

CONFIDENTIAL

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PRIME MINISTER

KISSINGER AND CHINA

As you know, Kissinger probably has more experience than any other westerner of negotiating with the Chinese. He has visited Peking on some ten occasions. I thought it might be instructive to look again at his memoirs. The following points struck me.

Familiar Faces

Much has changed in China since Kissinger went there in 1971 but a photograph of his arrival shows him being greeted by, among others, Huang Hua (the present Foreign Minister), the Vice Minister who accompanied you throughout your trip and your interpreter. These people have been studying western behaviour for a very long time. We shall need to match their expertise with expertise of our own.

Subtlety

Kissinger relates how, when he was trying to promote a rapprochement with Peking in 1970, he and all his advisers failed to note a signal conveyed to them by Chou En-Lai and Mao Tse-tung. The relevant passage is as follows:-

"Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung quite independently decided that the time had come to send us a signal. Unfortunately, they overestimated our subtlety, for what they conveyed was so oblique that our crude Occidental minds completely missed the point. On October 1, China's National Day, Chou En-lai led the American writer Edgar Snow - an old friend of the Chinese Communists - and his wife to stand at Mao's side on Tien An Men (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) and to be photographed with Mao reviewing the annual anniversary parade. This was unprecedented: no American had ever been so honoured. The inscrutable Chairman was trying to convey something. (As Snow himself later observed of the incident: "Nothing China's leaders do publicly is without purpose.) Eventually, I came to understand that Mao intended to symbolize that American relations now had his personal attention, but it was by then a purely academic insight: we had missed the point when it mattered. Excessive subtlety had produced a failure in communication."

/Another

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

Another more well known example of Chinese subtlety was their use of "Ping Pong diplomacy" in 1971. You will recall how an American table tennis team which visited Tokyo was suddenly invited to visit China and were received in the Great Hall of the People by Chou En-lai himself. Kissinger comments: "Like all Chinese moves, it had so many layers of meaning that the brilliantly painted surface was the least significant part.. At its most obvious the invitation to the young Americans symbolized China's commitment to improved relations with the United States: on a deeper level it reassured - more than any diplomatic communication through any channel - that the emissary who would now surely be invited would step on friendly soil. It was a signal to the White House that our initiatives had been noted. The fact that the players could not possibly represent a particular political tendency added to the attractiveness of the manoeuvre from the Chinese perspective. China would be able to make its point without any possibility of a jarring American commentary. Chou En-lai, too, knew how to make gestures that could not be rebuffed. Within China it helped condition the public and party cadres to an impending and revolutionary change of course. But it was also a subtle warning to us: if Chinese overtures were rebuffed, Peking would activate a people-to-people approach and seek to press its case in a public campaign much as Hanoi was doing".

Negotiating Tactics

As other papers submitted to you recently show, the Chinese can switch from a harmonious to a confrontational atmosphere very quickly. Kissinger describes a conversation with Chou En-lai one afternoon during which both by tacit agreement did not press controversial issues. When they met again the following afternoon, the mood was completely different. Chou launched into a spate of propaganda, and closed by questioning whether there was any point in Nixon coming to China. After a difficult session, Chou suddenly "suggested the Summer of 1972 for the President's visit as if all that was left was to decide the timing."

/Kissinger

CONFIDENTIAL

B.R.

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Kissinger later sums up the Chinese negotiating technique in the following way:-

"It is to determine as well as possible the nature of a responsible solution, get there in one jump, and then stick to that position".

He illustrates this by referring to a conversation with Huang Hua who began by introducing an impossible communique but later presented a draft which was "so close to our needs that we could accept it with a change of only one word". Indeed, it was fortunate that I suggested the Chinese submit their version first; it was better for us than our own."

This is powerfully reminiscent of our own experience with Deng Xiaoping.

Another general comment by Kissinger:

"Everything that was said to me by any Chinese of any station during any visit was part of an intricate design - even when with my Occidental mind it took me a while to catch on. And subjects were carried forward between meetings months apart as if there had never been an interruption."

Reliability

Kissinger often states that the Chinese never let him down. He also quotes the view of the then President of Pakistan (Yahya Khan), who was in close touch with the Chinese leadership, that they were "disciplined, pragmatic and reliable once they gave their word".

Would you like us to find out when Kissinger will next be coming to London, so that you can talk to him about China and Hong Kong? If he has no plans to come in the fairly near future, you may want to send someone to see him - but we could consider that later.

A.J.C. Yes please
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