



U.S.-China Relations: A Conversation with Future Leaders from China

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On December 14, 2012, the NCAFP's Forum on Asia Pacific Security and the 21st Century Leaders Council sponsored a panel discussion with rising leaders from China. The panel was moderated by Ambassador Winston Lord and included young Chinese leaders selected by the National Bureau of Asia Research.

The panelists were Beijing University Associate Professor Yu Wanli, co-author of several books on U.S. foreign policy and U.S.-China relations; Wei Ling, Director of the East Asian Studies Center at China Foreign Affairs University and the Chinese representative in the Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT); Yang Juan, an anchorwoman in the world news program of Phoenix Satellite TV, one of the most influential TV news programs in China; and Abe Denmark, Senior Project Director for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

The Chinese rising leaders had been travelling in the United States for the past two weeks. They visited Boeing, Microsoft and the Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington, spoke to Pentagon and State Department officials in Washington, DC, and visited several think tanks, including the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

The discussion among the panel was broken into three sections; impressions of the United States, the current situation in China, and U.S.-China relations. The panel questions were asked by the moderator and the answers were given by members of the rising leaders delegation. The panel discussion was then followed by a question and answer session which covered a wide range of topics.

The Setting

The panel took place soon after the presidential elections in the United States and the 18th Party Congress in China. It was also a time of rising tensions between China and many of its neighbors, some of them U.S. allies, over territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. And it came against the backdrop of a U.S. “pivot” to Asia following a withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Impressions of the United States

One Chinese panelist said she was surprised by how much the Americans she met knew about China, how much they cared about the leadership changes in China and by how much the U.S. wanted to engage with China.

On the negative side, she said, some Chinese feel that the U.S. is unfair to the extent that it establishes rules of the game which China must follow even though China has not been part of the rule-making.

A second Chinese panelist talked about how impressed she was, especially after the visit to Boeing and Microsoft, of the U.S. ability to innovate and to wield “smart power.” This smart power, she said, will keep the U.S. economy resilient and help the U.S. maintain its super-power status. She went on to say that there was growing interest in the U.S. among Chinese people from all walks of life and lots of goodwill despite the many challenges to the relationship. The opportunities outweigh the challenges. There is much potential for cooperation.

Asked about her impression of the “China threat” school in the U.S., she replied that there is an awareness of this mindset in China but that she was impressed by her talks with the American military who told her that the American troops recently sent to Darwin, Australia as part of the “U.S. pivot” to Asia were intended mainly for disaster relief. This, she said, “alleviated my concern.” She concluded by saying that her overall impression is that there is a potential for turning the challenges into opportunities.

A third Chinese panelist stressed what he called the “huge gap” of mistrust between the two sides. In China, he went on, many bloggers on the internet say that the U.S. seeks to encircle China and that the U.S. opposes Chinese investment in the U.S. as the Huawei incident demonstrated. He referred to a recent article by Wang Jisi of Beijing University and Ken Lieberthal of Brookings which explored this mutual mistrust and said he had concluded that he must think more deeply about this problem.

The moderator interjected that trust needs to be built up through actions as well as with reassuring statements. He added that the media on both sides tends to stress problems. This stirred a lively discussion on the media.

One Chinese panelist, herself a representative of the media, agreed that the media in both countries overemphasized the negative in order to sell its output. The U.S.-China relationship, she concluded, is not as bad as the press or the internet make out. The “basic relationship is solid and sound.”

The Chinese Domestic Scene

Asked what three things were most worrisome about the Chinese domestic scene, the panelists seemed to have different priorities.

One panelist said he is more concerned about the legal system and the rule of law. This, he went on, is a precondition for democracy. And, he has not yet seen many indications of a strengthening of the rule of law in China. He concluded with his hope that the development of the market economy in China would serve to gradually shrink the role of government and strengthen the rule of law.

Another Chinese panelist added that if the Chinese government shrinks and rule of law increases, “sooner or later there would be more freedom.” Another said that maintaining social stability is very important.

At this point, the moderator gave the floor to a member of the Chinese delegation in the audience who is a judge in China. The Chinese judge first expressed his great interest in the recent visit to China of U.S. Supreme Court Judge Stephen Breyer who talked about his book, recently translated into Chinese, on “How to Make Democracy Work.” The Chinese judge said that he learned from Breyer that democracy in the United States still has a long way to go. And the same is true in China. The judge concluded by saying that he is most worried about the economy and the stability of society because the development of the legal system will take time and is bound to be a “step by step” process.

Another panelist said she had three concerns about China that are shared by almost every Chinese citizen: housing, education and medical care. The Chinese people, she said, like the American people, are just trying to pursue their dreams and live happy lives. She went on to add that the biggest challenge China faces is the potential of an economic slowdown and the potential danger of instability.

The third panelist said that during her travels in the United States, the question she often got was: Is the Chinese system sustainable? She said that Americans were more worried about this problem than the Chinese. Pursuing this theme, she concluded by saying that “we all want universal rights and free speech.” But “we don’t want chaotic revolution.” China, she added, is difficult to govern. China is exploring a new page in its history. Democracy is not on the immediate agenda. Finally, she concluded, America needs to get to know China better and to be “more patient.”

At this point, the moderator interjected by saying that much depends on the definition of democracy. Most Americans, he went on, do not expect China to move instantaneously towards a multi-party electoral system. But we do hope to see soon, at least, the development of an independent legal system and a free press. He then asked the Chinese, some of whom were members of the media, whether they too wanted a free press in China.

One panelist said that we “absolutely want free speech” and will press the Chinese government to push political and economic reform. The moderator then asked the panelist how constrained she herself feels in writing and speaking in the Chinese media. The panelist responded that there are certain “red line” issues that are untouchable. It is possible to talk

about corruption but it is not possible to challenge the Party's right to govern China. It is possible to criticize scandals in China but it is not possible to call for the independence of Taiwan.

The same panelist went on to say that she is "very frustrated" with these "red lines" and tries to push the line further and further. For example, she frequently talks about political reform in Myanmar with the clear implication that this was an example for China. She is, she said, intent on "pushing the envelope."

Asked by the moderator if the verdicts on the 1989 Tiananmen uprisings needed to be revised, one panelist said that she had been taught that Tiananmen was an example of radical students misguiding other students. Another panelist implied that if the outcome of Tiananmen had been different – e.g. more liberal - China would not have experienced the rapid rates of growth it did experience in the past 20 years. One panelist said that mistakes were made on both sides. If the students were willing to compromise there would have been a different outcome. The third panelist said that he shows a documentary to his students about the Tiananmen incident. He said he was obligated to talk about this tragedy.

U.S.-China Relations

The moderator opened this part of the discussion by asking the panelists if they thought the U.S. was sincere in its stated position that it welcomes China's rise and that a strong, stable China is in the U.S. interest. Or does the U.S., fearing the rise of China, seek to contain and encircle China?

One Chinese panelist said that the Chinese mainstream believe that U.S.-China relations are not so positive and many do believe that the U.S. is trying to contain China and that the so-called "U.S. pivot" is aimed at China. Also the fact that U.S. would assist Japan in case of a conflict over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands confuses many Chinese because the U.S. said that it is not taking sides on territorial claims. A lot of Chinese, she concluded, think that the U.S. does not want a successful China.

Another panelist said that the pivot is both a sign of the U.S. general interest in the region and also a hedging policy aimed at China. On the other hand, she said, in Washington, DC, during the visits to the U.S. government agencies, the Chinese delegation heard a different story. The story was that the U.S. pivot was intended to make Asia more stable and secure.

Another Chinese panelist said that she thought the U.S. is sincere when it says it welcomes China's rise. But the real issue is how to build a "more constructive approach."

The moderator interjected at this point to say that there are a wide variety of views in the United States about the rise of China. Some think China is a potential threat. But the official position, supported by the foreign policy mainstream, is that the U.S. welcomes China's rise while at the same time is cautiously hedging in the event of unwelcome developments. However, he went on, the main reason for the "pivot" to Asia is not to contain China but because of the economic and military importance of the Asia-Pacific region.

Questions and Answers

The panel discussion was followed by a lively question and answer session.

One audience member asked about the membership composition of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Who is joining these days, he inquired, and is joining the Party a requirement for success in China? In response to this question, the moderator asked the Chinese delegates to raise their hands if they were members of the CCP. Two thirds of the delegation raised their hands. The panelists then said that joining the Party is not a prerequisite to success in China. They noted that the Minister of Health is not a Party member, so high-level officials don't necessarily need to join the CCP to hold powerful positions.

Another question addressed the issue of China's influence over North Korea—can China prevent North Korea from being dangerous? One panelist said that the Chinese government understands that its influence in North Korea is very limited. However, they fully support denuclearization.

Another panelist said that it is important to understand that there are diverse opinions, interests and players in almost every area in China and that China cannot control North Korea. She went on to say that the U.S. and China have common interests in trying to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula. Pushing the conversation further, the moderator asked if she thought the U.S. and China had differing priorities when it came to the DPRK. She said no and stated that “denuclearization is the shared goal between the U.S. and China.”

A member of the audience then asked about the relationship between the Chinese government and the U.S. SEC (Security Exchange Commission). While many people would welcome Chinese investment in the U.S., there is a concern that the auditing and transparency of Chinese companies is not sufficient. There is also a larger question of the effect of Chinese investment on U.S. security. A member of the delegation from the audience said that one major issue in this debate is the difference in structure between American and Chinese companies. The moderator concluded with stating that there are many economic benefits to Chinese investment in the U.S. and that mayors and governors are particularly interested in these benefits.

What is the biggest threat to the legitimacy of and/or future of the Chinese Communist Party? One panelist stated that if “you want to know about the future of the Party, you should read the Party Congress Report.” The key to understanding China is in this report, he said. He continued on to say that CCP legitimacy is based on “the revival of the Chinese nation.” This is the end goal of the CCP. The 18th Party Congress report says China is in the second of a three step process of reviving the Chinese nation.

Another panelist said that the main challenge to legitimacy of the party “identified very clearly by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping is corruption.” Corruption is the life and death issue of the party, she said.

Another delegation member added that the Chinese see positive signs in addressing corruption. One such sign is Wang Qishan's appointment to the top seat on the disciplinary

body in the Standing Committee. He is a really “tough guy” and this is a positive signal. Minimizing corruption is good for the economy and for stability. The moderator added that while Wang Qishan is an economic expert, he has the reputation of getting things done and this is a good sign.

Conclusions

The Chinese rising leaders revealed some differences and some ambivalence in their attitudes towards the United States. One stressed the positive – the potential for cooperation and for turning the challenges into opportunities and the potential for building a more constructive approach. Another said the “basic relationship is solid and sound” and not as bad as the media portray it. A third panelist stressed what he called the “huge gap” of mutual mistrust between the two sides. Other Chinese said that many Chinese do believe that the U.S. is trying to contain China and that the so-called “pivot” to Asia is aimed at China.

The panelists were cautious on the issue of political and economic reform in China. On the one hand, they indicated their desire to shrink the size of government, to strengthen the rule of law and to expand the “red lines”. On the other hand, they were concerned about social stability and the dangers of moving too fast on reforms. One said that the Chinese wanted universal rights and free speech but not “chaotic revolution.” Several stressed the need for patience.

On the whole, the panelists were patriotic but not strident. Although they expressed concern about U.S. positions, they were also critical of China’s policies, especially those that concerned the ability of ordinary citizens to live a peaceful and prosperous life. They were open to changing their views on U.S. intentions in light of conversations with Americans and agreed that greater dialogue between Chinese and Americans would foster deeper cooperation and better understanding without taking away from each country’s rights to pursue their own interests.

The panelists were also pragmatic when reviewing U.S.-China relations. They saw areas of cooperation and areas of conflict. They acknowledged that we are facing a new paradigm in international relations where an established power and a rising power are so integrated that peaceful cooperation between the two is an area of common concern. At the same time, there are areas where our national interests diverge and these problems must be carefully navigated. They were not hostile, but also not starry-eyed, preferring a realistic approach to bilateral relations.