



BULLETIN

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The Pander Complex

by Gerald Segal

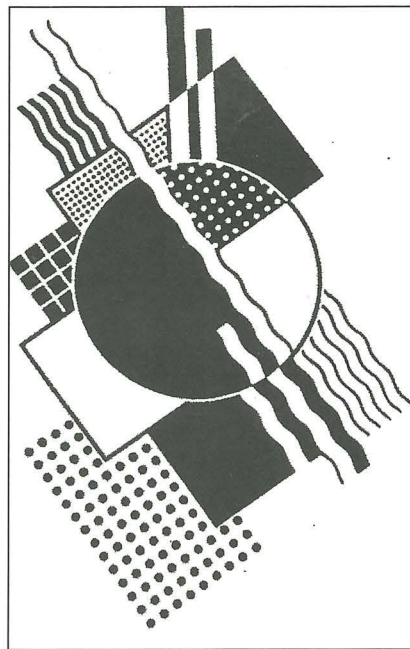
There is today little plain speaking about China and its policies. This mealy-mouthedness has its roots in a persistent and widespread failure to understand modern China.

Consider the current poverty of the debate about the single most important change in the international balance of power - the rise of China. The dominant discourse is that of 'engagement' with China, but the phrase is so trite as to be without meaning.

Of course we should engage China, but engagement in trade, security and culture is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for a decent relationship with a self-declared non-status quo power. Those who suggest that unwanted Chinese actions such as violation of trade accords, egregious violations of human rights, or the use of force against neighbours, should be met by deterrence and constraint are dismissed as nasty supporters of 'containment'. When it is so obvious that a sensible attitude towards China should include both elements of engagement and constraint, and that the debate should be about the proper mix at the proper time, it is clear that we are not thinking straight about China.

Some of the most worrying signs of this lack of straight thinking comes in discussion with Asian officials. Talk to a Japanese or even an Indonesian official in

private, and they will be quite frank about their worries about China. But in public we hear only coded language about 'uncertainties in the international environment'. In open, democratic political systems, whether in the Atlantic or Pacific worlds, such self-censorship makes it impossible to have a serious



debate about how to handle China.

These problems are especially worrying because they are not of recent vintage. There is a long and disturbing history of being unable to have a serious discussion about China. (Of course there are some excellent analysts of China and this is not meant to suggest that the community as a whole has not had some notable successes.) The last time the China expert community was right about a big change in China was when most

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of them told the world that the communists were likely to win power in the 1940s. American policy-makers were then in such a lather about the Cold War that the pundits were first ignored and then attacked as bearers of bad tidings.

Since then, most of these experts, whether sympathetic to the Chinese communists or not, have persistently failed to predict the course of Chinese events and policies. Legendary specialists told us that China was neither consulted about nor a supporter of the North Korean attack on South Korea in 1950. But the last documents from the Soviet archives in Moscow make plain that China was not only consulted, it was in fact the most ardent advocate of the invasion. The Moscow files also show that China fabricated key documents about its role in the war and they were used uncritically by prominent but gullible China specialists.

The Soviet files also indicate that the guiding analytical orthodoxy of the modern China studies field - that there are readily identifiable and contending factions in the leadership - is

clearly far too simplistic. The confusion and stupidities in the Chinese (and Soviet) decision-making process suggest that China-watchers have been wrong about the fundamentals as well as about many of the details of their subject. For example, the famously smooth and wise Zhou Enlai (foreign minister and later prime minister) is now revealed as incompetent and unreliable.

Not surprisingly, China specialists also misread the 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958 - when Mao Zedong thought that China could catch up with the advanced world by building furnaces in backyards. The idea was ludicrous, but as late as 1980, illustrious China specialists failed to talk about the lethal idiocy of Beijing's policies.

Even scholars writing in 1995 were far less willing to stress the horrors of Chinese policy than were Kremlinologists about Joseph Stalin's excesses. And this despite the fact that it is now known that at least 30 million Chinese died in the famines of the early 1960s that followed the economic failures of the 'Great Leap'.

In the Deng Xiaoping era, China-watchers consistently misunderstood his agenda and China's great power potential. A leading analyst of Chinese foreign policy wrote in 1984 that China was, at best, 'a dubious candidate for major power status'.

It also took China-watchers years to understand that Deng really believed in market reforms. Then they became so caught up in the euphoria of the reforms that they failed to see how ruthless he would be in ordering his henchmen to kill demonstrators on the streets of Beijing in June 1989. Few observers of China predicted the bloody crackdown. Nor did they foresee that Deng would respond to the collapse of communist regimes in Europe by speeding, not slowing, his own drive for economic reform.

Now that China stands on the brink of the post-Deng era, the experts shelter behind the slogans

of 'cautious optimism'. This cosy conventional wisdom that somehow China will 'muddle through' infuses nearly every study by the specialist community. Given their record, it is not surprising that they are so cautious, but at a time when China is undergoing massive and rapid social change they are only too likely to be proved wrong again.



They are, for instance, assuring the world that Deng's chosen successor, Jiang Zemin, is already in charge. When sceptics note the scale of the challenges, the many fractures at the top of the Chinese Communist Party, the country's bumpy past, and the fate of Hua Guofeng, Mao's chosen successor who instigated the arrest of the 'Gang of Four', they retort with some bit of arcane Beijing gossip or quote from their latest 'interviews' with a 'key decision-maker'.

There are many explanations for the pundits' poor performance. The most charitable explanation is that they are still on the nursery slopes of a precipitous learning curve. Universities and think-tanks only started in the 1970s to train a large cohort of specialized China-watchers. Their predecessors were mainly historians or linguists.

But the biggest problem is one well-known among Arabists, Africanists and others specializing in area studies: the tendency to go native. In the Chinese case, what has been termed the 'Pander complex' means specialists who believe they are encountering a cuddly Panda bear - actually the animal is quite vicious - tend to pander to current official Chinese policies.

The Chinese language is so

hard to learn, and Chinese culture is so rich, that China specialists are especially inclined to believe that the country is unique in all respects. They become adept at telling others what the Chinese are saying now, but terrible at understanding how they are likely to change.

This helps explain why the China-watchers with the best records are those who have come to the subject from the study of comparative politics, and especially comparative communist politics.

Because the experts are so dependent on access to the bureaucrats in Beijing, they are also vulnerable to pressure. Officials make it clear that those who are highly critical of China are unlikely to get a visa for their next field trip. All too often the pressure works. Most decide not to stray too far from the official line.

Improving the eyesight of China-watchers is difficult but not impossible. As the US Department of State learned with its Arabists, it is vital to broaden the horizons of specialists. Pundits about China would benefit from regular spells in other Asian countries, and especially in Taiwan, Japan, or Korea. They could also learn from a tour of former communist states in Europe. They need to ask the bigger, comparative questions that others ask about countries that are poor peasant societies, rapidly modernizing economies, or frustrated great powers.

Until China-watchers discover that, although China has special features, much of what it does is understandable in a wider context, there is no point asking most China specialists what to do about China. On nineteen occasions out of twenty you will be told what is in the interest of China's elite, not what is in your own interest.

Dr Gerald Segal is a Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. On 22 April 1997 he gave the first CSD/DAL Annual Lecture, 'Managing a Rising China'.
