Critical Issues Confronting China: 
Is China Ready for the International Major Leagues?
Ambassador Frank Lavin, CEO of Export Now

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In talking about China’s relationship with the international system, Frank Lavin, CEO of Export Now, shared some incisive views from his rich experiences in both the business world and the U.S. government — White House aid (1987-89), Ambassador to Singapore (2001-2005) and Under Secretary for International Trade at the Department of Commerce. He first raised a central paradox: why do we still talk about the question of whether China is ready for the international major leagues while China, by any conventional measure in terms of either economic prowess or military capacity, is already in the first league of world powers?

Lavin attributed this paradox to two reasons. First, China’s political system marks it as an outlier to all the major countries of the world. Second, it has numerous points of friction with many countries due to contested territorial claims or disputed trade actions, all of which cause controversies and suspicion. Why, then, was China included in the international system in the first place?

Lavin explained that this fundamental dilemma emerged about two decades ago. If a country as large as China were not a full participant, the effectiveness and the role of the international system would be in doubt. On the other hand, if China is included in the system, as it was with the Treaty of Westphalia of the 19th century promoted by states that are economically mature and politically-satiated powers, China doesn’t quite fit because of its uniqueness. As such, it was difficult to reach a consensus within the system.

Lavin further explained how China differs from the U.S. in its views and approaches to foreign policy. First, China has a different world view from the U.S., thereby a different organizing principle for its relations with the rest of the world. In its long history of some 5,000 years, China acted either as a hegemon in periods of strength or as a victim in periods of decline. There is not much record of it participating in the world as an equal or as a status quo power. China views a nation’s security as not coming from the stability within the international system, but from its particular position in it. Therefore, to feel secure, China has to be stronger than its neighbors both economically and militarily. It needs territorial depth, either through expanded sovereign territory or through buffer states, in order to project power and influence, and to
withstand threats from other countries. However, in so doing, China makes other countries feel threatened. This is a stark contrast to the U.S., which provides stewardship to the world system where every country is viewed as an equal and feels secure. This system is characterized by stability and peace since World War II, notwithstanding that the U.S. global role was somewhat diminished by President Obama and eroded by President Trump.

Second, China’s government is rather insular and can make decisions driven by domestic political requirements rather than its long-term interests. Diplomacy is traditionally about give-and-take. Diplomats try to shape outcomes that would advance their country’s positions while keeping or enhancing their reputation with occasional concessions to promote goodwill. But Chinese diplomacy is more influenced by the Leninist view with a relatively clearer dichotomy by which they (the Chinese) are right and others are wrong. Their desire to prevail is so strong that they are often too assertive, unaware that this is a recipe for friction and conflict.

Lavin traced this insular outlook to the way China cultivates and promotes its leadership. A first and foremost promotion criterion within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is loyalty to the team. Almost all Chinese leaders are promoted from within the system with little outside experience. This approach, while giving them a strong internal cohesion, also engenders an inward-looking perspective. This, when combined with top-down authoritarian directives, can produce perverse and entrenched outcomes. In this environment, anyone with a contrarian view from the leadership would not be able to have a hearing. The effectiveness of Chinese diplomats is further undermined by the fact that their foreign minister is not a member of the State Council, where high-level decisions are made. China is the only major power where the Foreign Minister does not belong to the highest level in Government.

Lavin recognized that the question of “whether China is ready” is somewhat rhetorical because “China is already here” with its increased contribution to UN peace-keeping operations, its effective use of its WTO membership to its advantage since 2001, and its willingness to reshape the global architecture as evidenced by its initiative of establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Lavin lamented that the U.S. made a mistake not to participate in the AIIB when the world clearly needed more infrastructure and when most other countries had joined.

He thought that the U.S., always an aspirational country, has to reckon with an inward and insular China with a Leninist legacy and much-enhanced capabilities in almost every respect. He wondered if it is possible for China to have an enlightened self-interest.