

Dear President Obama: in talking to China, remember its people

Rebecca MacKinnon



Exported from Wikisource on June 30, 2024



This work may need to be standardized using [Wikisource's style guidelines](#).

If you'd like to help, please review the [help pages](#).

Dear President Obama,

Welcome to U.S.-China relations! You didn't even mention China in your inaugural address, but the Chinese censors still took it personally. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's remarks in his confirmation hearing about currency manipulation have got everyone in a tizzy. We're off to a rollicking start!

People in China are watching closely -- and starting to debate -- whether your administration's pursuit of America's economic interests will help or hurt their own.

China is obviously not a democracy. Even so, if you really want to take U.S.-China relations to a new strategic level that rises above the day-to-day issues, you need to find new ways to engage the Chinese people themselves -- not just their government.

Normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979, combined with economic reforms and opening, transformed the Chinese people's lives. Chinese of our generation understand this. But their children take their opportunities and comforts for granted. They don't necessarily see the

U.S. as a symbol of hope or a target of aspirations the way their parents did.

It is this young generation born after 1980 who were most vocal on the Chinese Internet last year, lashing out against Western critics and Western media coverage of their government's crackdown in Tibet. In response to international pressure, the Chinese government negotiated with the Dalai Lama, but it didn't feel the need to concede anything meaningful. In maintaining a hard line, the Chinese leadership could feel doubly secure in the fact that, not only did they have the strength of the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police on their side; China's majority Han-Chinese public had no sympathy for the idea of Tibetan autonomy.

Chinese leaders listen selectively to public opinion, and sometimes those opinions actually give them an extra excuse to tell the U.S. where to shove it. While Americans tend to think of the Internet as the medium that will inevitably free the Chinese people of authoritarian rule, Chinese leaders have -- for many years now -- been going there for proof that the public wants them to be tougher with the U.S. Back in 2001 a U.S. spyplane made an emergency landing on Hainan island after a collision with a Chinese fighter jet which crashed into the sea. If people in the Chinese Internet chatrooms had gotten their way, the U.S. crew would be in a Chinese jail today. In a recent interview with The Atlantic's James Fallows, the President

of the China Investment Corporation Gao Xiqing pointed out that his P.R. department is inundated with public comments calling for him to sell U.S. dollar assets.

The point is that while these people are not citizens of a democracy, they are by no means an undifferentiated mass of brainwashed drones. Despite often crude censorship of the Internet and state-run media, despite manipulation, intimidation of dissidents and political astro-turfing of the blogosphere by paid commentators, there is no unity of thought in China today. Civic minded citizens manage to hold wide-ranging debates on the Chinese Internet, in living rooms, dormitories, office break rooms, and classrooms about many public issues. Reading the Chinese blogs I've found all kinds of views about you and your new administration. Many are inspired by your personal story and the idea of truly equal opportunity that you represent. Others hope that you will be more forthright and principled on human rights issues than the Bush administration was. Others are very concerned that you will be protectionist in order to help the American people in the short run, and that this will hurt the Chinese people economically. Others lament cynically that no matter what happens, the rich and powerful in both countries will be the relationship's main beneficiaries.

The Chinese government will have greater incentive to work with you on creative solutions to complex problems if your diplomats can do a better job of reassuring ordinary

Chinese that you do actually care whether U.S.-China policy outcomes will benefit them -- not just China's commercial and political elites. Right now, frankly, they're not convinced. One-way monologues through the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia don't have much street cred with China's Internet generation, to be honest. It's time to upgrade your public diplomacy strategy for the 21st Century.

Just as you have used new technology to engage with the American electorate, your China policy can be greatly strengthened if you conduct a real conversation with the Chinese people. Listen as much as you talk; provide a much-needed platform for open discussion. The U.S. embassy in Beijing should build a Chinese-language website modeled after change.gov, focused not just on U.S.-China relations, but on the range of concerns and interests - from environment, to food safety, to factory safety standards, to education and real estate law -- shared by ordinary Chinese and Americans. Some linguistically talented State Department employees should start blogging in Chinese. Open up the comments sections, see how the Chinese blogosphere responds, then respond to them in turn. Translate some of the Chinese conversation into English for Americans to read and react, then translate it back. Sure there will be censorship problems on the Chinese side, but if enough Chinese find the conversation important and relevant to their lives, the censors ultimately won't be able to stop it. Nor should they want to if they're

wise - because the resulting conversation would help both governments build a more stable and rational relationship that would truly benefit the people of both countries.

<http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2009/01/dear-president-obama-in-talking-to-china-remember-its-people.html>



This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/) License. This page must provide all available authorship information.

About this digital edition

This e-book comes from the online library [Wikisource](#). This multilingual digital library, built by volunteers, is committed to developing a free accessible collection of publications of every kind: novels, poems, magazines, letters...

We distribute our books for free, starting from works not copyrighted or published under a free license. You are free to use our e-books for any purpose (including commercial exploitation), under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 Unported](#) license or, at your choice, those of the [GNU FDL](#).

Wikisource is constantly looking for new members. During the transcription and proofreading of this book, it's possible that we made some errors. You can report them at [this page](#).

The following users contributed to this book:

- Arilang1234
- Billinghurst
- Kwj2772
- CalendulaAsteraceae
- Santoposmoderno
- Sasa Stefanovic
- Keymap9

- Smasongarrison
- Naymakha13
- Belbury