

Reagan-Sino Legacy: Relations of the United States and China in the 1980s

Nicholas G. Hahn III

Tiananmen Square is over six thousand miles from Krakow, Poland but through the lens of history, they bear a striking resemblance. Nowa Huta is a small suburb outside Krakow. It was formerly a planned Soviet community, one with large, typically-Soviet buildings making up long city blocks. It was a failed communist attempt to catch up to the industrial giant of the United States. During the communist time, workers regularly protested in what was Central Square. In 2004, the Krakow City Council voted to rename this square to: “Ronald Reagan Square.” All throughout Eastern Europe, you’ll find similar honors to our 40th President. Ronald Reagan’s legacy lives most vibrantly here, in the town squares of Eastern Europe.

Nowa Huta is a far cry from Beijing. There are no statues of Ronald Reagan in Beijing or in Shanghai. China is still communist. Accordingly, Reagan excluded the Red Chinese from his famous condemnation of the “Evil Empire.” In fact, China was the first communist country Reagan ever visited as President. This ideological disconnect was simply strategic, for as Reagan said, “Russia is still enemy number one.”¹ China was not the communist country invading Afghanistan; Chinese influence could not be felt as Martial Law was declared in Poland; and most of all, China was no ally of the Soviet Union. In a word, China was not an aggressively expanding communist state which threatened world peace—the Soviet Union was all the above.

China’s economy is today booming and tomorrow it will threaten America’s spot on the world stage—this wasn’t always the case. In order to fully grasp this current state of U.S.-Sino relations, we must first be reminded of the Cold War era.

Nicholas Hahn is a Political Science and Catholic Studies student at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. Nicholas is a Phillips Foundation Ronald Reagan College Leaders Scholar and has been named one of the 2006-2007 Top Ten Campus Conservative Activists by Young America’s Foundation.

¹ Quoted in Paul Kengor. The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism (Los Angeles: Regan Books, 2006) p 46

Richard Nixon was America's anti-communist crusader, but as soon as he ascended to the Presidency, he softened his approach to the Soviet Union considerably. Nixon, with the encouragement of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, pursued a policy of détente. Nixon presupposed a two-way street between Washington and Moscow—but as Reagan once quipped, “the Soviets make promises, they don't keep them.” Indeed, Leonid Brezhnev amplified Soviet expansionism and planted new communist seeds in Latin America, the horn of Africa, and the Middle East.

While both were committed to the communist path, the Soviet Union and China were pursuing opposite directions in the world order. China would not be engulfed by the seemingly unstoppable Soviet wave dominating Eastern Europe. In this sense, Nixon's visit to China was an iconic moment. He was the first American president to visit China and it was a startling attempt to open relations with this ideological counterweight. Reagan agreed: “Russia, therefore, has to keep its 140 divisions on the Chinese border...we buy a little time and elbowroom in a plain, simple strategic move.”²

Reagan, however, as Lou Cannon describes, “had long been Taiwan's leading political champion.”³ This is precisely why President Nixon, in order to sooth relations with Taiwan, sent Governor Reagan to do just that.⁴ In 1971, Reagan wrote: “Personally, I think the Red Chinese are a bunch of murdering bums.”⁵ Shortly after his trip to Taiwan, Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations General Assembly. Reagan was furious with the “completely immoral action” of the U.N.⁶

Years later during his second presidential campaign, Reagan was questioned about whether or not his support for Taiwan had changed: “It is absolutely untrue that I am going to [Beijing]. I have not altered one bit in saying this country must not abandon its friends on

² Quoted in Peter Schweizer. Reagan's War: The Epic Story of his Forty Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism (New York: Doubleday Books, 2002) p. 67.

³ Lou Cannon. President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) pp. 479-480.

⁴ Stephen Hayward. The Age of Reagan. 1964-1980 The Fall of the Old Liberal Order (New York: Prime Lifestyles, 2001) p. 283.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid*, 1.

Taiwan or weaken our mutual defense treaty with them.”⁷ After Reagan had won the Republican nomination for President, Reagan held a press conference to see off his running-mate, George Bush, who was traveling to Japan and China. “But Reagan, stubbornly loyal to his friends, the free Chinese, reiterated his intention to restore ‘official’ diplomatic ties with their regime on Taiwan.” He also wanted to “upgrade the negotiations with the representatives of Taiwan.”⁸

Reagan’s urge to upgrade negotiations was a de-facto policy of repealing the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. Nixon’s diplomatic coup with China required that it be a “One-China” policy, with no provision for any official relations with Taiwan. And so, the 1979 act established only “quasi-diplomatic” relations with Taiwan. The American Institute in Taiwan served as an embassy and interest point between the United States and Taiwan. Reagan saw this as an insult.

In December of 1981, a delegation of Reagan administration officials was sent to Beijing representing the U.S.-Chinese Joint Economic Committee. Much to the surprise of one Reagan economic advisor, Martin Anderson, communist philosophy was not the topic of discussion. In fact, they wanted better technology to “spur economic growth.”

In one memorable exchange, Anderson asked Bo Yibo, a high-level Chinese economic advisor, what had changed in Chinese economic policy: “for many years in China we were following a policy whereby everyone put everything into one big iron bowl. And then everyone took from the bowl what they needed. It didn’t work.”⁹ Anderson was visibly shaken by this frank admission. He observed: “Since the early 1980s the Chinese people have tasted a few fruits of capitalism, and their appetite seems barely wetted.”¹⁰ Indeed, a few years earlier, Deng Xiaoping instituted *gaige kaifang* or reforms and openness. It was the Chinese version of Mikhail Gorbachev’s later-to-come *perestroika*. Deng established “Special Economic Zones” which encouraged a more liberal market, especially for foreign investment. Reagan heartily welcomed China’s new course of economic direction.

⁷ Quoted in Frank van der Linden. The Real Reagan. What He Believes, What He Has Accomplished, What We Can Expect (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988) p. 157

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7. pp. 234-235

⁹ Quoted in Martin Anderson. Revolution. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt 1988) p. 13.

¹⁰ Martin Anderson. Ibid. p. 16.

Further into his Presidency, Reagan continued his support of Taiwan in the negotiations of the August 17, 1982 communiqué between China and the United States. Deng Xiaoping wanted American arm sales to Taiwan to end and demanded that the United States set a timetable. As Edward Lanfranco recounts succinctly, “neither side completely got what it wanted: China has continued to tolerate periodic American sales to the island; the U.S. is compelled to cap the quality of weapons and progressively reduce the quantity of what it sells.”¹¹

Reagan held that this communiqué still enabled his administration to maintain relations with Taiwan: “In working toward this successful outcome we have paid particular attention to the needs and interests of the people of Taiwan. My longstanding personal friendship and deep concern for their well-being is steadfast and unchanged. I am committed to *maintaining the full range of contacts between the people of the United States and the people of Taiwan*—cultural, commercial, and people-to-people contacts—which are compatible with our unofficial relationship [emphasis added]. Such contacts will continue to grow and prosper and will be conducted with the dignity and honor befitting old friends.”¹²

This communiqué was important to stabilizing U.S. relationships with China and Taiwan; an agreement which is still honored today. Henry Liu explains: “The last of the three communiqués in fact arrested the forward momentum of the previous two on moving toward a mutually satisfactory resolution of the Taiwan issue.”¹³

The communiqué itself triggered a “new breed” of policy advisors to surface. “They argued that past US concessions to China were unnecessary and that China had no real options but to accept US terms. This line of thinking narrowed the gap between the anti-Soviet hawks and the pro-Taiwan right in US domestic politics over China policy...”¹⁴ The connection between the positions of pro-Taiwan and anti-Soviet was illuminated—freedom was the bridge.

¹¹ Edward Lanfranco. *Reagan's legacy in Sino-U.S. relations*. United Press International. 11 June 2004. <<http://chinese-school.netfirms.com/articles/Ronald-Reagan-China.html>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

¹² Ronald Reagan. *Statement on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 17 August 1982. <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/81782b.htm>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

¹³ Henry Liu. *US, China: The Politics of Ambiguity*. *Asia Times Online*. 24 April 2002. <<http://www.atimes.com/china/DD24Ad02.html>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

Meanwhile, Deng's *gaige kaifang* seemed to begin to pay off. China was becoming increasingly pro-Western, as Henry Liu describes: "China appeared addicted to US capital and markets and seduced by American capitalist ideology and culture. McDonald's hamburgers and Coca-Cola were hailed in China as symbols of modernity."¹⁵ Reagan began to notice that "trade will change the Chinese political system" and so, he planned a visit China in April of 1984.

As the Cold War progressed, other world leaders began to surface. Pope John Paul II, born in Poland, was deeply troubled with the situation in his homeland. He was in constant contact with local Polish priests who helped foster Solidarity throughout underground Poland. The Pope was also concerned with religious liberties in China. The Pope desperately wanted to visit Beijing. He even wrote personal letters to Deng Xiaoping. As Frank Ching describes, "It was the ardent desire of the late pontiff to visit China during his lifetime, but he was denied even the chance to visit Hong Kong during an Asian tour in 1999."¹⁶ Pope John Paul II wanted to speak directly to the people of China and help cultivate the pillars of culture and liberty.

Reagan's visit to China would help carry the message the Pope so desperately wanted to deliver. Reagan's speeches in China were rich with ideas concerning commonality, culture, innovation, and freedom. Reagan spoke at the Great Hall of the People on April 27, 1984. He began his speech with an important distinction, "We must always be realistic about our relationship, frankly acknowledging the fundamental differences in ideology and institutions between our two societies." In declaring fundamental differences, Reagan, yet, describes the agreement on "many vital questions of our time." "America and China both condemn military expansionism, *the brutal occupation of Afghanistan*, the crushing of Kampuchea; and we share a stake in preserving peace on the Korean peninsula."¹⁷

Concerning the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the U.S. and China did more than just condemn it. "Throughout the 1980s, the CIA purchased arms from China for the mujahideen in their war against the Soviet Union. The Afghan War was the beginning of US-China military

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁶ Frank Ching. *Sino-Vatican relations after Pope John Paul II*. Association for Asian Research. 05 June 2005. <<http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2601.html>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan. *Remarks to Chinese Community Leaders in Beijing, China*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 27 April 1984. <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/42784a.htm>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

cooperation...”¹⁸ This act of collaboration proved that Sino-U.S. relations had moved past rhetoric and warm feelings—both countries were sharing intelligence and aiding the freedom fighters of Afghanistan.¹⁹

Reagan wanted to explain to the Chinese people and the government the forces which made America great: “faith and freedom. America was founded by people who sought freedom to worship God and to trust in Him to guide them in their daily lives with wisdom, strength, goodness, and compassion.” This was a deeply important message that would have resonated with the people had it not been censored by the Chinese authorities.²⁰

Reagan then moved to detail the new economic changes that were fostering growth in China:

China's economy crackles with the dynamics of change: expansion of individual incentives for farmers in your new responsibility system; new bonuses for workers and more disciplined management in terms of profits and losses; improved methods of market distribution; opening your economy to the world through China's membership in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and through your invitation to trade and invest, especially in your four Special Economic Zones; and your commitment to attract capital and scientific knowledge to create a high technology base for the future. All this reflects China's new role in the international economic community and your determination to modernize your economy and raise the standard of living of your people.²¹

It is important to note that recognizing this gradual change in economic philosophy was a linchpin to Reagan’s sense of openness and optimism for China: “Unlike some governments which fear change and fear the future, China is beginning to reach out toward new horizons, and we salute your courage.”²²

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid*, 17.

²² *Ibid*, 17.

In light of this change of philosophy, Reagan looked to the future: “We think progress in four areas is particularly promising: trade, technology, investment, and exchanges of scientific and managerial expertise.”²³ He outlined the growth in trade between the two countries, this growth perhaps, he insinuated, was because of the inherent destiny of man to prosper and be free.

No where else could this nature of man be more animated than in the hearts of the young Chinese. Reagan spoke at Fudan University just a few days after his speech at the Great Hall of the People. In fact, Reagan was so excited to meet with the students; he made an impromptu visit to a classroom before his formal speech to the student body in the auditorium. “I'm convinced that each of you stands at a great beginning. The Chinese people have skill, ingenuity, and a rich heritage. And those of you who are privileged to come to this university will help lead your country to new prosperity.” Before entertaining a few questions, Reagan encouraged the students to follow their dreams: “It's not so much what's inside the Earth that counts but what's inside one's heart and mind, because that's the stuff that dreams are made of. And China's future depends on your dreams and your faith and determination to make your dreams come true.”²⁴ The students were ecstatic.

In Reagan's formal remarks to Fudan University, in distinctive Reagan-esque eloquence, he described the pillars of American society, a sort of “Democracy 101.” America, Reagan explained, respects the “dignity of each man, woman, and child. Our entire system is founded on an appreciation of the special genius of each individual, and of his special right to make his own decisions and lead his own life.” This appreciation of the individual is grounded in particular facets of “national character.” Reagan then bulleted several characteristics of America: “fair-minded,” “idealists,” “compassionate,” “optimistic,” “peace[ful],” and perhaps most importantly for Reagan, religious “faith.”²⁵

It is these characteristics which Reagan saw most of all in the students, “But it is always the younger generation who will make the future. It is you who will decide if a continuing,

²³ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan. *Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Students at Fudan University in Shanghai, China*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 30 April 1984. <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/43084d.htm>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

²⁵ Ronald Reagan. *Remarks at Fudan University in Shanghai, China*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 30 April 1984. <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/43084e.htm>>. Accessed 23 August 2007.

personal friendship can span the generations and the differences that divide us. In such friendship lies the hope of the world.”²⁶ Only five years later would this hope of the world be on display in many cities in China. Many of the students listening to Reagan then would end up demonstrating for the American characteristics he spoke of. These were some of the students who would erect the Goddess of Democracy. This was the generation of liberty.

Ronald Reagan was not President of the United States at the time of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989. His heart must have been stirred by the site. The Executive Director of the China Support Network, John Kusumi wrote: “I have my differences with that administration over how the occasion of Tiananmen Square was handled. I believe that, *had Ronald Reagan been President, he would have spoken out on the night of June 4th* [emphasis added]. In contrast, the muted response of George H. W. Bush came the following day, with no memorable speech on television.”²⁷

Had Reagan given a speech the night of June 4th, it most likely would have included the same ideas of liberty and freedom discussed in his speeches to the Fudan University students. While there are no statues to Reagan in Tiananmen Square, the Goddess of Democracy was erected to represent the ideas Reagan espoused only five years earlier.

If judged only by his visit to Beijing and Shanghai, Reagan’s legacy in Sino-U.S. relations was a beaming success. His unwavering support for the people of Taiwan seemed not to railroad any relations with mainland China. Reagan had accomplished the irreconcilable: he had preserved his conviction for freedom and at the same time normalized relations with a changing China. Ronald Reagan’s long twilight struggle against expansionist communism was won with the fall of the Berlin Wall. China was not the “Evil Empire.” It was not “enemy number one.”

²⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

²⁷ John Kusumi. *Mishandling Tiananmen Square*. China Support Network. 06 June 2003. <<http://www.chinasupport.net/buzz25.htm>>. Accessed 23 August 2007