

China's Panda Diplomacy

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I. Introduction

Diplomatic tools, by definition, can be anything used to affect the relations between two countries. China, however, possesses one unique diplomatic tool that no other country can use — its very cute and adorable pandas. Both the panda and the Great Wall have become symbols of China, the former having served as a part of Beijing diplomacy. The Chinese government has been giving pandas as gifts to other countries for many centuries. For instance, preserved Japanese historical documents tell of the Tang dynasty offering the Japanese emperor a pair of pandas in AD 685. However, it is the People's Republic of China (PRC) that makes the best use of panda diplomacy. The panda has become an integral part of China's soft power, as these adorable creatures can easily conquer the hearts of people in foreign countries, particularly with the younger generation, and win favor for China.

II. The evolution of China's panda diplomacy

The PRC's panda diplomacy can be divided into three phases. The first phase runs from 1957 – 1982, when Beijing would offer pandas to other countries as gifts. The first country to receive this gift from the PRC is, of course, the Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, signed on February 14, 1950, gave China an ally in the Soviet Union, who would serve as a protector of national security and a provider of technology as well as foreign aid. In return, Beijing gave two pandas to Moscow in 1957 and 1959 as a sign of friendship. North Korea, another Chinese ally and one who fought shoulder to shoulder with China against the “American Imperialists” during the Korean War from 1950 – 53, received a total of five pandas from the PRC from 1965 – 1980.

The PRC's relations with Western countries began to improve after it replaced the Republic of China's seat on the United Nations on October 25, 1971, also at the same time becoming the sole representative of China. The panda is an especially wonderful gift to Western countries. China's Premier Chou Enlai announced the offering of a pair of pandas to the United States in his meeting with President Nixon in February

1972. It was the first time that the PRC sent pandas to a Western country. Beijing sent a total of 16 pandas to seven countries in the West camp from 1972 to 1982. Besides the United States, the other six lucky countries were Japan, France, the United Kingdom, West Germany, Mexico, and Spain. Japan received a total of four pandas in October 1972, 1980, and 1982; the other four countries received a pair of pandas each.

Among those seven countries in the West camp, the United States is the strongest world power; both France and the United Kingdom are permanent members in the United Nations Security Council; Japan and Germany are the second and third largest economies, respectively. In other words, Beijing sent pandas as gifts to either allies or formidable powers. Developing countries or middle powers, with the exception of Mexico and Spain, are unlikely to receive such a gift from China.

The second phase runs from 1982 – 1994, when China would lend pandas as commercial goods to other countries. After 1982, Beijing no longer would give pandas to other countries for free because it would violate the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora of 1975. The countries that would rent pandas from China included the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. But this approach drew even harsher criticism from international environmental organizations because it endangered the health and safety of the pandas. This criticism forced Beijing to discontinue lending pandas for commercial purposes only.

Beijing's panda diplomacy entered its third phase in 1994. The common practice is that China signs a contract and lends pandas to other countries in the name of mutual scientific research exchange. The rent, however, is not cheap. For example, a zoo in the United States pays up to US\$1,000,000 per year to rent a pair of pandas for a period of about ten years. If any cubs are born during the period, they automatically become the property of the PRC and should be returned to China after a period of two years; furthermore, before those two years are up, the United States needs to pay US\$500,000 extra rent per year for each cub. In addition, the zoo needs to pay another one million dollars to China as a fund for Sino-American research and protection for pandas. Therefore, the cost to rent a pair of panda for ten years is more than ten million US dollars. Of course, not every zoo can afford to pay the fees, though Beijing might charge less for developing countries. The United States, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, Spain and Japan are some of the countries that take this approach to acquire pandas.

III. The timing of China's panda diplomacy

China chose to give pandas to the United States at the time when President Nixon made his historical visit to China. Likewise, Japan received pandas when Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, as well as during the occasions when China's premiers Hua Guofeng and Zhao Ziyang visited Japan in 1980 and 1982 respectively. France received pandas when French President Georges Pompidou visited China in September 1973, the United Kingdom received pandas when Prime Minister Edward Heath visited China in 1974, and West Germany received pandas before Premier Helmut Schmidt visited China in 1975.

Those countries which were able to borrow pandas from China were also either strong powers or good friends of China. For instance, Hu Jintao signed with his counterpart Prime Minister John Howard to loan a pair of pandas to Australia when he visited the country in September 2007; Beijing also agreed to rent a pair of pandas to Spain when King Juan Carlos visited China on June 29, 2007. Lastly, Tokyo requested to borrow pandas from Beijing when Hu Jintao visited Japan.

In sum, the gift or loan of pandas symbolizes China's good will. The timing that Beijing chooses to make such an announcement has both diplomatic and political considerations. It is usually made during mutual state visits or summits between the two countries. After deciding to halt the practice of offering pandas as gifts in 1982, only Hong Kong and Taiwan have received this token of goodwill. Hong Kong became a territory of China after the United Kingdom returned sovereignty in 1997. As for Taiwan, Beijing worked under the guise of domestic transfer to give a pair of pandas to Taipei as gifts. The two pandas which arrived on the island on December 24, 2008, were named as Tuan-Tuan and Yuan-Yuan. Put together, the two names mean "reunion." Its united front goal could not be more obvious.

IV. Concluding remarks

China has garnered huge diplomatic interest by means of its pandas. Whether or not a country can get pandas depends on the weight they carry and their relationship with China. Many countries kowtow to China in order to get these beautiful animals, even though this diplomatic tool goes against the protection of rare or endangered species. It is a little known fact that only just over one thousand pandas are alive today. When these animals are taken out of their natural habitat, and especially when they are sent to an environment outside China, their average lifespan reaches only 8.5 years, which is much shorter than their natural life expectancy. A nation that truly cherishes its national treasures will not use them as diplomatic tools. However, since the Chinese government does not even cherish human life and has frequently abused human rights, how can we expect them to protect the interests of pandas?