’s priority will be to prepare for Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s state visit to the White House later this year and President Bill Clinton’s state visit to Beijing in 1998. Speaker Gingrich and his colleagues will gain first-hand knowledge of China as the House of Representatives prepares for a busy year debating and deciding China policy.

Both Gore and Gingrich should carry a strong, clear message to the Chinese: China should (1) remove restrictions on religious expression; (2) coordinate its efforts with the United States to stop the flow of missiles and nuclear technology to unstable states in the Middle East; and (3) make a concerted effort to increase U.S. access to its market by making trade regulations more transparent and removing both tariff and non-tariff barriers.

THE AIMS OF SUMMITRY

As the Vice President and the Speaker prepare for their trips, Washington is embroiled in controversy on the U.S. relationship with China. The White House access granted to known Chinese arms merchants and questions about the role of the Chinese embassy in last year’s elections have reignited a debate over China and whether U.S. policy has been compromised by the unsavory, if not illegal, activities of the Clinton White House. Some Americans are asking whether Gore should be meeting with the Chinese at all.

Although these concerns are understandable, summits can be an important tool of diplomacy so long as the goal is defending the national interest. Summits should not be seen primarily as conveying prestige or respect on a foreign country, but rather as part of a broader strategy of diplomacy and deterrence. Former President Ronald Reagan’s approach to dealing with the Soviet Union has been described as “trust but verify.” The United States was willing to engage in summitry and arms agreements with the Soviets only if it could verify Soviet compliance. The strategy was twofold: As President Reagan was engaging in diplomacy with his Soviet counterpart, he also was strengthening the readiness and capability of the U.S. military. This enabled him to negotiate with the dominant threat to U.S. interests from a position of strength—a strategy that resulted ultimately in the bloodless transformation of America’s strategic foe.

The Clinton approach, by contrast, appears to be one of blind trust or all trust and no verify. The President seems uninterested in pressing U.S. concerns regarding China’s role in weapons proliferation, threatening Taiwan with nuclear-capable missiles, and other security concerns. Moreover, while embarking on a

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major diplomatic campaign with China he has cut back on investment in defense personnel and equipment. He has diminished the readiness of U.S. troops by sending them abroad on ill-defined peacekeeping missions instead of employing them to do what they have been trained to do: deter and defeat threats to U.S. security interests, when necessary, with deadly force. The Clinton Administration has chosen to engage in negotiations with China from a position of weakness. The result has been a growing lack of respect in Beijing and elsewhere for American resolve and credibility.

THE U.S. AGENDA FOR GORE AND GINGRICH: BENCHMARKS FOR U.S.–CHINA RELATIONS

The Vice President should use his visit to do more than work out the logistics for an exchange of state visits. He should set a pattern—which the Speaker and other U.S. leaders should follow—by which every high-level meeting with Chinese counterparts begins with an exchange of strategic visions. Gore and Gingrich should define U.S. interests in Asia, describe the U.S. view of China's role in the region, and state—clearly but privately—which interests the United States must defend—with force, if necessary. Then the Vice President and the Speaker should invite their Chinese counterparts to do the same. In this way, top leaders from both countries can conduct business based on strategic national interests; and should conflict occur, it will not be due to miscalculation or miscommunication.

Vice President Gore and Speaker Gingrich should publicly define the objectives of the U.S.–China relationship. Citizens of both countries have a right to know the purpose of this relationship and to hear an explanation of why it is good for their countries. The Vice President and the Speaker should identify areas for short-term progress and set the following benchmarks for measuring progress toward long-term goals:

- **How well the Chinese respect the legal rights of Hong Kong after the July 1997 takeover.** Hong Kong should be highlighted as the key benchmark for measuring China's intentions and future direction. In the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration, China promised to allow Hong Kong's people to govern Hong Kong with a high degree of autonomy in all areas except defense and foreign affairs. Recently, however, the viability of this pledge has been called into question. China has said it will abolish the Legislative Council, democratically elected in 1995, and has announced plans to amend Hong Kong's Bill of Rights and other civil liberties ordinances.

Hong Kong is a critical element in the U.S.–China relationship, and its transition to Chinese sovereignty affects U.S. security, economic, and moral interests. The lives and property of more than 35,000 U.S. citizens and 1,000 U.S. firms must be protected in the transition. Moreover, the full and independent cooperation of the future Hong Kong government must be secured to guard against the spread of dangerous weapons and technology, illegal narcotics, and pirated goods. Finally, China's treatment of free-market democracy in Hong Kong is a key indicator of its intentions toward Taiwan and other free-market democracies in Asia.

- **How China treats Taiwan.** Another key challenge in the U.S.–China relationship is Taiwan. Taiwan's progress in free-market democracy deserves international praise and support. Beijing, however, sees Taiwan as the most sensitive political issue. The U.S. message on this issue must be absolutely clear: The United States has a fundamental interest in peace and stability, and therefore will not tolerate the use of military force in resolving the independence versus reunification debate surrounding Taiwan.
- **How cooperative China is in curbing the proliferation of missiles and nuclear technology to Iran and Pakistan.** China's willingness to abide by the rules and norms of international security regimes like the Missile Technology Control Regime and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is another benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of U.S. China policy. The United States should reject any linkage between Chinese nuclear and weapons proliferation and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and should never consider trading the security of the Taiwanese people to get China to abide by international rules and norms.

- **How committed China is to removing barriers and increasing transparency in its trade regime.** The goal of U.S. policy should be to increase U.S. access to China's markets by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers and to improve legal enforcement of international commercial rules and norms within China. Trade with China supports the livelihood of more than 200,000 U.S. workers and exposes the Chinese people to Americans and their values. To support these workers, the United States should be vigilant in pressing Beijing for legal reform and greater openness. At the same time, however, the U.S. government should be cautious about expanding its interference in the right of Americans to engage in commerce and trade.
- **How much progress China makes on human rights.** Human rights abuses in China are a serious issue for U.S. policymakers. Therefore, the Chinese should expect their American counterparts to raise human rights concerns in every official meeting. The United States should give China due credit for progress on economic rights, but Beijing should realize that U.S. officials are measuring China's progress on civil and political rights according to internationally accepted standards, not just American values. Human rights problems in China are systemic and should not be measured on an individual basis. The security of Wang Dan and other activists is important, but no real progress on human rights is made by the release of dissidents. Only when legal protections of civil liberties are in place and their enforcement verified will U.S. officials be able to recognize progress in this area of the U.S.–China relationship.

CONCLUSION

The message to China's leaders during this Easter recess must be clear: Unless China responds much more constructively to U.S. concerns, support in the U.S. Congress and among the American people for the Clinton Administration's policy toward China will be lost. How China chooses to respond will largely determine whether the U.S.–China relationship moves toward increased cooperation or confrontation. The choice may be China's, but the United States has an important role to play in ensuring that it is the right one—both for the Chinese people and for the world.

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