

FEATURE

Two American Women Visit Beijing:

Transformational Diplomacy or Delusion?

By Stanton Jue

We are truly going to rise or fall together

--- Hillary Clinton in Beijing in February 2009

Two powerful American women, one Secretary of State and one Speaker of the House of Representatives visited Beijing in the span of three months, February and May, 2009. The tone of their public statements gives a clear and unmistakable signal that the US. approach to China is changing from traditional emphasis on human rights and political freedom to a new tenor and style to manage the hefty issues and challenges facing our two countries.

This shift is apparently based on three assumptions: 1) The traditional approach has not been particularly effective in altering Chinese policy or behavior, 2) the rapid rise of China as an emerging global economic and political power requires a resetting of foreign policy priority; and 3) a belated recognition of political reality also calls for a softer approach in order to advance the mutual interests of the United States and China in tough economic times.

In February, Hillary Rodham Clinton initiated a new approach to China on her maiden voyage as Secretary of State. She pointedly played down human rights and political issues such as greater freedom for Tibet by saying that "we pretty much know what Beijing is going to say." However, she continued, "We have to continue to press them. Our pressing on those issues cannot interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis." This immediately stirred up



consternation and outrage from human rights groups and western media pundits.

The Washington Post editorial (2/24/09) called Clinton's statements misguided, understating the significance of her public expressions which might adversely affect the life of those fighting for freedom of expressions, freedom of religious rights and other basic liberties.

Over the past many years each visit of an American president or senior officials might result in the release of one or two dissidents to placate public outcry with no change in policy. It is my view that the Secretary's approach to China centered on candor, honesty and realism is right on track, right on target. She created conditions and opportunities for the US. and China to address the large issues such as the deepening global economic crisis, energy, environment, climate change, public health, trade, among other issues.

As a matter of policy, the Obama administration openly acknowledged there is no diminution of commitment to human rights and democracy. During the presidential primary campaign, he stated a number of times that American security is not more important than



Pelosi... prefaced her remarks carefully and said that she will continue to speak out for human rights in China...

human rights ... and the two are complementary. The question is basically balance, depending on specific set of circumstances in a given time and place.

To follow these general guidelines, Clinton's approach really reflects the Obama administration's central purpose of getting China more involved and to cooperate with us in resolving global economic issues at difficult times. It is clear, however, that human rights and political freedoms remain major elements of U.S. policy and value which must be addressed at appropriate time and manner.

The basic question is how to approach these sensitive issues in international discourse. A highly respected China scholar, David Shambaugh recently said, "Foreigners generally get much further when they discuss human rights in quiet rather than in public, when it is framed in a non-confrontational way. and explained in terms of being in China's best interests." It sounds logical. Clinton thus has aptly changed the discourse by not lecturing in the belief that in general Chinese leaders do not believe the U.S. government necessarily possess superior wisdom on what is a right *policy* or what is bad one for China, for they feel they know their country better.

In May, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi led a congressional delegation to Beijing to discuss energy independence and climate change with Chinese leaders. For a number of years, she has been a ferocious critic of China's human right record. In 1991 she unfurled a banner memorializing those who died in defense of democracy' in Tiananmen Square. In March 2008, she condemned China's rule in Tibet and said that the IOC made a mistake by awarding the Summer Olympics to Beijing, among other

criticisms. There was a real apprehension in China about what she might say in public about these issues.

However, in a speech before an audience at the Shanghai American Chamber of Commerce she prefaced her remarks carefully and said that she will continue to speak out for human rights in China and around the world. She skillfully eschewed comment on China's poor human rights record and Tibet and followed the administration guidelines closely not to confront the Chinese leaders in public.

Upon her return to Washington, she told a group at the Brookings Institution that she sees no progress in China on human rights, regretting that neither economic reforms nor U.S. pressure are making Beijing budge on these issues. However, she rejected the perceptions that she had softened her stance on human rights. She indicated she personally and privately petitioned Chinese president Hu Jintao to free jailed human rights activists. She acknowledged public pressure so far does not work or yield any significant results in China but somehow or other we have to find a way to do that.

Some commentators view the present shift in approach to China by two powerful American women as a signal to transformational diplomacy. Others see it as a delusion, a pipe dream or false hope. We don't know and simply will have to wait and see.

Meanwhile, before the end of the year, Obama will have several opportunities to raise the rights issues with Hu Jintao on a one-on-one meeting at international and bilateral forums and a presidential visit to Beijing in December. Most likely the strategic and economic issues will continue to dominate the discourse, while placing human rights and democracy on the back burner. These are unsettled times with unprecedented

challenges facing both countries. The United States and China must work together to survive and prosper. There are no viable options. Just as Hillary Clinton said in Beijing, "We are truly going to rise or fall together." Under these difficult circumstances, Obama may be forced to postpone and again disappoint human rights activists.

###

Stanton Jue is a Foreign Service Officer, retired. He had posting in Cambodia, Taiwan, Japan, South Vietnam, South Korea, Australia, China as well as an extended tour in Washington. His focus has been on China and U.S. relations with Beijing and Taipei from the Cold War days through reconciliation to current intermittent cooperation and competition between the two superpowers