

Testimony of James Mann

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you.

In the year 2000, when Congress gave its approval for the entry of China into the World Trade Organization, the dominant view in Washington was that China's admission would bring changes that extended well beyond mere trade and economics. Bringing China into the WTO, it was argued, would help open the way for gradual political liberalization and the rule of law in China.

Leaders of both political parties regularly embraced this idea. Bill Clinton said trade and economic changes in China would help to "increase the spirit of liberty over time...I just think it's inevitable, just as inevitably the Berlin Wall fell." George W. Bush declared, "The case for trade is not just monetary, but moral.... Trade freely with China, and time is on our side."

At the time, I believed this view was wrong. I had been a foreign correspondent based in China in the 1980s. Even during what was viewed as the era of the reform in China, you could feel the intense and growing opposition within the Chinese Communist Party towards any significant political change. That resistance to change reached its peak with the decision to use violence in 1989 to eradicate demonstrations at Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in China.

Before the vote to admit China to the WTO, there had been a series of annual debates in Congress, during the 1990s, over whether to renew China's most-favored nation trade benefits in this country. Covering those debates in Washington, I was repeatedly struck by the fact that proponents seemed to believe they couldn't win the argument by justifying trade simply as trade. Instead, they fell back again and again on the assertion that trade would open up China's political system.

It was these broad claims about the impact of trade that prompted me to write the book The China Fantasy. In it, I argued that the Chinese regime wasn't going to change in the way that American leaders said it would -- that trade and prosperity were not, in fact, going to open up its political system.

In the book, I laid out different scenarios put forward for China's future. One was what I called the "soothing scenario" – the one Clinton and Bush envisioned, that, with growing trade and development, China would inevitably open up its political system. A second scenario was that China would disintegrate into chaos – a possibility that I discounted but that some China specialists were putting forward in the decade after 1989. Then there was what I called the "third scenario" – that with trade and growing wealth, China will not open its political system at all but simply become a vastly richer authoritarian regime. I thought this Third Scenario was the most likely.

It has now been exactly ten years since The China Fantasy was published. Sad to say, that third scenario I wrote about is exactly what we see today: a richer, more repressive China. Indeed, over the past few years the Chinese regime has been entering into new types of repression – arresting lawyers, severely restricting NGOs, staging televised confessions of those who are detained.

The leadership has fewer outside constraints on what it can do. Its security apparatus has become more sophisticated. In fact, what we are seeing today is the very opposite of what many leading American politicians and China experts predicted at the time China entered the WTO: Development and prosperity have yielded a regime that curtails dissent and independent political activity more than it did five, ten or twenty years ago.

In fact-- and this is important --I think we are now witnessing in China a new dynamic. Call it the New China Paradigm, although it might also apply in various ways to some other countries, such as Turkey or Egypt: In a modern authoritarian society with a sophisticated security apparatus, the more prosperous and educated a society becomes, and the more there are stirrings from the public towards development of a civil society, the more repressive that authoritarian state will become in response, in order to prevent possible threats to its control.

What then is to be done? What options are there for the United States government in devising its China policy today?

There are no easy answers, but I can at least sketch out some suggestions.

- 1) The first is simply to drop the China Fantasy – to stop assuming that trade and economic advancement will gradually open up China’s political system or that political change in China is inevitable. To the extent we want to trade with China, we of course should do so – but with the understanding that the rationale for this trade is simply economic, not political or moral.
- 2) Do not refrain from speaking out. The United States should speak out as forthrightly as possible on behalf of human rights and the rule of law in China, as well as the larger value of political freedom and the right to dissent. Doing so not only upholds our own values but also gives recognition to those dissidents and others who are persecuted in China. For example, Liu Xiaobo, the winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, remains incarcerated in China, yet U.S. officials talk about him in public less and less. It would help if both senior U.S. officials in Washington and our ambassador in China – that is, Governor Branstad, if he is confirmed --would make appeals for human rights and the rule of law a regular, consistent, even insistent part of their public statements.
- 3) Insist on reciprocity. The United States should emphasize the concept of reciprocity in virtually all aspects of its dealings with China. What China permits or denies to Americans operating in China should equally be permitted or denied to Chinese operations in the United States. This principle should be applied to business negotiations, to non-government organizations, to the news media. When China penalizes American businesses or the news media, the United States should respond with similar limits on Chinese entities.

Let me take the news media as an example of the need for reciprocity. At the moment the asymmetry has become truly ridiculous. In China, American news organizations find their websites blocked; the Chinese government denies visas to reporters it doesn’t want; there are severe restrictions on reporters’ access and their travel. Here in the United

States, Chinese state-run news organizations enjoy the freedom to print regular propaganda inserts in American newspapers. China's state-run television, CCTV or CGTN as it is now called, not only isn't blocked but is allowed full access to the broadcast spectrum.

There can be no question that China does understand well the concept of reciprocity. Over the past 45 years, the principle has been applied regularly in formal diplomacy: China got a new consulate in the United States when the United States got a new consulate in China. In the earliest days of the Nixon opening, when the two countries first opened liaison offices in Washington and Beijing, each side was permitted to have one recognized and acknowledged intelligence officer. It is long past time to apply this principle to business, news media and other aspects of the American relationship with China.

4. Break out of the pattern of personalized diplomacy. My last suggestion involves something less concrete: the very style and nature of the dealings between China and the United States at the very top. In simplest terms, this is a plea to break out of the distinctive pattern of personalized diplomacy that has come to hamstring and limit the dealings between the United States and China.

Here is the pattern – one that I see repeated by administration after administration, and which I've seen signs of in the Trump administration's earliest dealings with China. A new team takes over. Its leading officials – the president, national security advisor, secretary of state – have little or no personal experience in dealing with China. So they quickly study up on the past, starting with the Kissinger opening. And in one way or another, they decide that China is unique, and that the rules and ideas that govern their dealings with other countries don't apply in China – that instead you have to deal in China secretly, and largely through a single individual inside an administration.

They are encouraged in this notion by Chinese officials, who arrive in Washington at the beginning of each administration saying that they need a single interlocutor, a high-level U.S. official they can talk to and pass messages through. And they are often also helped along, I have to say, by a handful Americans such as Henry Kissinger himself, who suggests to one administration after another that they need his

help and they need a single intermediary, namely him. I'm sorry to have to personalize this – but the personalization of American relations with China is precisely how he carried out diplomacy in the past and what he continues to urge today.

The result is that whatever U.S. official becomes China's principal interlocutor inside an administration – usually the national security advisor -- is treated as a "friend of China," the person Chinese officials regularly go to with one request or complaint after another. And then it's not long before this high-level official is calling up everyone else in the government, at the State Department or the Pentagon, for example – to demand that such-and-such action against China must be softened or dropped, that this line in a speech should be taken out.

It's now been a full 45 years since the Nixon opening to China. We need a thorough review of American China policy, in light of the many, many changes in both countries. At this point, doing things the old way, with personalized and secretive diplomacy, does far more harm than good. If we care about fostering the abstract rule of law in China, then we do not help that cause by falling back again and again on the idea that what counts above all is personal relationships.

I look forward to answering your questions.

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