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U.S.-China Agricultural Dialogue in Des Moines Shows Potential for Improving Relations During a Critical Period

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by **Kenneth Quinn**

Iowa's connections with China—highlighted by a 1985 visit by a young Xi Jinping, now 37 years later General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of the People's Republic of China—make for an unusual and much-needed bright spot in today's dismal U.S.–PRC relations. What better place than the leading agricultural state to look for collaboration in agricultural research and global development needed to face the global challenges of our time?

In April 2022, Sino–American diplomatic relations took center stage in Iowa's capital city, as three ambassadors—Nicholas Burns, the new Biden Administration envoy in Beijing, Qin Gang, the PRC ambassador to the U.S., and former U.S. ambassador to the PRC Terry Branstad—all participated in the U.S.–China Agricultural Dialogue that I co-organized and moderated.

Having all *three* senior diplomats participate in what was one of the most positive and rancor-free bilateral exchanges in the last five years, was a diplomatic hat trick

notable for a number of reasons:

- It occurred not in the politically charged atmosphere of Washington or Beijing, but in Des Moines in the more friendly environs of the American Midwest;
- The topic that provided this opportunity for positive discussion was agriculture and global food security; and
- The American entity that brought it all together was a previously little-known non-profit organization with only three employees—the U.S. Heartland China Association (USHCA).

Agricultural Roundtables

As president-emeritus of the World Food Prize Foundation headquartered in Des Moines, I have worked closely with the USHCA over the previous two years to organize a series of virtual “Ag Roundtables” that were held in conjunction with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and China Agricultural University.

These roundtables, coming during a period of severely strained government-to-government relations, provided the opportunity for constructive bilateral U.S.–China exchanges involving very senior heartland political and agri-business leaders, including Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, Illinois Congressman Darin LaHood, and the CEOs of John Deere, ADM, and Syngenta.

These sessions were based on the belief that, despite other difficult and intractable issues affecting the bilateral relationship, it is absolutely essential that the U.S. and China remain at peace and find ways to collaborate in agricultural research and global development, if our planet is to be able to successfully deal with the following most critical global challenge humankind has ever faced:

How to sustainably produce and distribute sufficient nutritious food to feed the exploding population on our planet, which will reach 10 billion by mid-century, while at the same



Ambassadors Qin Gang and Ken Quinn with Iowa State University “Quinn Scholars” following the 2022 Dialogue

time countering the adverse impact of climate change, especially on agricultural production, and preventing the spread of any future pandemic animal and plant diseases. The idea for the April, 2022 U.S.-China Agricultural Dialogue in Des Moines grew out of the success of those Ag Roundtables, and the chance to host new Chinese Ambassador Qin Gang's first ever trip to the Midwest and Iowa. *[Editor's note: Ambassador Qin Gang has recently been promoted to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.]*

When Ambassador Qin Gang first arrived in Washington in the summer of 2021, Iowa's Xi Jinping legacy came to the fore. The very first public encounter Ambassador Qin had with any American citizens was with Sarah Lande and me, two Iowans with direct connections to earlier visits by the Chinese leader to our state. In a 70-minute-long zoom conversation with Ambassador Qin, Sarah recalled young Xi Jinping's experiences in her home town of Muscatine, when in 1985 at age 31 he visited as part of a Hebei Province corn industry delegation. When he returned in 2012, I had the privilege of hosting him at the World Food Prize. I also referenced my involvement with the first Iowa-China connection, when I escorted a delegation of Chinese provincial governors, led by President Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun. This 1980 program was the first delegation of Chinese governors to visit America following the normalization of U.S.-PRC diplomatic relations. During our conversation, we encouraged Ambassador Qin to visit at an early opportunity and build upon our recent Ag Roundtables.

Ambassador Qin Gang Comes to Iowa

Nine months later, in April 2022, the PRC Embassy advised us that an inaugural ambassadorial visit to the Midwest was being planned for Ambassador Qin Gang, including his willingness to participate in an USHCA hosted Agricultural Dialogue in Des Moines.

Former Ambassador Terry Branstad, who as Governor of Iowa had welcomed young Xi Jinping in 1985 and did so again when Xi returned as Vice President of China in 2012, had served as U.S. Chief of Mission in Beijing between 2017 and 2020. Based on that unique personal connection, Ambassador Branstad was a natural to open the Dialogue.

We were delighted that the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, agreed to participate virtually from Beijing.

The U.S.-China Agricultural Dialogue took place at the magnificent World Food Prize Hall of Laureates. That century-old edifice in the center of Des Moines is named in honor of Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Iowa native, and Father of the Green Revolution, who was among the very first American agricultural scientists to travel to China in the early 1970s.

Several other attributes of the Hall reflect China's unique agricultural linkage to the Midwest:

- An artwork commemorates the 1980 visit to Iowa by Governor Xi Zhongxun, the father of Xi Jinping and one of the chief architects of China's free market economic transformation and agricultural reforms.
- Professor Yuan Longping, the "Father of Hybrid Rice" and perhaps the greatest agricultural scientist in Chinese history received the \$250,000 World Food Prize—considered the "Nobel Prize in food and agriculture"—in Des Moines in 2004; a plaque in the Hall honors him.
- Most significantly, the Hall of Laureates was the site for the 2012 U.S.-China High Level Agricultural Symposium, at which then-Vice President Xi Jinping gave the keynote address. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Chinese Minister Han Changfu signed a Memorandum of Strategic Cooperation in Agriculture, and contracts were completed for the export of \$3.5 billion of American soybeans to China.

How to Enhance Relations and Meet the Challenge of Feeding the World

Given that Xi Jinping, recently reconfirmed as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, will be the longest serving head of the PRC since Mao Zedong, that U.S.-China Symposium in Des Moines in 2012 may



Ambassador Quinn greeting Vice President Xi Jinping on February 16, 2012; Xi delivered the

turn out to be one of the more significant events in the Sino-American bilateral relationship. During this current period of strained

keynote address at the U.S.-China High Level Agricultural Symposium.

diplomatic ties, the legacy of those Iowa connections inspired our efforts at the 2022 U.S.-China Agricultural Dialogue to address the following key questions:

- What are practical steps that could increase the U.S.-China two-way agricultural trade and thereby positively enhance the bilateral relationship; and
- How can China and America collaborate to meet what the late Dr. Borlaug considered as “the single greatest challenge humankind has ever faced” — whether we can sustainably and nutritiously feed the 9 to 10 billion people who will be on our planet by 2046, when Iowa celebrates its bicentennial.

Ambassador Branstad set the stage by recounting the spirit of friendship that had been attained thanks to the powerful “citizen diplomacy” led by Sarah Lande and the families in Muscatine, Iowa who had opened their homes to young Xi Jinping and his delegation during that 1985 visit.

In their keynote addresses, Ambassador Qin and Ambassador Burns focused on the opportunities for enhanced agricultural trade, with Burns noting how faster review by China of requests for U.S. exports of products involving biotechnology would be a positive development. Ambassador Qin gave emphasis to the spirit of friendship he was encountering in the Midwest and its importance in providing a positive atmosphere for negotiations.

In addition to the three centerpiece ambassadorial presentations, the April Agricultural Dialogue also included:

- a panel of senior agri-business leaders from both countries, including the presidents of the U.S. Grains Council, the U.S. Soybean Export Council, and the CEOs of Continental Grain and Syngenta, all of whom had flown in just for this event; and
- The announcement by the president of the Iowa Corn Promotion Board of “one of the largest purchases of American corn ever made by China” (or any other country) that had just occurred in April, valued at over \$750 million.

To be clear, while there were no dramatic breakthrough achievements that night in Des Moines, there were three extremely important takeaway lessons from the event:

1) That during a time when a myriad of seemingly intractable issues—from Taiwan to human rights in official channels in the politically toxic environment in Washington—it was possible to have a positive discussion by senior officials from both sides take place in a separate channel. This “bifurcated diplomacy” organized by a non-governmental organization in the heartland can be an important step in rebuilding trust and restoring a more positive tone to the relationship. In fact, shortly after the April event, Ambassador Qin Gang had his first formal meeting at USDA with Secretary Vilsack.

2) Given the severe disruptions to the global food system caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is absolutely essential for the U.S. and China to remain at peace. One of the best ways to help achieve this goal would be for the two countries to carve out constructive ways to collaborate in addressing that global food security challenge cited by Norman Borlaug, which has existential consequences for the 9 to 10 billion people who will soon be on our planet.

3) Further positive advances in the PRC-U.S. relationship can be achieved through a continuation of this “bifurcated diplomatic process”. There is reason to think that Beijing may share this view. On August 4, at the height of the Chinese military exercises surrounding Taiwan following the visit of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the People’s Daily newspaper ran a prominent story with the headline “President Xi Jinping has a deep understanding of farmers and rural life.” The story included extensive quotes from me about Xi Jinping’s experiences in Iowa. It ends with a reference to President Xi’s proposal for a “return to the spirit of cooperation, peaceful coexistence and working together to solve global challenges.”

Following through, we at USHCA and the Chinese Agricultural Association for International Exchanges (CAAIE) are planning for the 2023 US-China Agricultural Dialogue in the heartland with a goal of further promoting peace through agriculture. To that end, at a recent Chinese Academy of Social Sciences conference, I put forward a proposal focused on agricultural development on the African continent. Entitled “The Road Out of Poverty: An Iowa-Inspired Chinese-American-African Collaboration”, this initiative would focus specifically on uplifting

agricultural production in Africa through joint research on increasing crop yields and dramatically upgrading rural infrastructure.

Given the experiences that both President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden have had in Iowa (President Biden from his participation in the Iowa Caucuses), the 2023 U.S.-China Agricultural Dialogue offers a unique opportunity for the two countries to rise above and reverse the current array of polarizing negative issues. By recapturing that Iowa spirit of 2012, we can commit to an unprecedented partnership to ensure that our planet successfully overcomes the greatest challenge in human history.★

Dr. Kenneth Quinn's 32-year career as a Foreign Service Officer culminated with his assignment as Ambassador to Cambodia. Following his retirement in 1999, he served for two decades as president of the World Food Prize headquartered in Des Moines. Since 2020, he has volunteered as a Strategic Advisor to the U.S. Heartland China Association, a bipartisan non-profit organization.



During his career, he has made over 20 trips to China beginning in 1979. He is a recipient of the State Department Award for Heroism and is the only three-time winner of the American Foreign Service Association Awards for Intellectual Courage and Dissent. In a ceremony at the House of Lords in 2019, Ambassador Quinn was presented the Aegis Trust Distinguished Service to Humanity Award for his role in discovering and then eradicating the genocidal Khmer Rouge terrorist regime. Ambassador Quinn has a Ph.D. degree in International Relations from the University of Maryland.

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