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Recent Events

- **Book Launch: “Developing China: The Remarkable Impact of Foreign Direct Investment”** (September 27, 2016)
- **Cross-Strait Relations Under the Tsai Ing-wen Administration** (September 15, 2016)
- **Playing to Our Strengths: U.S.-Taiwan Cooperation in the ICT Sector** (July 26, 2016)
- **China and the G20** (July 20, 2016)

Upcoming Event

- **Chinese Public Opinion and the Durability of Chinese Communist Party Rule** (October 26, 2016)

THE AMBIGUOUS BENEFIT OF MEETINGS IN CHINA

SCOTT KENNEDY

I’ve been to China a half dozen times this year, and I still have at least two trips left to bring me to the lucky number of eight. After 28 years, making the trek across the Pacific—or over the North Pole—doesn’t bring the same excitement it once did, but I still enjoy seeing friends and colleagues, seeing the sites, and learning new things about one of the most fascinating places in the world. My hope on each visit is to walk away surprised at something I saw or heard.

But I have to admit, on occasion I wonder how useful these trips are. I don’t mind the jet lag, which I view as a good opportunity to get through piled up work and catch the sunrise, and I’m not really bothered by the traffic in Beijing (where I stick to the subway as much as possible) or the pollution and inconveniences you run into in almost any Chinese city. What is starting to eat at me is the seemingly limited value of the events I attend. Now, of course, public meetings in China have never been the most opportune time to debate complex ideas and achieve breakthroughs. Andrew Walder’s fantastic study, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism* (1986), noted that meetings were venues for displays of political correctness (*biaoxian*, 表现). That said, my initial unscientific instinct is to conclude that we’ve reached a new low and that public gatherings seem even less productive than in years past.

Here are three examples.

In early June, I attended the U.S.-China Innovation Dialogue, which is a component of the U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue. Now in its eighth year, the American side’s original goal was to use the meeting as a vehicle to promote the norm of market-based innovation, as opposed to government-directed support (and opposition) for certain technologies. During this year’s meeting, both Americans and Chinese, officials and business people, enunciated this norm. At the same time, several Chinese speakers unapologetically defended the need

(continued on page 2)

THE AMBIGUOUS BENEFIT OF MEETINGS IN CHINA

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for government support in certain instances for emerging industries. When pressed on the specific case of preferential credit for e-vehicle battery development that has gone exclusively to Chinese companies, an official responded that such support was entirely legitimate and that if non-Chinese companies wanted access to such support, they should invest in China. Other speakers stressed the importance of international cooperation to spur innovation, which is code for the transfer of American technology to China for free or at subsidized rates. This may be laudable, but the implied expectation made is that this should occur even as the Chinese government continues to provide extensive funding for indigenous technology development. In short, the original purpose of the Innovation Dialogue, at least from the American point of view, was largely blunted and in some ways turned on its head.

In late June, I attended a conference on governance cohosted by two American and Chinese universities. Political science has never been the most progressive scholarly discipline in China, but this gathering felt like a trip back in time to the 1980s when Chinese scholars were just beginning to become familiar with social science theories and methods. Several Chinese attendees stressed that China needed to find its own governance model and not accept “Western” social science theories, which they suggested were universally critical of countries that are not multiparty democracies. One highlighted that the Chinese government, under the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership, has become a thoroughly “service government” aimed at helping society, without regard for itself. There were counter voices, mostly by non-PRC experts, who complicated this picture, but disagreements were exercises in speaking past one another than directly addressing opposing views.

And finally, in mid-September, I attended the Binhai Forum on Peace and Development in Northeast Asia. Graciously hosted by the Tianjin municipal government and several Chinese foreign policy organizations, the public presentations by the Chinese attendees did not break stride with official positions on economic or security issues. The Belt & Road, and its ancillary arm, the China-

In the News

“The only thing he’s focused on right now is next fall. If he gets his way next fall, which I think would mean they don’t signal the successor, that doesn’t then mean he’s already decided to stay on forever.”

—Christopher K. Johnson in the *New York Times*, “Xi Jinping May Delay Picking China’s Next Leader, Stoking Speculation”

“The conflict over China’s trajectory pits three camps against each other: optimists, debt hawks, and policy critics. Their disagreements turn on their varying confidence in the Chinese government’s ability to manage the economy and alternative assessments about the threat that rising debt levels pose to the economy.”

—Scott Kennedy in *Foreign Policy*, “It’s Time for China Analysts to Stop Talking Past One Another”

“China’s relationship with North Korea is arguably the worst it has been in several years. The Chinese ability to really squeeze the regime and get them to be more in line—or at least not make trouble for China—has been strained.

And the reality is that China still has ultimate leverage in terms of the aid that it supplies but they’re ultimately unwilling to use it because they still feel much more comfortable having a buffer zone called North Korea between themselves and the South and U.S. forces in the South.”

—Christopher K. Johnson in *Bloomberg*, “How Will the U.S. Election Impact Relations With China?”

“China is most interested in maintaining basic stability of its currency and limiting volatility. Reducing expectations of substantial or sudden depreciation helps reduce capital outflows. The recent modest depreciation is not geared to support exports.”

—Scott Kennedy in *Voice of America*, “US Clearing Center Is China’s Latest Move to Make Yuan Global Currency”

THE AMBIGUOUS BENEFIT OF MEETINGS IN CHINA

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Mongolia-Russia Corridor, received great praise. North Korea was criticized for its recent nuclear test, but the United States was encouraged to do more to reassure the DPRK and to not go forward with deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system. I could have—and did—read all of this in Xinhua reports. Moreover, the meeting was held at a swank conference resort center, but it was surrounded by a high wall and located far from downtown Tianjin, which kept attendees isolated from ordinary Chinese.

In each of these three meetings, there was a dearth of substantial give-and-take between Chinese and international participants, and when there was, it felt more like attendees reflexively resorted to knee-jerk defenses of their initial views. I wonder whether any minds were changed by any of the public exchanges. In the past, I've attended meetings in China that had more open and engaging exchanges, between Chinese and foreign participants and amongst the Chinese participants themselves. But these more recent events left the impression that public discourse in China has become stale and of limited value.

The question is why. My initial reaction is that the most likely answer is that maintaining a common position in public is expected even more in Xi Jinping's China than in earlier eras. The penalties for going off script may have risen. But there is another possibility—that my initial impression is wrong or at least not the full story. It is entirely conceivable that I inaccurately imagined greater genuine engagement in years past. That may be because China's official line on many things was more liberal under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and even Hu Jintao, and I mistook a greater level of agreement that I heard in meetings during these periods as a sign of more in-depth interchange. Relatedly, it is possible, even likely, that in the wake of the global financial crisis, the difficulties of the United States in its fight against terrorism, and the relative economic and diplomatic success of China, attitudes in the People's Republic have decidedly changed. People aren't necessarily parroting the party line as much as simply expressing a genuine different point of view. And rather than accept that possibility, I may have

In the News

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“It really is the economic component of the US pivot to Asia. If we don't get this done in the lame duck-session in Congress—which now looks very likely since we have both major candidates opposing the deal—it really is a great advertisement for China message in the region.”

—Christopher K. Johnson in *CNBC International*, “The US will have zero credibility in Asia if TPP fails, ex-CIA official warns”

“China should keep spending on infrastructure, but in different ways. He says the country needs more investment in rural areas to narrow regional wealth disparities, along with well-designed hospitals and schools.”

—Scott Kennedy in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Is China Building a Road to Ruin?”

Podcasts

LISTEN Obama's Legacy in U.S.-China Relations: A Conversation with Evan Medeiros (September 29, 2016)

LISTEN Why and How China Hacks: A Conversation with Samm Sacks (September 20, 2016)

LISTEN Recapping China's G20: A Conversation with Matt Goodman (September 10, 2016)

LISTEN Understanding China's Intelligence Services with Christopher Johnson (July 19, 2016)

LISTEN China's Five-Year Plan with Scott Kennedy (July 14, 2016)

THE AMBIGUOUS BENEFIT OF MEETINGS IN CHINA

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rationalized it as Chinese political correctness.

My conclusion is that it likely is a combination of both increased pressure for political correctness on the one hand and more heartfelt doubts about liberal economic and political approaches on the other. In any event, I think the wrong conclusion would be that public meetings in China are entirely irrelevant and that we should avoid attending them. Even if they are filled with seemingly boring recitations of official policy or heartfelt defenses of those positions, there is still a lot to learn and observe. You cannot have a genuine dialogue without fully understanding the official positions of all parties. And simply hearing Chinese positions has the beneficial effect of pushing us to become more familiar with U.S. policies, the pros and cons of each side, as well as the positions of others. Being pushed and prodded, whatever the motivation of others, is almost always a good exercise that we should welcome, not reject in frustration.

Finally, even public events have their private moments, when one can hear both defenses of public statements and also more complex analyses that reflect a wider range of views in China than one hears emanating from speakers standing on a dais in front of microphones and cameras. Talking with scholars, businesspeople, and officials on the sidelines of these meetings was illuminating by any standard, as we could talk about macro topics and micro issues. During breaks of the Innovation Dialogue, informal conversations yielded a range of views about the government's proper role in spurring innovations. During meals at the symposium on governance, local analysts were more willing to exchange gossip and speculation about elite politics. And in Tianjin I had the good fortune to meet new friends from Mongolia and Russia, two countries with which I have little contact. Their perspectives on China were not consistent with each other or typical of what one would hear in the United States.

So perhaps not as much has changed in attending meetings in China as I had initially believed. The one thing that was differ-

Interactive Website

China's 13th Five-Year Plan (5YP)

<http://fiveyearplan.csis.org/>

DID YOU KNOW that China's five-year plans take over two years to write? **Learn more** about China's most authoritative vision statement of economic and social goals through an interactive map depicting regional targets, a flowchart of the drafting process, a timeline of 5YPs, analysis on national targets and implementation, and commentaries.

Recent Publications

"Cautious Optimism: Prospects for Cross-Strait Relations Under the Tsai Administration," by William Johnson, Brian Bumpas, and Marina Leonart-Calvo, *CSIS Commentary*, September 22, 2016.

"The Hangzhou G20 Summit: The Ambiguous Gap between Aspiration & Action," by Scott Kennedy, *CSIS Critical Questions*, September 7, 2016.

"It's Time for China Analysts to Stop Talking Past One Another," by Scott Kennedy, *Foreign Policy*, August 24, 2016.

"Judgment Day: The South China Sea Tribunal Issues Its Ruling," by Gregory Poling, Michael J. Green, Murray Hiebert, Christopher K. Johnson, Amy Searight, and Bonnie Glaser, *CSIS Critical Questions*, July 12, 2016.

ent from the late 1980s is that now I like tea, and my Chinese friends are coffee drinkers. Although I dread the upcoming flights, on further reflection, I'm now looking forward to what will take place after I land. ■

Scott Kennedy is a deputy director of the Freeman Chair in China Studies and director of the Project on Chinese Business and Political Economy at CSIS.

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Recent Publications *(continued)*

Perfecting China, Inc.: The 13th Five-Year Plan, by Scott Kennedy and Christopher K. Johnson, *CSIS Report*, May 2016.

FREEMAN CHAIR IN CHINA STUDIES

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