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Preparations for Clinton Trip to China

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June-1998

PREPARATIONS FOR CLINTON TRIP TO CHINA

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06/11/1998
My time in the Senate has taught me that if you want something bad enough, you have to work long and hard to get it. So as President Clinton prepares to visit China, we must recognize what America wants in its relationship with the world’s most populous nation. And, just as important, we should identify how we can best achieve our goals.

First, what do we want? We want peace and stability; we want to promote human rights; and we want prosperity and open trade. To be sure, getting what we want will take a lot of work.

Some argue that we can best achieve these objectives by isolating China and demanding reforms. I think that’s the easy way out. Like most Americans, I am gravely concerned over human rights abuses and unfair trading practices. But ostracizing 1/5 of the world’s population is the wrong answer. To maintain peace, promote prosperity and protect our environment, we must engage China.

Our chief priority in the Sino-American relationship is the promotion of peace. Much has been said lately in that regard, particularly surrounding allegations that a transfer of missile technology from the U.S. to China occurred.

The U.S. needs a strategic approach to deal with the advance of technology from military to commercial fields, and the time to develop a consistent policy is now. If oversight in a previous launch was weak, we should strengthen our policy. If American companies broke the law they should be punished. But predicating U.S.-China relations on unsubstantiated charges misses the point and serves to minimize the tremendous importance of China’s role in promoting security in Asia. China could be a partner for peace if we show that we are willing to work with them.

Since 1996, a time when relations between the U.S., China and Taiwan were tense, China has proved itself a worthy partner in promoting stability in that region. And because of their help, I think we can expect stability in the Taiwan Strait. By providing food aid to North Korea and encouraging four-way talks in the region, China has also proven capable of acting constructively in advancing the cause of peace in Korea. And with Pakistan and India conducting nuclear tests, I expect our work with China will help see that cooler heads prevail in South Asia.

Just as we must engage China in advancing peace and security, so too should we work with them to promote a better life for all Chinese. President Clinton’s request for renewal of Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status for China has met with suggestions that we should use MFN to coerce China to reform its human rights policies. But the people making these suggestions don’t realize the delicacy of our task. Revoking MFN for China would be deliberately picking a fight with them. It would be like using a chainsaw where a scalpel would be most appropriate. We must take a strong stand against infractions against workers, dissidents, women and children. But restrictions, such as the denial of MFN trading status or the use of sanctions that hurt Chinese people and fail to directly punish the abusers of power, do little to encourage social reconstruction there.

And finally, we need to engage China to promote global prosperity. China should be as open to our goods and services as we are to theirs. Today, they are not. Although my state of Montana exported a substantial $6.2 million worth of products to
China last year, moving China into the WTO and granting it permanent MFN status can only help to open China’s economy and reduce ambiguities in our economic ties.

Some argue that we should ostracize China until it comes around to our way of thinking. I think it makes no sense to isolate a country and then expect it to play by our rules on security, proliferation, human rights and trade. Working with China does not mean we are ignoring our differences with China. By seeking common ground with China we are not sacrificing our ideals for theirs. We must engage, not appease.

As the President makes this historic trip, I think it is a fitting time for us to reflect a little more deeply on ourselves, on our responsibilities, and on what we can do to advance this critical relationship. Only through continued dialogue can we resolve our disagreements. It is only on common ground that we can take steps to ensure the peace and prosperity that the world deserves.