11-27-2009

Obama in China: Final Thoughts

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President Obama’s trip to China is now in the past, though there might be a postscript when the U.N. Climate Change Conference convenes in Copenhagen next month, as how China and the U.S. would cooperate (or not) in dealing with environmental issues was a major topic during Obama’s meetings with Chinese leaders. As a final look back at Obama’s first trip to China, here are several readings that put his visit in a larger context:

1. Timothy Garton Ash writes about “Two Ways for West to Meet China”, arguing that Western countries could choose between two strategies when dealing with China:

   The first approach, which China’s rulers like, is for the West to say: “You have your traditions, your civilisation, your culture, your values, and we have ours. In a world of very diverse sovereign great powers, the only basis for international order is mutual respect. Inside our respective frontiers, we do it our way, you do it yours. Only thus can we avoid Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’.”

   . . . The other approach, which I support, is for the West to start the search for a genuinely universal universalism, in a dialogue with China and other non-Western emerging powers. This could not be a purely Western-defined universalism, with the implication that all the essential universal truths were discovered in the West some time between, say, 1650 and 1800, and all other countries simply have to follow suit.

   Rather, it would be a universalism which says something like this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, but maybe you’d like to suggest some other ones. We say life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; perhaps you’d like to make the case for harmony, security or transgenerational community. Then let us compare the aspirations, and the social realities, in the cool light of reason.”

2. This opinion piece at the Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka) compares Obama’s China trip to Richard Nixon’s journey there in 1972.

3. Looking back to the 1870s, China Beatniks Maura Cunningham and Jeff Wasserstrom posted this article at History News Network, detailing similarities and contrasts between Ulysses S. Grant’s meetings with Qing officials and Obama’s talks with Hu Jintao.

4. George Will also went back to the 1870s, but only to mention in passing that Grant, like Obama, met the Japanese emperor during his Asia trip. Will questions Obama’s designation as the first “Pacific President,” pointing out that many Commanders-in-Chief before him have been deeply engaged with the Pacific Rim.

5. Finally, James Fallows has been holding a virtual Obama-palooza over at his Atlantic blog, posting not only a six-part series on coverage of Obama’s visit (“Manufactured Failure”), but also several other articles on the perceived failure of Obama’s Asia trip.

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