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# What Hillary Didn't Do In Asia

**Clinton made no mistakes on her China trip. Yet there's no evidence of serious strategic thinking either.**

**Kishore Mahbubani**

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Why did Hillary Clinton lose the race for the democratic presidential nomination? Simple. She had a plan A: to romp through initial primaries, build momentum and squash her opponents. But when plan A failed, she found she had no backup. Even though she successfully scrambled and managed to slow Obama's momentum, the battle was already lost. Clinton failed to engage in strategic thinking in the biggest competition of her life, and it cost her.

All this made her a curious choice to become secretary of state. Clinton is intelligent, tough, shrewd and, when she chooses to be, charming. But the key to doing her new job well is to engage in long-term strategic thinking on major geopolitical challenges —such as the U.S. role in managing the rise of Asia.

Her recent trip to the region provides some early clues on how she'll manage this task. There's no doubt she did a competent job. Clinton followed the advice of her briefing books, making Japan her first stop to reassure this nervous and insecure ally. Then she went to Indonesia, probably at Obama's instigation, to rebuild America's image in the world's most populous Islamic country. South Korea was an essential stop to send the usual tough signals to North Korea. And then came China, her most important destination.

Throughout it all, the secretary made no mistakes. She said and did the right things and made pleasant noises to please each host. In China, for example, she said, "We have to look inward for solutions, but we must also look to each other to take a leadership role in designing and implementing a coordinated global response to stabilize the world's economy and begin recovery." This appeal to cooperation in sharing leadership must have pleased her hosts, as it showed great respect—a big issue for China.

Yet there's little evidence Clinton has engaged in any serious strategic thinking about U.S.-China relations. If she had, she would have asked some big questions. Traditionally, relations between dominant powers and emerging powers have been tense. This should have been the norm with China and the United States. Yet China has emerged without alarming Americans. That's close to a geopolitical miracle. Who deserves credit for it? Beijing or Washington? China seems to have a clear, comprehensive strategy. The United States has none.

Beijing's strategy toward the United States is complex. Chinese leaders have consistently followed Deng Xiaoping's advice of *shanyu shouzhuo*—be good at keeping a low profile. Yet they have also created a balanced interdependence with the United States, reducing Washington's ability to pressure them. China relies on America as a market for its manufactured products. And China has encouraged the United States to rely on it (and other East Asian countries) to fund its budget deficits. When Clinton said on her trip, "I appreciate greatly the Chinese government's continuing confidence in United States Treasuries," she

validated China's strategy of buying U.S. debt as a way to restrain America's freedom of movement.

It's hard to find signs that the United States is pursuing a similarly coherent, long-term strategy toward China; instead there is a hodgepodge of policies, some wise, some not. Wisely, the United States has decided to help integrate China into the world economy. This policy has worked, leading Chinese society to open up considerably as a result. The hundreds of thousands of Chinese students who have studied in U.S. universities have become major agents of change at home. World Bank president Robert Zoellick's vision of China as a "responsible stakeholder" is slowly coming true.

Yet Washington has demonstrated far less strategic thinking on a range of other issues, such as Iran, North Korea, Iraq and Sudan—each of which it has treated in separate silos. The Chinese, by contrast, view such issues as parts of a whole, and constantly look for trade-offs. Hence they were happy to cooperate on North Korea and Iraq, for which they were rewarded when President Bush put significant pressure on Taiwan not to push for independence. This was a major victory for China. Any objective balance sheet would show more gains for China than the United States. By cooperating selectively, China has thwarted the emergence of any U.S. strategy to contain or prevent its rise.

So what should America's long-term strategy toward China look like? To start, Washington should revisit its assumptions. What should U.S.-China relations look like in 20 years? The Chinese Communist Party is not going to disappear like the Soviet Union, as many U.S. policymakers privately hope. Thus Washington should focus on integrating China even more into the international system and abandon policies China perceives as destabilizing, like support for the Dalai Lama or criticism of China's human-rights violations. What Clinton still needs to work out, in other words, is a big-picture view of the world's largest nation. If she fails to think strategically, the result will be an even stronger China. If she succeeds, China may turn out just as strong—but become a much more cooperative and restrained partner.

*Mahbubani is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (National University of Singapore) and author, most recently, of "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East."*

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