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COMMENTARY

Fearful Asymmetry

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Before and after each Sino-American summit, Beijing offers a triple spin: China is an equal of the U.S., the U.S. needs China even more than China needs the U.S., and the two powers are fundamentally like-minded. Left out are a few points. Chinese come to the U.S. and read scathing criticisms of President Bush in American newspapers. Americans go to China and never read a word of criticism of President Hu Jintao in "China Daily." The Chinese state creates a lock-step view of events within China and the world that is completely different from our own marketplace of ideas.

Asymmetry marks access and availability of information in the U.S. and China: 100,000 Chinese students are on our campuses (enormously more than the Americans on Chinese campuses), and they have extraordinary access to information, whereas many sensitive materials are withheld from Americans in China. Hundreds of prominent Americans who know a lot about China are pro-Beijing and are publicly critical of U.S. policy toward China. That is their right. But there is no equivalent community of specialists in China that is pro-American and criticizes Beijing's policy toward the U.S. -- nor could there be.

The professions in China are not autonomous: Journalists, professors, most lawyers and clergy for licensed religious organizations are all beholden to the party-state. Hence many cultural exchanges between China and the U.S. are flawed projects since Chinese journalists, judges and other professionals are not independent.

Time and again an American leader speaks in China after a promise from Beijing that his remarks will be transmitted unaltered to the Chinese public, only to find sensitive parts have been cut. "People's Daily," reporting the joint press conference between President Clinton and President Jiang Zemin in 1998, omitted Mr. Clinton's words on freedom, Tibet and the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989. Vice President Cheney's speech in Shanghai in April 2004 was gutted of key passages about democracy after a promise to transmit it in full. And so on. The Chinese people cannot know what they do not hear. And they are unaware of how much they do not know.

Just as Beijing uses divide-and-rule at the national level to try to split Japan, Australia and other allies from the U.S., it does the same at the level of the individual writer, journalist or academic. The Chinese try to pick favorites and isolate critics of Beijing. They dangle access (as they do with businessmen); they intimidate potential critics. In the mid-'90s, National Geographic invited me to write an article on the Three Gorges Dam project. Some months after the photographer and I began, Beijing refused me a visa to travel to the dam area. National Geographic was in a bind;

inevitably, they chose another writer to whose views Beijing would have less objection, a quiet victory that remained unknown to readers of the published article.

Another Chinese method is to plant themes in American minds by repetition and infiltration. "The U.S. is trying to hold China back" says Beijing. Taking 25% or more of its exports is a strange way of holding China back. "A Cold War mentality in the U.S. is damaging U.S.-China relations" says Beijing. In truth, North Korea, China's only ally, is the conspicuous Cold War relic that is gravely unsettling to northeast Asia. "Japanese militarism is the great danger in Asia" says Beijing. Never mind that China has fought wars on four flanks in the last half-century, during which Japan's military has killed not one non-Japanese in combat.

To help plant these themes, Beijing draws into its sphere Americans with good knowledge of China and readiness to agree with Chinese policies. All the statements listed above are embraced by prominent business, media and academic figures involved with China. New is the amount of money China has available for its manipulation. The corruption of power was familiar in earlier years of the PRC; the corruption of money becomes evident today. Beijing is bold with its open wallet. It is true that Beijing's behavior in the face of the international flow of information has improved in the post-Mao era. But the Leninist basis of the Chinese regime remains. President Clinton, while in office, twice referred to China as a "former communist country."

This only sets us up for disillusionment. Far from being like-minded, China fends the U.S. off, undermines it across the globe, and desires its decline in East Asia. Beijing will not "help" Washington over North Korea since its interests (propping up Pyongyang) differ from U.S. interests (solving the nuclear weapons issue by reunification of Korea under Seoul).

What should we do about the situation? Our overall China policy can (and does) blend full engagement with participation in preserving an equilibrium in East Asia that discourages Beijing from expansionism. No contradiction exists between these twin stances. There are two Chinas, after all: a command economy that sags, and a free economy that soars; a Communist Party that scratches for a *raison d'être*, and 1.3 billion individuals with private agendas. Being wary of authoritarian China while engaging with emerging China is a logical dualism.

Beyond that strategy, we should, above all, avoid wishful thinking about the Chinese state. We should be aware of the asymmetry in cultural exchanges. We should resist the Chinese divide-and-rule policies by a stance of solidarity with those whom Beijing singles out for attack or exclusion. We should talk back every time the Communist Party mocks the freedoms of the U.S. or denies the repression of its own rule.

Far better to have cordial relations with Beijing than the confrontations of the '50s (Korean War) and '60s (Indochina Wars). But in the absence of a common enemy and with a yawning gap between democracy and dictatorship, the relationship cannot be cozy. "Avoid politicizing the issues" between the two countries, Hu Jintao said last week, but the fundamental issues are political. It is good that Beijing finds common ground with Boeing and Microsoft; but less common ground exists between Beijing and the American democracy. One worries at times that authoritarian China has an advantage over the U.S. It can take the long view, hide plans it does not want revealed, pull the strings of Chinese public opinion, set the agenda of international organizations while doing little to implement their decisions, win access to American society while closing doors within China, and deceive non-Chinese about all this by its political theater. Yet ultimately an authoritarian regime is not strong. China today is no match for the U.S. in any realm except population, and as long as it remains a dictatorship it will never equal the U.S. as a power and influence in the world.

The average life span of the European Leninist regimes that collapsed between 1989 and 1991 was only a few decades; the Chinese communist regime is now 57 years old, 17 years short of the Soviet Union, the longest running authoritarian regime of modern times. Democracies sound raucous, but the U.S. and Australia, to take two, have been stable for a period that runs into centuries. The oxygen of freedom prevents many evils. Our quarrel over the manipulation of news and views is not with Chinese culture or people, but with the Communist Party state. It manipulates because that was its political upbringing. It strokes the feathers of sycophants and ditches independent spirits because that has been the Leninist way in every country where a Communist Party has held a monopoly of power.

Political systems do matter. Washington and Beijing could hardly be more different on the fundamental issue of freedom.

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