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How US critics misread China

Robert Lawrence Kuhn says analysts who see Beijing conducting a more muscular foreign policy and curbing freedoms at home have failed to account for the steps being taken to improve the rule of law

President Xi Jinping's (习近平) state visit to Washington came at a time when most China experts in America had turned pessimistic about relations. Worse, some had come to believe that it has been all along an illusion to expect US-China relations to improve fundamentally, and that US policy on China must adopt more strategies bordering on "containment".

Such pessimism was as pernicious as it was pervasive. If we want a "new kind of major power relationship", as Xi has called for, not a new kind of cold war, we should start by understanding

why America's China experts had turned negative.

Don't blame American politics. Although political campaigns engender tiresome China-bashing, leading analysts are not much swayed by political rhetoric. Don't blame "foreign media conspiracies". Free media attacks all abuses of power; they harbour no hatred for China.

Here's what did happen. The general perception among foreign China watchers was that China had become both more aggressive abroad (for example, the South China Sea and cyber-theft) and more autocratic at home, regressing with respect to

political reform and civil society, fostering a kind of recidivistic Maoism, with focus, of late, on "hostile foreign forces", stricter regulation of the media and non-governmental organisations, and the detention of human rights lawyers.

It is this combination that counts – greater assertiveness internationally and fewer freedoms domestically. It is critics' misconstruing of this confluence that led them to misjudge Xi's intent and China's direction. While no one was equating China today with the Soviet Union of yesteryear, there were worrisome moves in this counterproductive

direction. Correct understanding lies in counterexamples.

Internationally, critics suspect China's "belt and road" initiative to be Beijing's reach for regional dominance (about 60 countries). Yet, building infrastructure in developing countries facilitates global stability, and because these countries are often not very stable, projects will be challenging and risky. In addition, China's economy depends on trade, which depends on the international order, and so to argue that China seeks to disrupt the international order makes no sense.

Domestically, I give two counterexamples concerning the rule of law, the third of Xi's "Four Comprehensives", his overarching political philosophy. While critics focus on isolated cases, recent judicial reforms are a milestone. The power to control the court system – from financing the judiciary to selecting judges – is being transferred from local levels to provincial levels and judges are being held to higher standards. The objective is to prevent interference in the fair adjudication of cases and administration of justice.

Another advance in civil society, underappreciated in Western media, is China's absolute prohibition, backed by senior

leaders and finalised recently, against using executed prisoners as a source of organs for transplants. (The commercial trafficking in human organs had become an immoral "industry" run by powerful interest groups.)

Xi's focus on rule of law undermines the false narrative that China is regressing domestically. By not appreciating major reforms, critics misinterpret or exaggerate what they do see.

It is good that Xi and President Barack Obama put their personal credibility on the line to improve Sino-US relations. Their agreement that neither country will conduct economic espionage in cyberspace addresses (but does not resolve) a prime generator of bilateral tension.

All issues were reviewed: on contentious matters of maritime sovereignty, I find their open disagreement more promising than artificial harmony or face-saving silence.

Most important is economic stability and growth. Prosperity will be enjoyed by both China and the US – or enjoyed by neither. With their economies intertwined, it is simply impossible for one country to succeed and the other not to. Other common issues include controlling climate change, stopping regional wars, fighting terrorism and

organised crime, preventing pandemics, promoting alternative energy and green technologies, and increasing tourism and student exchanges.

I don't think the two presidents interpret a "new kind of major power relations" in quite the same way, but the summit seems to have achieved its goals.

Now comes the hard part. How to build China-US relations? In three words: transparency, communications, interdependencies – high-level visits, military exchanges, scientific cooperation, the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, mutual investments (the bilateral investment treaty is crucial), and people-to-people contacts.

In today's world, the real conflict is not between opposing political systems but, rather, between, on the one hand, the forces of modernity, competence and development, and, on the other, the forces of ignorance, exploitation and oppression. That's the reason that, despite their differences, China and the US must make the relationship work.

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PHOTOS OF THE WEEK



Monday. The "supermoon" appears behind the Turning Torso building in Malmo, Sweden. A swollen "supermoon" and total lunar eclipse combined for the first time in decades. Photo: AFP



Tuesday. A paramilitary policeman and pedestrian hang on to a fence amid strong tidal waves under the influence of Typhoon Dujuan in Hangzhou (杭州), Zhejiang (浙江). Photo: Reuters



Wednesday. A man wrapped in a protective blanket watches from the beach as refugees arrive on the Greek island of Lesbos after crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey. Photo: AFP



Thursday. A woman tries to make her way out of a partially collapsed building after an explosion caused by bombs hidden in parcels in Liucheng county, Guangxi (广西). Photo: Dickson Lee



Friday. Residents mourn during a vigil in Roseburg, Oregon. Ten people were killed and seven wounded in a shooting at a community college in the western US state. Photo: AFP

JAKE'S VIEW

JAKE VAN DER KAMP

China becomes scapegoat for America's economic troubles

...blah, blah, blah ... could fuel fears that the China led global economic slowdown is sapping America's strength ... blah, blah, blah ... one of the biggest lodestones on America's economy was in the commodity sector, which has slowed in part because of weaker demand from China. The price of oil has fallen nearly 50 per cent over the last year.

Reuters, Business, October 3

And more blah-blah yet. It seems the biggest export of the United States these days is to blame. Americans are certainly not keeping much of it at home when it comes to figuring out why the US economy has troubles.

The variant that particularly wins my prize at the moment is the one about how things are going badly in the US because a minor stock market in which foreigners have only recently been allowed to invest, Shanghai's, suffered a sharp correction when not enough foreigners came in to keep it propped up.

This has upset the whole world order and it's all China's fault. Anyone can see that.

But I also like the latest line about how the commodity sector has slowed in part because of weaker demand from China. Yes, China's iron ore imports, for instance, have flattened out at about 840 million tonnes a year. In 2001 they totalled 84 million tonnes. Some slowdown.

And why has commodity

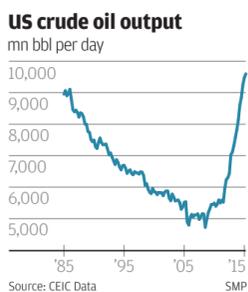
demand in China slowed? Could the reason possibly lie in the fact that American demand for imports from China is in decline just now? Might it be American consumers who are driving things here or shall we just close our eyes again and go for the easy option?

Then take that bit about how the price of oil has fallen nearly 50 per cent over the last year. I wasn't aware that this was a bad thing but, if it is, then it must obviously be China's fault.

And now look at the chart of crude oil production in the US, shooting up like a rocket for the last few years. This is not to mention that Washington's price for boosting Saudi Arabia's defences against the latest crop of extremists spawned by showers of American bombs is that Saudi Arabia will continue to pump oil at record levels.

But it's all China's fault. Blame China.

The fact is that that the befogged academics who now run the US Federal Reserve Board are entirely at a loss to



understand why their cherished theory of stimulating economic activity by dropping money from helicopters, so to speak, is just not working as expected.

All they have achieved is another bubble of speculation in financial markets and a faltering debt-addicted economy that they now say cannot even take a 25 basis point increase in interest rates, leave alone the very minimum of 250 basis points that normalcy would require.

But rather than be honest and admit that seven years of this easy money regime without an underlying recovery has proved them wrong, they continue to insist that all will come right, as their textbooks prescribe, if only they are given yet more time.

And when that will not do any longer they look for a scapegoat and find a convenient one in China.

It would not ordinarily trouble me greatly. It's an old excuse that has been used by American politicians many times in the past and we can expect to hear it more often soon with a pending US presidential election. Fortunately, Beijing knows how to bend with this wind.

Judging by what I have read in this newspaper, however, it seems that an increasing number of people actually believe it this time. How odd, China as the perpetrator of a global economic slowdown from which a blameless United States suffers?

What nonsense.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK



Can you hear me now?

The first tweet by whistle-blower Edward Snowden, in a likely cheeky swipe at his former employer, the NSA

I say to my people everywhere: raise the flag of Palestinians very high because it is the symbol of our identity

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas as the Palestinian flag is flown at the United Nations

Somewhat this has become routine. We become numb to this

US President Barack Obama after yet another mass shooting

His hands are drenched in the blood of civilians, his own people

U.S. military spokesman Colonel Steve Warren on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

WHAT THE MAINLAND MEDIA SAY

CARY HUANG

Xi pushes for women's rights ... but not in his backyard

President proclaims the importance of gender equality on the world stage, yet sends to jail those who seek the same at home

The furious reaction to US presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton's criticism of Beijing's record on women's rights has highlighted the fragile nature of the relationship between the world's two most ideologically divided "frenemies".

The former first lady echoed the views of many rights groups in a tweet questioning President Xi Jinping (习近平) 's role in co-hosting a UN women's rights conference in New York, after his state visit to Washington where he held a summit with US President Barack Obama.

"Xi hosting a meeting on women's rights at the UN while prosecuting feminists? Shameless," tweeted Clinton, referring to the mainland's arrest of five activists this year.

State media reacted with strongly worded editorials. The *Global Times* and other major media outlets accused Clinton of bashing China, like Republican candidate Donald Trump, to garner votes.

Clinton is making a second run at becoming the United States' first female president. She has made women's rights a cornerstone of her 2016 presidential campaign.

Her words are more for a domestic audience than a Chinese one, but Beijing must acknowledge it is imperative to improve women's rights in a country that has seen dramatic economic and social advancement in the last 30 years.

As party mouthpiece *People's Daily* acknowledged, UN efforts to push women's rights represent an irreversible trend in human history.

Building upon the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a plan for expanding women's rights and opportunities that was adopted by 189 nations in the capital in 1995 – this week's UN summit was to work out specific actions to meet those goals.

At the summit, Xi pledged to promote "gender equality and women's development". He also invoked the famous Mao Zedong (毛泽东) line that "women hold up half the sky".

But Beijing's women's rights record is regressing rather than progressing.

One example is the introduction of the one-child policy in the post-Mao age. There have been many horror stories of women's rights abuses – from forced abortions to men poisoning their baby daughters.

China is the only country in the world with such a policy, and it has led to at least one major social consequence – an estimated 40 million "excess" men in China.

Another area of concern is prostitution. Punitive laws and policing practices are leading to

serious cases of abuse against sex workers, who are estimated to number 6 million and who are overwhelmingly female.

There have been reports of widespread police torture, beatings, physical assaults, arbitrary detentions and fines against sex workers, as well as a failure to investigate crimes against them by clients, bosses and the police.

Beijing has never upheld the rights of sex workers, seeing them as a social evil, even as the industry has boomed under China's post-Mao reforms.

Since he came to power in late 2012, Xi has overseen the country's most repressive policies for decades. There is a considerable distance to travel on the reform road before women's rights will see significant improvement. The arrest of five women for campaigning against sexual harassment on March 8, International Women's Day, is evidence of this.

Under Xi, China has drafted and enacted a series of restrictive and repressive laws: the National Security Law, the Counter-Terrorism Law, the Overseas NGO Management Law and the Internet Security Law. All aimed at legitimising restrictions on free speech and religion, and escalate the suppression of civil society and women's rights' advocates.

Xi has proclaimed the importance of women's rights on the world stage. But his repressive policies are sending to jail those who seek the same rights at home.