

Your Excellency President Xi Jinping, Ladies, Gentlemen and Friends,

I am Paige Alexander, CEO of the Carter Center. It is an honor and privilege for the Carter Center to be one of the co-organizers of this important conference.

President and Mrs. Carter asked me to convey their best wishes to President Xi Jinping, Mr. Zheng Bijian, president of the China Institute of Innovation and Strategic Development, and all the participants of the conference.

President Carter sent a letter of greeting to this conference. It is dated November 9, 2021.

I am reading his letter:

To Zheng Bijian and participants of the 6th Understanding China Conference

Paige Alexander and I are pleased to welcome you to the 2021 Understanding China Conference. Understanding one other, whether among the citizens or between our nations, is no easy endeavor. Misunderstanding occurs because of differences in culture, history, ideology, political systems, and national security concerns. But it is essential for our nations to appreciate the other.

The deterioration of the US/China relationship could devastate collective prosperity and endanger hard-won peace. We commend your providing this space for greater understanding and send you our best wishes for a productive conference.

Signed: Jimmy Carter and me

One of the main causes of the sharp decline of the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China is a sheer lack of understanding between the two countries. I would like to use the experience of President Carter and the Carter Center to highlight how difficult it is to achieve mutual understanding.

When President Carter was young, missionaries at his hometown in Georgia told him that China needed help and he began to donate to the church to help the Chinese.

When he was a teenager, his uncle, Tom Gordy, who was an American merchant marine, was deployed in China. He wrote to President Carter often and in one letter

he said China's George Washington was Dr. Sun Yat-sen and he was leading the Chinese people to pursue national glory.

President Carter's first trip to China took place in 1949. He was then a submarine officer. There was civil war in China. He saw devastation caused by the war and widespread poverty. He did not quite understand the complexity of the Chinese situation, but he did observe that the Nationalist Party was not popular.

President Carter's next trip to China was in 1981 after he left the White House. Before that, he and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping made the courageous decision to establish full diplomatic relationship between the two countries. He was bold and firm in normalizing the relationship after a 30-year period of mutual hostility because he had a deep understanding that the Chinese people, like the American people, also wanted peace and prosperity and there would be no peace and prosperity when the most powerful nation did not even have a relationship with the most populous country in the world.

There had been so many changes in China between 1949 and 1981 that Deng Xiaoping told President Carter to visit China whenever he liked to. President Carter made many trips to China since. His last visit to China was in September 2014 at the age of 90.

Changes in China between 1981 and 2014 were even bigger and more significant. Since President Carter visited China so often, he understood these significant changes gave the Chinese people more freedoms, made the Party more popular, enabled China to become the second largest economy in the world and made it possible for China to influence global affairs.

From 1996 to 2012, the Carter Center was asked by the Chinese government to tell the epic story of China's village elections and governance. We tried very hard to get fellow Westerners to obtain a better understanding of China's drastic political changes, but our efforts were eventually misunderstood by many in the Chinese government and in the U.S.

Recently, we organized an online dialogue with China's new ambassador to the U.S., Qin Gang. Many in the audience were surprised by his assessment that China has a very effective political system, and the American democracy is seriously defective. This is at the core of bilateral misunderstanding. As one of the oldest democracies in the world the U.S. still has a long way to go to improve its political institutions and it, like many other countries in the world, would like to see China

to have more political choice and accountability. There will be no consensus on which political system works better to deliver economic prosperity, foster innovation and protect individual rights, but there has to be more efforts to understand other country's political systems more objectively and approach them with no prejudice and hysteria.

During President Carter's last meeting with President Xi Jinping in December 2012, he was asked to spend more of his time and his Center's resources on promoting better relationship between the U.S. and China through reducing misperceptions and increasing mutual understanding.

That is exactly what the Carter Center has done in the past nine years through organizing nine annual High-Level Forum on U.S.-China Relations, six Young Scholars Forum on U.S.-China Relations, and numerous meetings and workshops in China and Africa designed to find areas of cooperation between the two countries in Africa. Our most impactful project is probably our Chinese and English language websites called US-China Perception Monitor. They were launched in 2015 and are the only websites in the world dedicated solely to reduce misperception and enhance U.S.-China understanding.

Understanding each other, whether among the people or between the nations, is no easy endeavor. As indicated by President Carter in his letter to this conference, for our two nations, not understanding each other will destroy collective prosperity, endanger hard-won peace, and drag each other and their allies and partners to the abyss of ignorance and hatred.

What President Xi Jinping and President Carter agreed in December 2012 remains the mission of the Carter Center. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have organized more than 50 online public and private meetings, webinars, and workshops in both Chinese and English languages. We believe better communication will increase mutual understanding and contribute to the stabilization of the bilateral relationship that now runs the risk of veering into conflict.

I have not been able to visit China since becoming the CEO of the Carter Center in June 2020. I look forward to traveling to China soon, visiting all the partners of the Center and meeting up with many of you whom I have only met virtually.

I wish I could participate in this meeting in person. I look forward to the recommendations on how to make our understanding each other more effective.

Thank you.