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Holbrooke's Quiet Legacy: US-China Diplomatic Relations

By Susan Suh

Synopsis

The passing of Richard Holbrooke marked the end of an era in US diplomacy. His legacy on China reminds us that even this brash diplomat understood confidentiality and respectful discretion when developing relationships that crisscross global boundaries, cultures and history.

Commentary

INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY marks time by its products and personalities. Richard Holbrooke loomed large in the annals of both. Over his astounding 40-year career at the highest levels of US foreign policy, Ambassador Holbrooke left few issues untouched, few geographies unvisited, few egos unbruised and few legends unwritten. It was a tear in his aorta that finally defeated him as nothing else could –symbolic of a man who literally lived and died by the strength of his heart and his devotion to what he fiercely believed was fair and right in this world.

During the past few years Holbrooke's name became synonymous with the challenges and opportunities in South Asia. In his role as US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, a razor intellect coupled with a refusal to decorate blunt dialogue in diplomatic niceties sharpened the pointed side of his approach, rankling not only the likes of Afghan President Hamid Karzai but often Holbrooke's own colleagues. This was simply how "The Bulldozer" worked; as U.S. Vice-President Joseph Biden would say, Holbrooke's "the most egotistical bastard I've ever met. But maybe he's the right guy for the job."

Tough Legacies of "The Bulldozer"

It was hard, and continues to be so, though a joint 16 December 2010 briefing by the White House and the US Departments of State and Defence provided cautious optimism from the American perspective. The "AfPak" conundrum persists on multiple levels, with the lives and futures of countless stakeholders in the balance – most of all the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan themselves who long for peace and security.

That Holbrooke was selected by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for this most difficult of tasks should not have been a surprise. He was loyal, innovative, indefatigable. It was Holbrooke who tenaciously brokered the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords ending bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia. It was he who, as US ambassador to Germany shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, did much to build and shape positive bilateral relations with the newly reunified state. It was he who historically insisted that HIV/AIDS be brought front and centre on the UN Security Council's agenda while he was America's representative to the

United Nations. And it was he whose experiences and insights as a young Foreign Service Officer in Vietnam first launched him to the fore, quickly earning him a front seat in contributing to and struggling with US policy during the war.

And Then There Was China

Amidst all of this, it has been easy to overlook Holbrooke's part in unlocking what he once said is "the development of the most important bilateral relationship in the world": the United States and China.

Appointed US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the age of 35 – the youngest ever to be named to that level – Holbrooke took his post in 1977. It was just a few years after President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger astonished the world in how they opened an American political door to China, first in top secret and then in public; the smiling image of Nixon shaking hands with Mao Zedong in 1972 remains one of the indelible moments on the international stage of the 20th century.

As Holbrooke would say three decades later: "Less famous but of equal importance was the next major step: the establishment of full diplomatic relations between China and the United States. Without this action, announced by President Jimmy Carter on 15 December 1978, the relationship could not have moved beyond a small high-level connection with a very limited agenda." It was this critical milestone that Holbrooke – with President Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, among others – helped secure with then-new Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping and his senior leadership. It demanded the greatest of discretion and the deepest of confidentiality from both sides. And it would prove nothing less than transformative for the world.

Discretion, the Better Part of Valour?

As the 32nd anniversary of this crucial tie across the Pacific slipped by unnoticed on 15 December 2010, it is telling to see what else is dominating the headlines: Julian Assange is free on bail. WikiLeaks continues to expose the secrets behind global statecraft, simultaneously hailed and damned for its role in enhancing or demolishing trust and security in the public realm. Which is it?

Holbrooke, until the end, maintained extensive ties with the international media and with others who hold public servants to account. He himself served as editor for Foreign Policy at a time when the magazine was new, daring to investigate the hard stories that no one else wished to touch. Holbrooke knew better than most how and when to engage the public, and would be the first to respect transparency.

But perhaps he would also be the first to respect quiet communications, to get to the heart of an issue and – if you're lucky – a historic breakthrough that saves thousands of lives or, as with China, set in motion a bilateral bond that elevates the opportunities for exchange, growth and understanding between millions of people around the globe. All secrets do not need to be leaked with fanfare; all discoveries behind closed doors are not breaking news. Do we have the discipline to balance this today?

The continued development of China-America relations will prove vital as US President Barack Obama prepares to host his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao for a state visit to Washington in the new year. Together, beneath today's posturing and pressures, they hold the key to addressing a spectrum of concerns in Asia and far beyond. How will they wield this key? Holbrooke's legacy in building this bilateral relationship provides a useful reminder to do so with discretion, determination and trust.

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