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G-Zero: US-China Relations in the Age of Xi

Posted By Peter Lee
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A few years back, Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State declared that G-2—a US-PRC great power condominium much dreaded by advocates of a muscular attitude toward the Chinese menace—was dead.

Don't worry, China hawks. G-2 is still dead.

What's left is G-Zero: a world in which the PRC and US governments go their separate ways and have less and less to do with each other.

As a result, the PRC's bar for "success" in official and state visits to the United States is extremely low. Decent venues, nice photos, no embarrassing incidents...

The baseline for humiliation is Hu Jintao's 2006 official visit to the United States. The atrocities were documented at the time by the *Washington Post's* Dana Milbank:

The visit began with a slight when the official announcer said the band would play the "national anthem of the Republic of China" — the official name of Taiwan. It continued when Vice President Cheney donned sunglasses for the ceremony, and again when Hu, attempting to leave the stage via the wrong staircase, was yanked back by his jacket. Hu looked down at his sleeve to see the president of the United States tugging at it as if redirecting an errant child.

...

China wanted a formal state visit such as Jiang got, but the administration refused, calling it instead an "official" visit. Bush acquiesced to the 21-gun salute but insisted on a luncheon instead of a formal dinner, in the East Room instead of the State Dining Room. Even the visiting country's flags were missing from the lampposts near the White House.

...

If only the White House hadn't given press credentials to a Falun Gong activist who five years ago heckled Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin, in Malta. Sure enough, 90 seconds into Hu's speech on the South Lawn, the woman started shrieking, "President Hu, your days are numbered!" and "President Bush, stop him from killing!"

Bush and Hu looked up, stunned. It took so long to silence her — a full three minutes — that Bush aides began to wonder if the Secret Service's strategy was to let her scream herself hoarse. The rattled Chinese president haltingly attempted to continue his speech and television coverage went to split screen.

Much, much better this time. Top drawer reception, lots of nice pictures, demonstrators kept at a remote and silent distance, PRC media flooded the zone with favorable coverage at home, Xi Jinping looked in control and at ease in the aerie of the cranky and contentious US bald eagle and got his "world leader" ticket punched.

All this despite the fact that the US has moved overtly into an alliance with Japan to contain the PRC in East Asia, and pretty much the only positive subject the two countries really have to talk about is climate change.

There was no official communique; instead the US acquiesced as the PRC issued a laundry list of 49 "outcomes" that looked suspiciously like a summary of 49 things the two countries talked about but never quite agreed on.

By the way, note to posterity:

The *Wall Street Journal* mis-characterized Xi Jinping as saying “*China’s President Pledges No Militarization in Disputed Islands*” in its headline and “Xi Jinping made a commitment...” in the lede.

What he actually said was: “China does not intend to pursue militarization of Nansha Islands in South China Sea....”

That’s not a “pledge” or “commitment”, folks. It’s a statement of “intent” under current circumstances but contingent upon future developments. Let’s see where the goalposts show up when the South China Sea jostling resumes.

The overall “same bed different dreams” anomie in the loveless official relationship was also on display during the joint press conference. The U.S. press corps and President Obama let their preoccupation with the seemingly less than world-historical issue of Speaker of the House John Boehner’s resignation run away with them. By my estimate, President Obama spent half of his response time to questions by Western journos musing on Boehner’s departure and the prospects for a government shutdown, while President Xi presumably (no split screens this time) either played Angry Birds on his smart phone or pondered the inspiring or encouraging spectacle of American democracy valiantly staggering forward despite its self-inflicted wounds.

President Xi had his relatively low expectations met, I believe.

For the US press, on the other hand, there is no standard is too high to which a visiting Chinese dignitary can be held, especially when US-PRC relations have entered the cybercrime/South China Sea/dissident crackdown/screwed-up stock market phase. The task was made infinitely easier by the near-simultaneous visit of Pope Francis, the massive, ecstatic reception given the pontiff, and the contrast it provided with the scripted, plodding US-PRC summit.

The Guardian’s Tom Phillips mocked PRC fawning coverage of Xi’s visit with a tweet “Pope? What Pope?”

Reuters helpfully pointed out:

Feted in China, Xi’s U.S. Profile dims in Shadow of Pope

The ex-Ambassador of Mexico to the PRC, Jorge Guajardo, who assiduously tends the anti-PRC vineyard from his current residence in Washington, contributed this inadvertently revealing insight to Reuters:

“To be contrasted with someone who has no military, no economic might and be completely eclipsed, I think it’s astounding. I don’t think the Chinese are noticing the contrast in messages,” said Jorge Guajardo.

The actual message, perhaps imperfectly grasped by Ambassador Guajardo, is that Pope Francis’ agenda, which challenges the prevailing capitalist, political, and spiritual orthodoxy in this country, is not regarded as a threat to the US because Pope Francis has zero clout. The PRC, on

the other hand, is playing the same amoral, moneygrubbing, and bullying game we are—and, thanks to its military and economic muscle, is making life difficult for us in ways Pope Francis can't even dream of.

Somebody else who “missed the message” was CBS News’ Mark Knoller, who tweeted:

Ending hour-long joint news conference, Pres Obama and Xi shake hands. Obama walks Xi to his car. A limo, not a Fiat.

What, no rickshaw? I tweeted in reply.

The relevant comparison for Xi, of course, is not the Pope and his funky Fiat, it is President Obama, whose ride of choice is The Beast, a \$1.5 million dollar armor-plated limousine—with a supply of the president’s blood in the trunk!— escorted by a phalanx of black SUVs filled with submachine-gun-wielding Secret Service agents.

Clearly, the US media and, I expect, many citizens of the US are much more comfortable dealing with the fantasy of flying heavenward on Pope Francis’ wings of mercy and compassion, not the grubby reality of wrestling on the White House lawn with a mean, fat panda for dominance of the 21st century economic and military order.

Funny thing is, the PRC has a similar combination of affinities and aversions, unpleasant realities and comforting fantasies, as was exhibited on Xi’s next stop: the United Nations.

The PRC had worked out a nice deal to co-host a UN conference on gender equality, the Global Leaders’ Meeting on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment “chaired by Xi Jinping” on the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, a monumental gender equality conference in Beijing, and taking place in New York just before the UN General Assembly’s 70th anniversary confab.

In early 2015 the PRC had detained the “Feminist Five”, women who had attempted to promote a national movement of the type that the CCP abhors, in order to bring attention to inequities against women in the PRC. The government, presumably mindful of the grisly optics this provided the conference, had freed the women in March, but that did not preclude the US from beating on the subject.

Freed from the onerous obligation of hospitality demanded by the state visit, the United States government leapt at the opportunity to rain on Xi’s parade on the occasion of the UN conference.

Samantha Power, the US Permanent Representative to the UN had announced that the US would commemorate the conference by honoring twenty women political prisoners, the most conspicuous of whom was Wang Yu, a human rights lawyer, albeit not a feminist but indeed a woman imprisoned as part of a crackdown on nettlesome lawyers. Wang had bravely defended many activists, including one of the “Feminist Five”.

Despite the generally pretty good status of women in the PRC—especially when compared to the gender equality shortcomings of humanity’s-flavor-of-the-week Pope Francis, let alone Saudi Arabia, whose elevation to the chair of the UN Human Rights Council was hailed by the United States (and excused by Samantha Power as “just a procedural position”)—the gender conference was deemed worthy of a US boycott, as the *New York Times*’ Jane Perlez reported:

The Chinese government planned Mr. Xi’s prominent role to show that he is committed to the empowerment of Chinese women. The ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, thinks otherwise.

Ms. Power...was present when Mr. Xi addressed the summit, but unlike the scores of international leaders at the event, including Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President François Hollande of France, she did not speak.

President Obama did not attend the session, a decision by the administration to signal its distaste for the idea of Mr. Xi celebrating women’s progress in China amid a sweeping crackdown on dissent, including the arrest of female activists.

Victory of principle, or churlish own-goal along the lines of US resistance to the AIIB and boycott of the PRC’s 70th anniversary parade. You decide!

Hillary Clinton, presumably by virtue of her “present at the creation” participation in the original conference in Beijing in 1995, felt empowered to weigh in with this tweet:

Hillary Clinton @HillaryClinton

Xi hosting a meeting on women’s rights at the UN while persecuting feminists? Shameless. #FreeThe20 <http://hrc.io/1KDkyFz> -H

So, from her individual account, Clinton called out Xi by name, and called him “shameless”. In Chinese, “shameless” doesn’t mean, Hey, he sure has thick skin/big balls/a bold indifference to criticism/what a cool, edgy, transgressive bro! It translates as 无耻, meaning a person without a sense of shame and beneath contempt.

It’s a major insult, one whose import—with the added offense of applying the epithet directly to Xi, literally in his face—perhaps escaped Clinton and the functionaries who manage her twitter account. *Global Times* took up the cudgels on Xi’s behalf, while declining to quote the tweet, an indication of its odiousness.

Since the CCP leadership already cordially detests Clinton for her upfront role in orchestrating the pivot and promoting the diplomatic and military ostracization of the PRC—remember Xi Jinping’s “back trouble” when Clinton visited Beijing on her farewell tour as Secretary of State?—maybe it’s no big deal.

Except that it will further concentrate the attention of Xi Jinping and the CCP leadership on restructuring the PRC’s foreign relations so that unpleasant engagement with a United States

government—possibly soon to be run by President Hillary Clinton—can be minimized as much as possible.

Indeed, that was the theme, ignored by the US-centric Western press (but hammered home by the PRC press non-stop), of Xi's current visit.

A few awkward hours in Washington, bookended by outreach to business leaders in Seattle and a major public relations push in New York to buttress the UN—and claim an increasingly central role in a non-US-dominated international order—by the PRC.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly, Xi was able to offer up some crowd-pleasing initiatives that put some meat on the bones of the PRC's idea of the UN as a viable venue for its foreign policy and international relations—and an alternative to the unipower priorities of the United States.

He promised \$1 billion over ten years to a fund to support the UN over ten years. If this works out to \$100 million per year—and ends up in the coffers of the UN, instead of expended by the PRC on initiatives it deems worthy—it might represent about a 1/3 increase in the PRC's underwriting of the UN budget.

Add \$100 million to the African Union to assist in its peacekeeping operations.

And the pledge of a standing, standby force of 8000 men as a reserve for UN peacekeeping operation, thereby offering the possibility of the UN having significant muscle on tap and providing a viable alternative to helpless reliance on the US and other national forces to enforce UNSC resolutions.

Add to that announced initiatives to support South-South exchanges and, in the US “sub-national” exchanges between Chinese and Americans.

And a \$2 billion assistance fund plus debt relief for poor countries.

All in all, a concerted effort to diminish the US government as a factor in PRC foreign relations, and eliminate the need, as much as feasible, for PRC leaders to engage in onerous, expensive, and humiliating visits to the United States in order to wangle grudging and partial acknowledgment of PRC peer status by the United States.

Prospects for the PRC buying and bullying its way into a multi-polar world are looking pretty good.

The US should get ready for G-Zero...and maybe be more careful what it wishes for.