

Engagement a priority

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60 years is a short period in Chinese history. As Dr Joseph Needham's work showed the world, China's contribution to science and civilisation that of most countries for the past 5,000 years. China, like Persia, Greece, Turkey, Rome and many other very old civilisations has made immense contributions to the world, and in many cases this has been forgotten by the new world, which knows Disney better.

When my father and other friends started nearly 60 years ago – as the Icebreakers – to reopen trade and contact with China, they were amazed that some would try to boycott and embargo this immense country. These opponents of an open China seemed to be defying the very gravity of the earth which showed that China would inevitably re-occupy its world-leading position. In an era of anti-communist propaganda, there was a belief that China could be starved and frozen into submission.

From their first trip to China, and first contact with the Chinese Communist Party, this attitude seemed almost ridiculous, were it not for the fact that it was backed by the huge military and economic tools of isolation.

But their work in restarting trade with China was destined to succeed, just as China's re-emergence from isolation, obscurity and poverty were to be overcome. When the 'icebreakers' arrived China was a broken state, recovering from civil war and foreign intervention, its population starving and suffering from malnutrition and illness. A life expectancy of 28 has been replaced by one of over 80, a population of a few hundred million by over 1.4 billion people.

The misreading of China is one of the great errors of the world. It has meant that in the past 30 years China has grown from infancy to maturity and is now heading for real strength and power. It has done it by relying on its own strategies and effort, although many in the world have played their part. But, at the end of the day, China's



Stephen Perry
with Dai Bingguo,
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experience of 150 years of foreign invasion, and 60 years of being treated like a second-class nation, has left China depending on its own skills to succeed. While the West could have developed a warm and trusting relationship, it has decided to continue lecturing China about human rights and other such things – this to a country that has thousands of years of civilisation. China's human rights are well advanced on those of the West at a similar stage of development. We would be better spending our time getting our own human rights in better shape and leaving good examples for others.

So China is now strong and developing. Now the West has fallen into deep trouble and we have seen the Chinese Vice Premier standing in the Guildhall, in the centre of the City of London, admonishing the British for taking their eye off the game. Now the world has come full circle and China is in the ascendancy and all the King's men cannot match the development path of China.

Is China crowing or trying to dominate as it once felt it was? No. It is quietly maintaining its course of development and very deliberately avoiding the road to superpower status. China does not want to go where the UK and the USA, and many others have been. China will develop its own nation and work to avoid global power and reach, except where it is vital to its needs.

China is above all now an Asian nation. We see endless articles about the IMF, the World Bank, G20, G8 and many others, but the reality is that these are not the important structures for China. Much more important to China is ASEAN + 3, the East Asian Summit, SCO, the Tripartite Group and Chiang Mai. China is interested in building Asia and not the world. It will play its role in the world but its core is in Asia. Few seem to grasp this and even fewer understand the longer-term implications. The IMF has a medium-term future but not much more. Then it may be used by Western nations. Eventually, it will die as a global institution.


We are now moving away from the era of 30 years of China learning from the West, into a new era when the West can learn from China. As the West debates the funding of an escalating welfare state and the total cost of the state, it is China where the state costs less than 25 per cent compared to our bloated 45 per cent. They will develop a suitable welfare state, an affordable one. They will develop an economy geared to a healthy life for its people – not immediately, but within 10-20 years. They will lead the world in environmental solutions.

While China will develop its economy around its domestic and Asian needs, its trade with the West will diminish in importance. Its need for massive exports to the West will decline and its purchases will also subside. They say in 10 years there will be three aircraft manufacturers – Boeing, Airbus and the Chinese. And that in 20 there will be two – the Chinese and one other. We have a short time to work out how to link

into this unfolding new continent of Asia. We need an explosion in our university students spending a year in China. We need to get Asia, and get China.

The issues are too big now for incremental thinking. We need to change our approach radically. The down side is not a threat from China. They do not seek hegemony over the West. What for? They know that leads to trouble and self-destructive trouble. No, the real worry is that we will be bypassed into a very marginal position for our children and heirs. This attempt to build an economy on money will not be replicated in China. They will base their economy on food and industry. Increasingly export industries will be moved offshore.

The China of the next 60 years will be like nothing we have ever seen in the world. They will build a world based on harmony and redistribution of wealth. Of course, when my father said China was going to re-emerge as a leading nation, some said he was mad. I say that China will emerge as a leading Asian nation, developing peacefully but in a form that makes our nation states redundant. Now is the time to learn from China, to engage with modesty. The problem areas of the world will only be settled down with the help and support of Russia and China, not by surrounding them with missile systems.

We have wasted time not engaging with China. Now we must make up that time. 

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Stephen Perry
with Hu Jintao,
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