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Secretary Clinton's Asia Trip: Getting China Right

Stephen Yates and Walter Lohman

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to China (February 20–22) caps off her groundbreaking first official trip abroad. By visiting Asia first, Clinton has provided an encouraging sign that she understands the region's importance to America's future and the central role that American leadership plays there.

In her speech to the Asia Society prior to departure, Clinton described her mission as discussing “how the United States is committed to a new era of diplomacy and development in which we use smart power...to find regional and global solutions to common global problems.” With regard to China, she emphasized “how essential it is that we have a positive, cooperative relationship.”

It is important to approach China with a strategy designed to achieve clear objectives.

As she attempts to do so, it will be useful for Clinton to consider the approach of prior Administrations. In particular, the United States would do well to return to core elements of Ronald Reagan's approach to engagement with China.

What Would Reagan Do? Reagan set the standard for engaging China in a way that demonstrated respect for the legitimate aspirations of China's people, projected absolute confidence in American ideals and power (and was prepared to use it), and welcomed cooperation with China while insisting on measurable results. He focused more on what governments do than what they say. He also clearly interpreted America's commitment on cross-Strait issues to be conditioned absolutely on the peaceful

resolution of differences, focusing on the process and avoiding discussion of outcomes.

Perhaps most important for the new Administration to consider, Reagan's approach proved that a broad majority of Americans favor sustained engagement with China so long as doing so helps to deal with the dominant security challenges facing this nation and engagement supports expansion of economic and other freedoms in China with minimal negative impact on U.S. interests elsewhere.

The Way to Engage China. To sustain broad American support for engagement with China, Clinton should:

- *Honestly evaluate Chinese “cooperation” to date.* Clinton has identified the gravest global threats confronting America as “financial instability and economic dislocation, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, food security and health emergencies, climate change and energy vulnerability, [and] stateless criminal cartels and human exploitation.” This list is fine as far as it goes. The Bush Administration was also mindful of these priorities. But before it seeks to expand a “partnership” with China, the Obama Administration should carefully examine progress on the com-

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mitments and areas of cooperation already identified. With regard to countries of greatest concern to the United States—North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Burma—the Chinese record is decidedly poor.

- ***Develop and maintain a strong, comprehensive deterrent against bad Chinese behavior.*** Is China paying a price for failing to uphold commitments or otherwise hindering U.S. global priorities? An answer to this question should define the fundamental nature of U.S.–China relations—whether the nations are partners, rivals, or something in between. The United States needs to get beyond “hedging.” And it needs to focus on more than just the military threat facing Taiwan. It must increase the price of bad Chinese behavior on a broader scale. China’s commercial and diplomatic goals in southeast Asia ought not be compatible with supporting a regime weighing down the region’s development and global orientation. Beijing’s claims to the South China Sea and border disputes with India should not be allowed to sleep quietly only to arise under more advantageous circumstances. Nor should China get away with the pretense of “responsible stakeholder” at the same time it is running diplomatic interference for the likes of regimes in Iran and Sudan.
- ***Focus on the need for China to address uncertainty about its current and future direction.*** There is a general lack of transparency in China’s domestic governance that amplifies concerns in a wide range of areas: the solvency of its financial institutions, the management of its currency, the mission behind its military modernization, whether there will be meaningful progress on civil and political rights, and the relationship China ultimately seeks with its neighbors and the U.S. The burden should be kept squarely on Beijing to be more open and to address these concerns.
- ***Encourage the expansion of economic freedom in China but recognize that prosperity alone will not lead to political freedom or regional peace.*** The Chinese people should know that the U.S. supports their desire to improve their quality of life. But with free-market reform in China essentially suspended, China’s simultaneous resistance to democracy and massive military modernization leaves open the question of whether international trade and investment will “socialize” China’s evolution into a status quo power or empower China to mount a stronger challenge to the current international system.
- ***Demonstrate respect for Taiwan’s democracy.*** For there to be a peaceful resolution to differences across the Taiwan Strait, Beijing must find a way to accommodate and appropriately engage Taiwan’s democratic system. As an example to Beijing, the U.S. needs to find ways to more openly engage Taiwan’s democratic leaders. This does not require a change of policy or head of state meetings. Senior envoys, phone and video-conferences, strategic public remarks, and less restrictive visits to the U.S. (even if not to Washington) are among the many means to consider. Such engagement should be pursued in a way that promotes Taiwan as a democracy, focuses on advancing real policy objectives, and is defensible as part of an effort to avoid conflict and promote positive development on both sides of the Strait. Nothing can be more important to setting clear parameters on relations with China than strict adherence to the word and spirit of the Taiwan Relations Act. Even as the relationship between Taiwan and China improves, it is important that America provide Taiwan the support that will allow it to determine the pace and conditions of that relationship.
- ***Exhibit strong, respectful, results-oriented leadership.*** There is no question that the U.S. and China can and must work together on many of the major issues of the early 21st century. Progress in one area does not excuse China’s shortcomings in other areas any more than it does for other countries, including the U.S. Strong leaders, like Ronald Reagan, are among the most effective in dealing with China because they respect the legitimate aspirations of the Chinese people and the responsibilities their government has to their people but at the same time are honest and straightforward about areas that need to change. Strong leaders are also effective in dealing with China because Chinese leaders

know they will benefit from cooperation and fear the consequences of disagreement or conflict.

Speak Plainly, Seek Results. In the end, the most important advice for getting China right is the simplest: speak plainly while seeking results. The new Administration should clearly communicate the kind of relationship it seeks from China, what it expects in return, and what it is prepared to deliver, both positive and negative. What is needed is a

more business-like approach rather than the one that has prevailed for far too long, one that is captive to diplomatic jargon and falls short of telling America, her friends, and even the Chinese themselves what the U.S. expects and what it is prepared to do to realize those expectations.

—*Stephen Yates is a Visiting Fellow in, and Walter Lohman is Director of, the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*