



Engaging China: The Clinton Visit by Michael McDevitt

President Clinton leaves for China on 24 June. Because this is the first Presidential trip to China this decade there has been the predictable surge in editorials and features on China in the mainstream press and a dramatic increase in the number of conferences, meetings and roundtables at all the major think-tanks. Under any circumstances the visit would be cause for increased stirring in the policy community. With the backdrop of the Loral satellite launching waiver flap and Congressional hearings that question virtually every aspect of the Administration's China policy, one is left with the impression that domestically the Administration has lost control of China policy.

Last week Clinton delivered a major address on China at the National Geographic Society. It was a carefully worded, well thought out explanation (some would call it a defense) of the Administration's policy of engagement with China as the best way to further U.S. interests. Clinton characterized his approach as "principled and pragmatic," rhetorically rejecting both a policy of containment and a policy based solely on commercial interest. He focused the discussion on the advantages of engagement by running down a list of the major "issue sets" we have the China (regional stability, non-proliferation, international organized crime/drug trafficking, environmental concerns, free trade, and human rights) and asking rhetorically, in each case, if those interests would be better served by engaging or isolating China. In the immediate aftermath a number of Asia watchers all had the same first impression – why didn't he do this a lot sooner?

That said, the speech missed the mark in several specific ways. The thematic focus seemed to "shoot behind the rabbit" in that it was directed at justifying engagement per se. That issue has been settled; the consensus is that we must deal with China. The debate in Washington has moved beyond whether of not China would be "engaged." By setting up a false dichotomy between engagement and isolation (the current term of art rather than containment) the President appeared to be fighting the wrong battle. To suggest that everyone who does not believe in engagement as practiced by the Administration is automatically guilty of trying to isolate China misses the point.

Engagement is not a strategy, it is a tactic and a process. By elevating engagement to the level of high policy, it becomes too easy to be trapped by "engagement for engagement's sake" without any concrete strategic goal – except more is better. Engagement as practiced does not appear to have any limits. What behavior by China does engagement not excuse? Virtually anything can be rationalized under the rubric of engagement; are there any conditions? As practiced, virtually every decision seems to be based narrowly on the merits of the issue of the moment. There doesn't appear

to be an overarching set of principles or guidelines to use as a litmus test to see if an individual issue, despite the merits of the moment, makes sense in the larger scheme of things.

The larger scheme of things has to be based on a clear appreciation of U.S. national interests. A good example that many critics have pounced on was the characterization of China as America's "strategic partner." This was announced at the 1997 Jiang-Clinton summit and has been controversial every since. It is interesting to note that the President did not refer to China in his address last week as a strategic partner, hopefully because the White House has belatedly realized that characterizing China as a "strategic partner" is a debasement of language. Not only does it misrepresent what could best be described as the normal diplomatic interaction that major powers have with one another in the pursuit of national interest, but it gives the impression of being oblivious to the importance of our real strategic partners in Asia: our treaty allies and close friends. Even the most avid China bashers would agree that we have reason to engage in a strategic dialogue with China; but to call that partnership is simply too much.

Perhaps the most egregious example of engagement for engagement's sake is the bypassing of Japan during the Presidential visit. The overall impression of this lapse, when combined with the acceleration of the visit from fall to June and the ready acquiescence in the protocol arrival ceremony in Tiananmen, is one of being too eager to engage without focusing on real as opposed to hoped for advancement of U.S. interests. Happily, so far, Japan has not made an issue of the fact that the President is not stopping in Tokyo on the way home. But, this snub suggests a number of possibilities; none of them good – a belief that China vice the U.S. is the key to long term stability in East Asia, a poor understanding of the centrality of Japan to advancing U.S. interests, or an unhealthy worry about offending Chinese sensibilities because it would make further "engagement" more difficult.

Since for better or worse we are stuck for the time being with a China policy called engagement, it would be well for the Administration to anchor that policy with sound strategic rationale; rationale based on priorities and specific goals. As a starting point, I would argue that the most fundamental goal would be clear and unambiguous recognition by China that the United States is a legitimate presence in East Asia; a presence that contributes to the overall stability of the region; a presence that is welcomed and not grudgingly accepted or quietly undermined. This would shore up domestic support, assuage concerns over an incipient rivalry, and be cheered throughout most of East Asia.

RAdm. Michael McDevitt (USN, Ret.) is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Naval Analyses.