

China Strikes Back!

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OCTOBER 23, 2014 ISSUE



Chuck Fishman/Contact Press Image

Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter at the White House with their wives after a gala at the Kennedy Center that was held in Deng's honor, January 1979

When Deng Xiaoping arrived at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington in January 1979, his country was just emerging from a long revolutionary deep freeze. No one knew much about this five-foot-tall Chinese leader. He had suddenly reappeared on the scene after twice being cashiered by Mao, who famously described him as “a needle inside a ball of cotton.” But in 1979 he knew exactly what he wanted: better relations with the US. He and President Jimmy Carter appeared to be serious about resolving differences. While reporting on these meetings, I had the impression that they were aware they were appearing in a kind of buddy film, and were using the opportunity to suggest clearly that they

were ready to cooperate.

“Today we take another step in the historic normalization of relations which we have begun this year,” Carter said in welcoming Deng at a state dinner in the White House.

We share in the hope which springs from reconciliation and the anticipation of a common journey.... Let us pledge together that both the United States and China will exhibit the understanding, patience, and persistence which will be needed in order for our new relationship to survive.

They then took off for Atlanta, Houston, and Seattle, with the most unforgettable moment occurring in Simonton, Texas. Deng was attending a rodeo when a cowgirl galloped up on horseback to his front-row arena seat to present him with a ten-gallon Stetson hat. When he clapped this symbol of Americana on his diminutive head, it almost came down over his eyes. But he accomplished his goal: demonstrating to people in both countries—it was China’s first live broadcast from abroad—that bygones were bygones and it was time start anew.

Even now photos of these events from over three decades ago radiate camaraderie and a sense of leaders putting suspicion aside and trusting one another enough to allow for new ways of interacting. Their efforts, however, led only to a partial transformation of the relationship. One thing “normalization” did not, and could not, change was China’s Leninist form of one-party government. And since our two political and value systems remained opposed, an enormous block of contention continued to exist between us. What allowed some sense of fraternity to arise anyway was that Deng and Carter were able to imagine (in their different ways) that the two countries and societies might still slowly find more grounds for cooperation.

While China never had a truly democratic government under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and then Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Deng Xiaoping, the world’s democracies were able to entertain vague hopes that as long as the door was open—and perhaps with some assistance from open markets, academic exchanges, American philanthropy, etc.—China might yet gradually become more democratic.

The prescience of such dreams seemed only confirmed when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet bloc collapsed. But even as these dramatic events gratified the West, they shocked and terrified Chinese Party leaders. They were hardly thrilled when President Bill Clinton, speaking of the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square

while on a trip to China in 1997, rather sanctimoniously chastised China for being “on the wrong side of history.” At that point Jiang Zemin, then Party general secretary, had little choice but to listen.

However, it turned out that history was not quite as obligingly Western as Clinton had assumed. Although it was not yet obvious, the dream of a more democratic China had already been grievously impaired in 1989 when the Tiananmen massacre created a never-again mentality within the Party. By the time Xi Jinping became president and Party secretary in 2013, a virtual coup de grâce had been delivered to both Western and Chinese hopes for structural political reform. The Party’s new message was, in effect: “Because China emphatically rejects all Western forms of democratic governance as unworkable, Americans should forget their missionary-like dreams of bringing elections, human rights, and democracy to China. What you see now is what you’re going to get! Changes are not wanted.”

At a meeting between presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping held at the Annenberg estate in California, known as Sunnylands, in June 2013, Xi suggested trying to recapture some of the old Carter–Deng magic when he expressed a desire to see the two countries form a “new kind of big power relationship” (*xinxing daguo guanxi*). He implied that each country should accept the other as it is. The idea never really caught on.

But this September, here was Jimmy Carter, the man who had helped set the US–China relationship in motion, back in Beijing. Was it not a good opportunity to pick up the old theme of mutual respect and jointly explore new steps forward just before Obama himself visits China in November? Who better than Carter to help improve a relationship now burdened by recent disputes, tensions, and distrust, and arrive at a “new kind” of interaction?

I accepted an invitation to go along on a part of Carter’s recent trip. Of course, since 1979 enormous progress has been made both in China’s development and in institutionalizing bilateral relations with the US. But just as striking is how much suspicion over motives and intentions still remains. Indeed, one could only conclude that the two countries have recently been moving further apart, which became evident even before Carter arrived in Beijing. Why?

Carter first came to China in 1949 as a young naval officer aboard a US submarine visiting Qingdao and Shanghai only months before the People’s Republic of China was established. Three decades later, on December 15, 1978,

after a long and extremely difficult set of secret negotiations, he startled the world by announcing that the US and China would reestablish normal diplomatic relations. Despite substantial congressional opposition—Senator Barry Goldwater accused him of “lying, thumbing his nose at the Congress, and selling out Taiwan”—six weeks later Deng Xiaoping was at the White House.

When Carter arrived back in Beijing this September to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of “normalized relations,” his first stop was the People’s University. I imagined this as another opportunity not only to celebrate Carter’s role in US–China relations, but also for him to express his own views on events since then and meet with students. Instead, we found ourselves thrust into the middle of a forum on global finance run by the university, one more of the endless business conferences now proliferating in China, because the subject is safe. Only after forgettable addresses by the university president and a former UN trade and investment specialist from Argentina was Carter able to present a short talk, followed by a single question addressed directly to him.

It turned out that Carter had been paid a fee, making this just one more stop in his tireless global effort to keep the Carter Center funded. Watching this former US president treated so offhandedly highlighted how the power relationship between the two countries is shifting: it is now not only the West that has wealth. Indeed, China is expected to soon surpass the US in GDP.

But there were numerous other ways in which this tectonic shift in US–China relations revealed itself. Although Carter had met four times before with Xi Jinping, on this visit he met neither with him nor with Premier Li Keqiang, which seemed odd, because if they really do want better US–China relations, why ignore the man who had once done so much to improve them?

The Chinese, moreover, had unceremoniously banned one invited member of Carter’s delegation from speaking at a forum in the Great Hall of the People. Carter himself soon learned that the various official hosting organizations around the country had canceled or reorganized several events set for Shanghai and Qingdao. And a Carter Center meeting for its Young American and Chinese Scholars Forum on US–China Relations program was moved off the Jiaotong University campus at Xian and into a hotel.

Why such changes, which undermined the goals of the trip, were allowed to happen went unexplained to the Carter delegation or the press. Perhaps the anticorruption campaign now underway in China had rattled organizers. Or

maybe awareness of Carter's long-standing commitment to international human rights and democracy made officials fear some kind of untoward incident. In any event, in China it is always difficult for foreigners to remonstrate. As every foreign embassy, corporation, university, NGO, and media outlet there knows, foreigners are expected to accept whatever is dished out. Too much complaining only gets contracts, visas, programs, agreements, and exchanges delayed or canceled.

The high point of Carter's trip was to be a banquet in the Great Hall of the People, a cavernous, tomb-like edifice thrown up by "the people" in ten months during the Great Leap Forward in 1959 when some 30–40 million Chinese were beginning to starve to death. It is one of the principal monuments in Mao's expansion of Tiananmen Square. Its vast salons (one enormous room for every province in China), all decorated with epic-sized landscape paintings, are calculated to awe and overwhelm. But the dinner for Carter was disappointingly flat. It was hosted by Vice President Li Yuanchao, who gave a short speech that had none of the actively friendly tone that characterized meetings thirty-five years before.

As we ate amid a sea of half-empty tables, a Chinese professor whispered to me that President Xi just days earlier had met with Zimbabwean president and international pariah Robert Mugabe (calling him "an old friend of the Chinese people whom we respect very much," with whom China "stood shoulder to shoulder against imperialism, colonialism, and hegemony"). He went on to say that Xi was actually in the Great Hall of the People toasting Malaysian Supreme Head of State Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah at the very moment of our dinner. But Xi didn't stop by the Carter dinner to say a word.

None of the six Chinese newspapers I thumbed through the next day ran stories about the banquet or the visit. Only the English-language *China Daily*, widely read by American expats, said anything about it, publishing a photo not of Carter but of student performers at the banquet, followed by a short article inside headlined: "Turkey Feast Honors China–US Relations."

Fortunately, the next night there was a very pleasant dinner sponsored by *Caijing Magazine* and also Deng's daughter, Deng Rong. With many former Chinese officials present who had worked with the Carter administration, the former president and his wife were said to be extremely gratified to see so many "old friends," almost all of whom were now out of office.

The overall effect of the visit—and it is an "effect" that has been sealed at a good

many other meetings between Americans and Chinese—was to make the visitors feel the impossibility of making real contact. In fact, at one point I heard from sources close to him that Carter was upset enough to consider just packing up and going home.

What made the dinner in the Great Hall all the more unsettling was the feeling that a whiff of “humiliation”—*chiru*—hovered over it. The Party has for many years emphasized China’s history of being humiliated and exploited by foreign powers. To feel a gust of Chinese reaction now coming back the other way left me wanting to leave early that night.

As I walked with another American China scholar out of the Great Hall into Tiananmen Square, all lit up as if for Christmas, we agreed that it was dismaying not just that Carter was being kept at official arm’s length and had been personally offended, but that this entire episode was like so many others with which we had both recently been involved. What is more, it struck us as somehow emblematic of the suspicious, secretive, peremptory, punitive way in which official China now so often deports itself in the world, especially toward democracies, which it tends to view as especially seditious, even hostile. It was not too many years ago that the Chinese were making similar criticisms of the West. But if such behavior then was not constructive for China’s relations with what it saw as “imperialist powers,” there is really no new logic that makes Beijing’s present behavior any more constructive now.

But many Chinese officials and military officers now seem so proud that their country has become rich and strong that they appear almost relieved to at last be able to stand up militantly to the Japanese and the Vietnamese—and even to quietly insult prominent Americans—never mind the negative, even dangerous, possible consequences for the rest of the world of such truculence. Right now people on both sides seem to be filled with increasing perplexity about why things are so difficult, just at a time when we are urgently in need of finding ways to avoid the kind of conflict many worry can all too easily emerge with the rising of a large new power.

Where does such a standoffishness, which impedes our two sides from truly engaging, come from? Perhaps from a concern of the Chinese that being too obviously flexible and accommodating might be misinterpreted as weakness, the very frailty that China’s hard-earned rise to wealth and power has sought to remedy. A second is perhaps Beijing’s awareness that despite all its economic progress, Western-style democracies not only still look down on China’s Leninist

system of governance, but wouldn't mind seeing it fundamentally changed. Western attitudes toward Chinese Communist Party rule are, not surprisingly, experienced as condescending, and they rankle many proud Chinese.

Now that China is enjoying such success in its own development that the global balance of power has begun to dramatically shift in its favor, the US finds itself confronting a new reality in Beijing. Xi's version of reform no longer even includes a meaningful program of political reform. Gone are the days when officials might say, "Give us time. China cannot change all at once."

What is more, China's new confidence in its own system of Leninist capitalism and its new assertiveness in the world have only been encouraged by the spectacle of a paralyzed US Congress and Europe's faltering governments. Such models of democratic practice leave Party officials feeling more justified than ever in rejecting Western democracy's checks and balances, electoral politics, universal values, human rights, independent civil society, open media, and freedom of religious organization. "One part of the now long-standing Chinese leadership critique of Western-style democracy is that it is prone to paralysis and gridlock and ultimately governmental weakness," Xi recently commented.

The Western presumption that China, aided by open markets, foreign education, and Western soft power, will irresistibly be swept toward ever greater political openness, which many Westerners have come to view as the inevitable (and desired) evolutionary path for every society, is now being met by Chinese leaders with a loud and defiant denial that could be summarized as follows: "We don't want to be in your teleological dream! Your President Clinton's 'right side of history' is not in the official view of our Party Chairman Xi's 'China dream!'"

The "China Dream" is an idea launched by Xi that is now emblazoned on billboards, bus stops, and byways throughout the country and it essentially plays



AP Images

Deng Xiaoping at the rodeo, Simonton, Texas, February 1979

to China's historical yearning for wealth, power, respect, and global standing. What it does not contain is any aspiration toward the Western conception of liberal democracy and humanistic values. It was the shadow of these clashing sets of ideas and the incipient great shifts in relations with Asia that undermined the visit of Jimmy Carter, who was, after all, the first US president to bring universal human rights into the White House as a real consideration in foreign policy.

China's new power now enables it to resist almost all forms of foreign pressure. When visitors like Carter now arrive from "barbarian" lands, China's top officials would far prefer to confine them to something like the old dynastic system of "tribute" (*jingong*), which prescribed strict rules for visiting foreign emissaries from subsidiary countries like Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Burma. Such ambassadors were allowed to come to Beijing, await an imperial audience, proffer their ritual gifts to the Son of Heaven as "tribute," and then quickly leave. Never were they accorded equal status, because, after all, there were no powers "equal" to China, only lesser ones.

Because patriotic Chinese have waited so long for their nation to enjoy a "rejuvenation" (*fixing*), one can understand how gratifying their country's newly elevated status must feel and how tempting it must be to manifest it in resistance to Western pressure, something denied them for a century and a half. But China's new assertiveness, rigidity, and more belligerent nationalistic attitude are provoking a counteraction all around its peripheries. In fact, some are now asking, "Does China have any real friends?" China's actions are also creating deep concern about its intentions, especially among what we might call foreign "accommodationists," those in the US and elsewhere abroad who have been working for rapprochement.

Many such people are beginning to wonder if the prospect of the kind of US–Chinese collaboration that President Carter tried to encourage thirty-five years ago—and that he spoke about repeatedly in Beijing this September—has not now become too naive. Indeed, one increasingly encounters foreigners who have been deeply involved in Chinese affairs expressing disenchantment and concern with China's recent behavior. What is particularly striking is the number of foreign CEOs, once the backbone of better relations, asking whether they still have a future in China.

Carter's recent visit was a low-cost, high-yield opportunity for China to begin reversing this tide of failing confidence. All that was needed was to celebrate his dramatic partnership with Deng in 1979 and to say that this most essential of

global relationships now needs to continue. Instead, the Chinese have again and again chosen to send messages that have many unspoken complications: “From now on, you will deal with us on our terms, or your foreign businesses will be circumscribed, official visits will be downplayed, visas for free-thinking scholars and journalists will be denied, and those who come filled with dreams of democracy will be snubbed. And since we know that few can afford to be shut out of the lucrative Chinese market, we in Beijing can redefine the terms of the game.”

This is not to say that China would not love to have better relations with the US—but on its own terms. To compound the standoff, our diplomatic officials in the White House and the State Department have relatively little interest and experience in China, and are distracted by many other urgent problems elsewhere. We have, moreover, a president possessed of a rather cool manner himself who has so far been unable to warm up to his counterpart, Xi Jinping, also a seemingly very self-contained, reserved man with an often enigmatic smile.

In short, what used to be referred to as “the West” now finds itself confronted by an increasingly intractable situation in which the power balance is changing, a fact that few have yet quite cared to acknowledge, much less to factor into new formulations for approaching China. We remain nostalgic for those quaint days when Chinese leaders still followed Deng’s admonition to his people to “hide our capacities and bide our time” (*taoguang yanghui*). What he meant in using this “idiom” (*chengyu*) was not that China should be eternally restrained but that the time to manifest its global ambition had not yet come. Now that it is stronger, however, its leaders appear to believe that their time has at last come and they are no longer willing even to press the comforting notion of “peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi*).

Underlying their new attitude is an unstated warning: “If China can’t get what it wants peacefully, we are now powerful enough to get it by other means, and we don’t much mind who is offended.” Here there is an echo of Vladimir Putin. What the Chinese seem to be saying without being too explicit (they have always been masters at indirection) is that they will now be reckoned with on their own terms, not ours. Like it or not, this is the world’s new reality.

The new challenge is unfamiliar, and it poses a difficult new question: Will the Western democracies ever be able to accept China as it is, the better to deal with the host of new global problems that menace us all, like climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation?

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