2-27-2009

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Commentators on Clinton on China
February 27, 2009 in The Five-List Plan by The China Beat | 2 comments

Following Hillary Clinton’s visit to Asia, there have been a range of commentaries on her new approach to China. Clinton’s downplay of that standard gambit of Sino-American relations, human rights, has pleased some commentators and maddened others. Here’s a selection of five ways of looking at her China visit:

1) A Missed Opportunity, Merle Goldman at the Boston Globe:

The Charter 08 episode in China reveals widespread dissatisfaction with China’s authoritarian market economy, including those who are the supposed beneficiaries of China’s political model. Their participation in the Charter 08 movement may be attributed not only to worsening economic conditions in late 2008 because of the increasing closure of China’s export industries due to slackening demand for Chinese consumer goods in the West, but also questioning of the political system on which the Chinese Communist Party has based its legitimacy. Despite the crackdown, Charter 08 represents a multi-class movement for political change in China that is likely to continue. Such a movement needs the support of the international community. The worldwide outcry over the crackdown on the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia marked the beginning of the unraveling of the Communist system in Eastern Europe. Clinton’s recent visit to China would have been the appropriate venue for criticism of China’s suppression of Charter 08.

Demands for political change in China will continue. The Obama administration should give more attention to human rights issues in China and support those who advocate peaceful political reforms. Clinton’s trip to China was a missed opportunity.

2) A “Relief,” AFP at The Straits Times:

CHINA’S state media on Monday described Hillary Clinton’s trip to Beijing as a relief, after the US secretary of state steered clear of human rights to focus on cooperation between the two nations. She maintained that Washington’s concerns about rights in China should not be a distraction from vital trade and environmental issues, pointing to the need for cooperation between the world powers amid the economic crisis.

‘If the point of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s maiden voyage overseas in her new role as United States secretary of state was to assure and reassure, she made it,’ the China Daily said.

3) A Promising Approach to the Region, John C. Bersia of McClatchy-Tribune:

Both showmanship and substance were on display during Clinton’s tour. The showmanship was essential to underscore that a different approach is in effect. Toward that end, she – a globally known quantity – has distinct advantages. Many people, from officials to average citizens, want to see her, and she happily accommodates them. But I was even more pleased with the substance, notably what Clinton said during her visit to China.

In fact, her statements went to the heart of the creative engagement that is necessary for the United States to continue to lead in Asia. Although she rightly reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to human rights, she also indicated that the issue will not “interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crises.” In other words, there will be separate tracks for those matters.

4) The End of a “Charade,” Alex Spillius at The Telegraph:
I found her honesty refreshing. For 20 years Western, particularly British and American, leaders have assured their publics that they would pressurise Beijing on Tibet, political dissidents and freedom of religion. The rhetoric was empty. Perhaps the apogee of this craveness was Jiang Zemin’s London visit during the Blair era, when protestors were kept from his view by police vans, while the Foreign Office insisted that human rights was heavily on the agenda.

Now Mrs Clinton has admitted that other things matter much, much more to Washington, namely economic survival. She has exposed the myth that we can’t afford to be unpleasant to the Chinese.

It will be to her shame if she drops human rights from all her discussions with the Chinese over the next four years. They remain guilty of abuses which should make all of us very uncomfortable dealing with Beijing. She says that won’t be the case. Human rights groups, rightly, will be holding her to account.

5) As One Visit Among Many, a wrap-up of Clinton’s recent trips abroad at Worldpress.org

Tags: Hillary Clinton, U.S.-China Relations