Reading China Wrong

Michael Pillsbury

Many observers have harshly criticized President Obama's China policy for being at best overly optimistic and at worst tragically naïve. In 2012, it is common to see strategic mistrust between the U.S. and China. The cover of the September 2012 issue of *Foreign Affairs* thus features an article on how China sees the United States as hostile and aggressive. A senior American lawmaker has noted that China's rhetoric toward Obama has grown angry, with the official *People's Daily* accusing the United States of "fanning the flames and provoking division, deliberately creating antagonism with China, " and that newspaper's overseas edition going so far as to say that it was time for the United States to "shut up."[1]

Is it fair to judge Obama's China policy to be so naïve, at least until the "pivot" began in 2012?

Cautious historians may claim that no one can fairly judge the successes and failures of the Obama administration's policy toward China for at least 30 years hence, when the relevant classified documents will be publicly released in the State Department Historian's book series called *Foreign Relations of the United States*. That series lags far behind the times, and even the volume covering the controversial years of Jimmy Carter has not yet been released. However, one can still reach a tentative judgment based on new three books, published in 2012, which agree in their criticisms of failure of Obama's early China policies. The core issue seems to be the erroneous decision to try and "build trust" with China's leaders by pandering to their sensitivities with regard to Taiwan, Tibet and other issues.

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"Building trust" has been tried for several decades by a long string of NSC staffers. Each has reported in his memoirs that the approach was ill-fated, only to have the next president's NSC staff proceed to try the same idea again. The Obama administration's experience in 2009 and 2010 should stand as a warning to any future U.S. president not to underestimate China's misperceptions of American hostility. Yet such a warning is unlikely to be heeded, because of persistent hope that China would like to cooperate with us—if only we could build trust.

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Former NSC staffer Jeffrey A. Bader presents the most positive evaluation of Obama's China policy in his memoir, *Obama and China's Rise*.[2] By contrast, two other books by distinguished journalists cite interviews that highlight Obama's foolishness. James Mann's *The Obamians*[3] and David Sanger's *Confront and Conceal*[4] bluntly assess Obama's China policy as naïve during his first two years.

Bader is a reliable guide, actually an eyewitness, to Obama's early intentions toward China. He stresses how modest the goals were: that Obama did not want any "dramatic changes in U.S. policy toward East Asia." Bader praises part of the Bush foreign policy team and singles out "a number of people—notably Colin Powell, Bob Zoellick, Rich Armitage, Jim Kelly, and Doug Paal" for praise because they well understood the "requirements and subtleties of a sound Asia policy."[5] However, Bader and Obama wanted to reverse the influence of another group of advisers with whom the moderates "had to fight bruising internal battles with a shifting coalition of neoconservatives and hard-liners." During the campaign in 2008, Bader reports, "our campaign team did not see our role as that of articulating dramatic new policy initiatives to reverse eight years of Asia policy."[6]

Besides the decision to continue the policies of Powell, Armitage, Zoellick, Kelly and Paal, the Obama team decided to "avoid the mistakes of the presidential campaigns of 1980, 1992, and 2000, which had damaged U.S.-China relations early on and taken anywhere from one to three years to get past." Bader says Obama wanted to "put a floor under the relationship, to convey that we intended to expand areas of cooperation while managing differences." The key strategy was "to establish a relationship with a modicum of trust between U.S. and Chinese leaders so that there could be political incentives for cooperation."[7] Even this modest goal, however, could not be achieved with regard to Iran, North Korea, climate change or any other major issue. Rather, Bader reports in detail Obama was unfairly criticized by almost everyone from the Friends of Tibet to human rights advocates and sometimes even "the front page of the *New York Times*."

Continuity, not change

In *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power*, James Mann dwells on a significant point: that the Obama strategy was not just a continuation of George W. Bush, but its roots and personnel went all the way back to many of the same foreign policy hands who had worked under Clinton. These Clinton alumni were confronting a changed world, one that the younger Obamians took for granted but the Clinton alumni did not.

Mann, in his conclusion, suggests that the "pivot" to Asia may have been the most important step Obama took in his entire foreign policy. But he hints it may have just been rhetoric. According to Mann, "If a single word captured the Obamians' view of their overall strategy in dealing with the world, from the very start of the administration, it was the concept of 'rebalancing.' They repeated this word again and again in private conversations, in official briefings and in written documents such as their National Security Strategy."[8]

Mann criticizes the "Obamians" who used "rebalancing" in a variety of contexts. In general, they said, America should rebalance its priorities toward a greater emphasis on domestic concerns. In foreign policy, America needed to rebalance from an overreliance on the military toward diplomacy and other means of statecraft. The United States also needed to rebalance away from a preoccupation with the Middle East and toward the prosperous region of East Asia. In economics, Obama and his aides spoke of the need to rebalance the international economy, the global markets, the distribution of imports and exports, and the values of various countries' currencies. In meetings with Chinese president Hu Jintao, whose government held ever growing foreign exchange reserves, the need for rebalancing was at the heart of Obama's message.

Mann writes, "To some experienced Washington politicians, the Obamian concept of rebalancing seemed laudable but not exactly right."[9] The "Obamians" seemed to mean that they believed in the idea of America's "decline," as their opponents sometimes suspect. "The ultimate purpose of [Obama's] foreign policy is to make America less hegemonic, less arrogant, less dominant," wrote Charles Krauthammer during Obama's first year. "In a word, it is a foreign policy designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many."[10] Mann reports the Obama team rejects this criticism that they are declinists, citing Biden's adviser Tony Blinken: "This is the contrary of decline: It's about figuring out, in a more complicated world, with new constraints, how to maximize our power, and that's what we've done," asserted Blinken.[11]

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The mirage of "building trust"

The first two years of Obama's China policy seem to be roundly condemned by everyone. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton got off to a bad start by seeming to trivialize human rights, and Jeff Bader had to ask the Tibetans in exile to postpone a visit by the Dalai Lama. Bader blames the press and the Chinese for criticizing Hillary and less than gallantly tells how he had to save her on board her plane with talking points she badly needed.

Bader takes a dim view of Hillary's early Asia diplomacy in part because the Chinese viewed the secretary "with some wariness." They did so for two reasons. During the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, she had delivered a speech strongly criticizing the heavy-handed way the Chinese ran the conference and treated the attending nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), thereby becoming a rallying point for women and human rights critics. She also had issued some "fairly hot rhetoric about China" during the campaign, mostly on currency and trade issues. Therefore, while the Chinese leaders had a very good relationship with

Bill Clinton, they were not sure if "his spouse viewed China in the same light as he did." Fortunately, in the name of building trust with China, Bader was able to save her by providing talking points for the media which she delivered "in a deadpan" and accepted "as if she were swallowing some bad-tasting medicine."[12]

But building trust would prove to be even harder in the months ahead, and ultimately would fail completely. Tibet in particular would become a significant flashpoint. Bader is at his best describing vividly how China's premier Wen Jiabao essentially broke Obama's heart at the Climate Change conference in Copenhagen.

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Bader and Obama had tried to soothe the Chinese by postponing arms sales to Taiwan and a meeting with the Dalai Lama—sensitive over the perceived challenge posed by the Dalai Lama being received in Washington on the eve of the President's trip to China. Bader reveals the effort to placate: "To compensate for delaying the date of the Dalai Lama's visit, we decided to send the assistant to the president for intergovernmental affairs, Valerie Jarrett, to Dharamsala in September… While our people were preparing for Jarrett's visit to Dharamsala, we sought assurances the Chinese would resume dialogue with the Dalai Lama. The Chinese refused to make an explicit commitment…."[13] No deal on Tibet happened, and by 2012 many monks lit themselves on fire in protest.

But the perceived cold shoulder to the Dalai Lama, and his subsequent visit to other cities in the United States, was spun differently by his representatives—with considerable damage to the Administration's China policy. The incident seemed to "support allegations that the Obama administration was prepared to, as some liked to say, 'kowtow' to the Chinese on human rights issues."[14] Predictably, columnists and editorial writers piled on.

The U.S. media attacked Obama again during his visit to Beijing. As Bader recounts, "Led by a front-page story in the *New York Times*, journalists dug deeply into all the steps the Chinese had undertaken to try to constrain the event. They left the impression of a president who accepted Chinese censorship, pulled his punches, and participated in a Potemkin village event not seen by real Chinese."[15] The main hope in the President's conciliatory approach appears to have been that the "kowtow" would pay off in getting China's cooperation in climate change. And yet, China didn't cooperate. Bader recounts that on climate change, China would not agree to verification or the legally binding character of any commitments.

Thing got worse for the trust building business after Bader retired. By January 2010, when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Beijing, David Sanger recounts that the level of suspicion of Gates's delegation was sky high: "As soon as they got word of the [Chinese stealth fighter] test, Gates's aides huddled to try to figure out what message the Chinese were sending. The first interpretation, one senior aide later told me, was that it was 'a giant screw-you to Gates and Obama'…."[16]

Sanger sums up a widespread view when he writes that "Obama's first three years in office were spent trying to convince Hu to revalue China's currency, pressure Iran to rein in nuclear North Korea, cease claiming exclusive territory in the South China Sea, and crack down on the daily raid on American technology."[17] At times, the Chinese leadership—particularly President Hu and other "technocrats"—seemed to be moving

toward a more responsive, constructive policy. But never did Beijing really meet any of Washington's demands. In Sanger's telling, it is this more than anything else that precipitated a turnaround in Washington's approach toward China.

Mugged by reality

In Obama's first year, he had ducked two perpetual flashpoints with Beijing. One was the tradition of greeting the Dalai Lama of Tibet for a visit to the White House—what Sanger dubs a "ritual endorsement" of Tibet's desires to break free (even though every president carefully intones that Tibet is part of China but should have religious freedom and some autonomy). But back home, pressure was growing on Obama from the left to meet with the Dalai Lama, as a symbol of solidarity after a period of extraordinarily brutal crackdowns by the Chinese in Tibet.

Then there was the long-delayed decision on arms sales to Taiwan, part of the fading American commitment to the island nation—something Obama had pushed off as long as possible. But when he finally gave the Taiwanese a modest package of arms (but none of the F-16s they wanted, which possessed the capability to strike back at the Mainland), the reaction in Beijing amounted to a calculated, prolonged tantrum. Long-arranged visits between Chinese and American military units were canceled. When U.S. officials showed up in Beijing, they were dressed down—and then given a lengthy presentation about China's rights throughout the contested South China Sea area, Sanger reports.

Nor did the intelligence community really seem to know much about how to build trust with China. Sanger recounts that the staff of Obama's National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon, together with much of the intelligence community, concluded there was a debate in China. Sanger writes, "American intelligence agencies reported that there were three competing schools of thought developing in China. Two were the moderates, and the third school—largely in the military—argued that China should not be tethered to a set of Western-written rules meant to keep China down."[18] In the analysis of the U.S. intelligence community, the first and the second schools had won most of the fights, but the third school had all the energy. It was not hard to whip up nationalist sentiment, such as over perceived U.S. "bullying" of North Korea.

Thus, the March 2010 torpedoing of a South Korean ship by Pyongyang led to an ugly exchange between Obama and Hu Jintao when they next met at an economic summit. Obama charged that by ignoring the evidence, Hu was giving the North Koreans the chance to attack again with impunity. Sanger reports, "Hu responded that China was simply being evenhanded, siding with neither North nor South."[19] Obama was so annoyed that he publicly charged the Chinese with "willful blindness" at a press conference.

A new leaf?

The culmination of this widening distance was the so-called "pivot" unveiled publicly by the Obama administration in January 2012.[20] That policy, in formation today, reverses the ill-fated idea of "building trust" in favor of a more confrontational strategy toward China. And yet, significant dangers remain.

History has shown that "building trust" with China was not a wise or complete policy. But its allure is clear, and retains tremendous staying power. Over the past several decades, U.S. policy toward China has overwhelmingly been crafted by a small handful of China experts. Those China "hands," in turn, have tended to be permanently obsessed with the quest for cooperation and trust with China, a nation

on its way this decade to surpassing our economy and one exhibiting an increasingly aggressive, militaristic international profile.

Unfortunately, future presidents will almost certainly want one of these China experts to craft his policy. The end result is that we may well see this movie again.

1. James Webb, "The South China Sea's Gathering Storm," *Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444184704577587483914661256.html.
2. Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2012).
3. James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (Viking Adult, 2012).
4. David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (Crown, 2012).
5. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, xvii.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibidem, 11.
8. Ibidem, 340.
9. Ibidem, 341.
10. Charles Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice," *Weekly Standard* 15, no. 05, October 19, 2009, http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/056lfnpr.asp.
11. Mann, *The Obamians*, 342.
12. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 16.
13. Ibid., 51.
14. Ibidem, 51-52.
15. Ibidem, 59.
16. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 370.
17. Ibid., 374.
18. Ibidem, 398-399.
19. Ibidem, 403.
20. The "pivot" is encapsulated in Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," January 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.